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Original Citation:

Under the gaze of Orpheus: J.M. Coetzee and the writing of the disaster / Chiara LOMBARDI. - In: INTERFÉRENCES LITTÉRAIRES. - ISSN 2031-2970. - ELETTRONICO. - 4 (2010)(2010), pp. 163-182.

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/77045> since

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Chiara LOMBARDI
Under the Gaze of Orpheus
J. M. Coetzee and the *Writing of Disaster*

Résumé

Partant du problème du langage dans la littérature contemporaine, cette contribution explore les relations existant entre l'œuvre de John M. Coetzee (en particulier *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980 ; *The Master of Petersburg*, 1994 ; *Disgrace*, 1999 ; *Elizabeth Costello*, 1999) et la pensée de Maurice Blanchot, principalement, mais aussi celle de Jacques Derrida, de Roland Barthes et d'Emmanuel Levinas. L'analyse s'intéressera particulièrement au mythe d'Orphée et d'Eurydice et à la légende d'Eros et Psyché dans leurs corrélations avec les images liées au vide, à la cécité et à la vue, utilisées par l'auteur pour signifier la relation paradoxale qui se joue entre la vie et l'écriture et le pouvoir ambigu exercé par le langage sur l'Autre.

Abstract

Starting from the problem of language in contemporary literature, this present essay explores the relationships between the work of the South African writer John M. Coetzee (in particular *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980 ; *The Master of Petersburg*, 1994 ; *Disgrace*, 1999 ; *Elizabeth Costello*, 1999), and the thinking especially of Maurice Blanchot, but also of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Emmanuel Levinas. The main focus will concern the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the tale of Eros and Psyche, related to the images of *blankness* and those of *blindness* and *sight*, taken as symbols of the paradoxical relation between life and writing, thus implying the ambiguous power exercised by language on the Other.

Pour citer cet article :

Chiara LOMBARDI, « Under the Gaze of Orpheus. J. M. Coetzee and the *Writing of Disaster* », dans *Interférences littéraires*, nouvelle série, n° 4, « Indicible et littéarité », s. dir. Lauriane SABLE, mai 2010, pp. 165-182.

UNDER THE GAZE OF ORPHEUS

J. M. Coetzee and the *Writing of Disaster*

In the work of South African writer John M. Coetzee, *language* is the intriguing meeting point of the author's attitude towards literature and culture, history, love, sexuality and death. Referring to Lacan and especially to Jacques Derrida in *De la Grammatologie* (for the notion of language's perpetual deferral of meaning), in *Old Myths – Modern Empire. Power, Language and Identity in John Coetzee's Work*, Michela Canepari-Labib points out that Coetzee's novels deeply explore "the impact language has on the human's psyche, the will to power inherent in any use of language, the psychological and political mechanisms behind the practice of torture, human fascination with violence, the status of human language, the devices and motivations involved in the process of story-telling [...] and the way in which human beings can achieve (or fail to achieve) an idea of identity"¹.

In general, Coetzee's theory of language indirectly (often allegorically, as we shall see²) refers to the Western classical and modern culture and traditions, also contributing to rethinking the notion of *humanism* from a contemporary, post-modern point of view³; at the same time, it may be set in the context of the philosophical debate of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially in connection with French post-structuralist thinkers. We can consider the work of Maurice Blanchot (from *Faux pas*, 1943; *La Part du feu*, 1949; *L'Espace littéraire*, 1955; *L'Entretien infini*, 1969; to *L'Écriture du désastre*, 1980), for example, as an important reference for the characterization of the ontological status of language, which stems from Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Hegel⁴. Influenced by Mallarmé, whose *Crise de vers* divides linguistic activity in the domain of the *parole brute* and in that of the *parole essentielle*, Blanchot writes in *La Part du Feu*: "Dans le langage authentique, la parole a une

1. Michela CANEPARI LABIB, *Old Myths – Modern Empires. Power, Language and Identity in J. M. Coetzee's Work*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2005, p.17.

2. See Lois Parkingson ZAMORA, « Allegories of Power in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee », in *Journal of Literary Studies*, n° 2, 1986 (1), pp. 1-14; Stephen SLEMON, « Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History », in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, n° 23, 1988, pp. 157-168; Teresa DOVEY, « Allegory vs. Allegory: the Divorce of Different Modes of Allegorical Perception in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* », in *Journal of Literary Studies*, n° 4, 1988 (2), pp. 133-143; ID., *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, Cape Town, Donker, 1988; Michel MARAIS, « The Hermeneutic of Empire: Coetzee's Post-colonial Metafiction », in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, Graham HUGGAN and Stephen WATSON (eds.), London, Macmillan, 1996, pp. 97-121; Anne CHANTOT, « J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Allegory/ies », in *Commonwealth. Essays and Studies*, n° 26, 2004, 1, pp. 27-35; Derek ATTRIDGE, « Against Allegory », in ID., *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading. Literature in the Event*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 32-64. I refer also to my essay: Chiara LOMBARDI, *Tra allegoria e intertestualità. L'eroe "stupido" di J. M. Coetzee*, Alessandria, Dell'Orso, 2005.

3. See Derek ATTRIDGE, « Modernist Form and the Ethics of Otherness », in *J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading*, op. cit., pp. 4-6.

4. See Maurice BLANCHOT, « De l'Angoisse au langage », in ID., *Faux pas*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943, pp. 9-23.

fonction, non seulement représentative mais destructive. Elle fait disparaître, elle rend l'objet absent, elle l'annihile"⁵. The "authentic language" (i.e. the *parole essentielle*) thus substitutes the referential structures of reality with the free associations of poetic thinking: it changes the rules, it moves and modifies the imaginary of the reader, creating fruitful "blanks"⁶.

In the chapters of *L'Espace littéraire* entitled "L'Œuvre et l'espace de la mort", in particular, Orpheus – the legendary poet who, from Virgil to Rilke, descends into the underworld to rescue the beloved Eurydice but loses her as soon as he turned to look at her against the will of the gods – becomes the symbol of the instability, unsteadiness and changeableness of language, of its "angoisse":

Il y a, à la vérité, une ambiguïté essentielle dans la figure d'Orphée, cette ambiguïté appartient au mythe qui est la réserve de cette figure, mais elle tient aussi à l'incertitude des pensées de Rilke, à la manière dont il a peu à peu dissous, au cours de l'expérience, la substance et la réalité de la mort. [...] Orphée est l'acte des métamorphoses, non pas l'Orphée qui a vaincu la mort, mais celui qui toujours meurt, qui est l'exigence de la disparition, qui disparaît dans l'angoisse de cette disparition, angoisse qui se fait chant, parole qui est le pur mouvement de mourir. [...] Il est le poème, si celui-ci pouvait devenir poète, l'idéal et l'exemple de la plénitude poétique. Mais il est en même temps, non pas le poème accompli, mais quelque chose de plus mystérieux et de plus exigeant: l'origine du poème, le deux domaines, qui est l'abîme du dieu perdu, la trace infinie de l'absence [...].⁷

In Coetzee's fiction, similarly, the Orpheus myth embodies the symbol of a paradoxical relationship between the self and the Other, and also between life and writing, because it reflects the ambiguous power of language, and specifically of literature (mostly in its intertextual bonds) as "embodiment of otherness"⁸. Also the allusions to the myth of Eros and Psyche, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, have a similar range of meanings: the act of Psyche seeing Eros, like Orpheus' backward gaze, may be read as the consequence of *disaster* according to Blanchot: "Si le désastre signifie être séparé de l'étoile (le déclin qui marque l'égarement lorsque s'est interrompu le rapport avec le hasard d'en haut), il indique la chute sous la nécessité désastreuse"⁹.

Describing a love relationship as well as facing the horror of 20th century history (especially after the Shoah) means for Coetzee finding a different approach to writing and reading, a poetic which should be able to observe the extreme tension between the duty to witness and the right to silence, and to write at the limits of saying¹⁰. "Reporting from the far edges"¹¹ is what Elizabeth Costello – the elder-

5. ID., *La Part du Feu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949, p. 37. Cf. John GREGG, *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994.

6. I refer in particular to the theory of Wolfgang ISER, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 1978.

7. Maurice BLANCHOT, *L'Espace littéraire* (1955), Paris, Gallimard, « Folio Essais », 1988, p. 184.

8. Graham ALLEN, *Intertextuality*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 45.

9. Maurice BLANCHOT, *L'Écriture du désastre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 9.

10. See George STEINER, *Language and Silence*, New York, Atheneum, 1967; but also: Christine BARON, « Indicible, littéraire et expérience des limites (de Blanchot à Wittgenstein) », in *Limites du langage: indicible ou silence*, Karl COGARD et Aline MURAT-BRUNEL (eds.), Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, pp. 291-298. See also Jean-Gérard LAPACHERIE, « George Steiner: quarante ans de réflexion sur les limites du langage », in *Limites du langage: indicible ou silence*, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-306.

11. All the following quotations are taken from John M. COETZEE, *Elizabeth Costello*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1999.

ly writer whom John M. Coetzee usually introduces as his female *alter-ego*¹² – claims in her activity as writer : the act of writing poses in fact the question of “how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank”. “It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge”, the writer adds. “We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be” (*EC*, 1).

By doing so, the writer is forced to leave the realistic perspective (as “the word-mirror is broken, irreparably” – *EC*, 19) to provide a polysemous linguistic code, where the word flows opaque and clairvoyant, blind and fair at the same time, a word that is never supposed to be innocent at all but that belongs to mankind as “a fallen nature”¹³. From this point of view, *allegory* is what Costello finally invokes as the only form of a paradoxical *salvation* :

*Always it is not what I say but something else [...]. Only for extreme souls that it have been intended to live thus, where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards [...]. There may come a time when such extreme souls as I write of may be able to bear their afflictions, but that time is not now. [...] 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. Save me, dear Sire, save my husband ! Write ! Tell him the time is not yet come, the time of giants, the time of the angels. Tell him we are still in the time of fleas. Words no longer reach him, they shiver and shatter, it is as if (as if, I say), it is as if he is guarded by a shield of crystal. (*EC*, 229-230)*

Such use of *allegory* – obviously conceived not according to the Medieval, religious hermeneutic, but to the postcolonial practice of finding a multiplicity of meanings throughout the language, in the attempt to *decolonize* the texts from an univocal, one-sided interpretation¹⁴ – and the rejection of any realistic devices, linear plot and well rounded-characters¹⁵, thus contribute to actively absorb the reader not only in the South African historical context (where many of his novels are set) but above all in a universal sense of responsibility to the Other :

In Coetzee’s hands, the literary event is the working out of a complex and freighted responsibility to the other, a responsibility denied for so long in South Africa’s history. The reader does not simply observe this responsibility at work in the fiction but, thanks to its inventive re-creation of the forms and conventions of the literary, becomes an ethical participant in it¹⁶.

In line with these premises, in this paper I aim to explore the mythological symbols of Orpheus and of Eros and Psyche as they are laid out in Coetzee’s works (especially in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980 ; *The Master of Petersburg*, 1994 ; *Disgrace*,

12. Heather WALTON, « Staging John Coetzee/Elizabeth Costello », in *Literature & Theology*, n° 22, 2008 (3), pp. 280-294 ; Michael Valdez MOSES, « “King of the Amphibians” : Elizabeth Costello and Coetzee’s metamorphic fictions », in *Journal of Literary Studies*, n° 25, 2009, 4, pp. 25-38.

13. See *infra*, § « Obscenity and Humanity/ -ism ».

14. See Angus FLETCHER, *Allegory : The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1964 ; Theresa M. KELLEY, *Reinventing Allegory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

15. Michela CANEPARI-LABIB, *op. cit.*, p.15.

16. Derek ATTRIDGE, « Ethical modernism : Servants as others in J.M. Coetzee’s early fiction », in *Poetics Today*, n° 25, 2004, p. 670. Cf. ID., *Against Allegory. Waiting for the Barbarians and Life & Time of Michael K*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

1999 ; and Elizabeth Costello, 1999), paying particular attention to the relationships between the texts and the thinking of Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Emmanuel Levinas : what I would finally argue is that, at the same time as dealing with the paradox of language itself, Coetzee also comes to some fundamental conclusions about how literature can get over *the disaster of writing*.

1. OBSCENITY AND HUMAN-ITY/-ISM

Obscene. That is the word, a word of contested etymology, that she must hold on to as a talisman. She chooses to believe that *obscene* means *off-stage*. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human !*) must remain *off-stage*. (EC, 168-169)

In Elizabeth Costello's chapter entitled *The problem of Evil*, the protagonist has been invited to speak at a conference in Amsterdam on the "age-old problem of evil", and precisely on the topic 'Silence, Complicity and Guilt' (EC, 156-157). Elizabeth recalls having been already invited for another conference on the same subject the previous year in the United States, and having been later attacked in the pages of the review *Commentary* for "belittling the Holocaust" because of her speaking of it in relation to the enslavement and massacre of entire animal populations (a "massacre of the defenceless"... "a slaughter no different in scale or horror or moral import from what we call *the holocaust*" – EC, 156). Nevertheless, she decided to go to the conference in Amsterdam under the effect of a novel she was reading at the time she received the letter of invitation, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* by Paul West, a book on Hitler and Hitler's would-be assassins' execution. She accepted to speak about the problem of evil starting from that novel when "the obscene touch of West's book was still rank upon her", "with the word *obscene* still welling up in her throat" :

Obscene : not just the deeds of Hitler's executioners, not just the deeds of the blockman, but the pages of Paul West's black book too. Scenes that do not belong in the light of day, that the days of maidens and children deserve to be shielded from (EC, 159).

Elizabeth Costello is quite aware of the difficulty of her exploit, of speaking openly over half a century after the Second World War and the holocaust, faced with the mental numbness at the startling number of victims, and telling "well-adjusted citizens of the New Europe" about "an evil universe invented by an evil god" (EC, 159) ; but finally she agrees with the hosts to talk on the topic entitled 'Witness, Silence, Censorship' (EC, 160). The question thus shifts from the search for 'complicity' and 'guilt' to the duty to 'witness' : "*How can we know the horrors of the Nazis [...] if our artists are forbidden to bring them to life for us ? Paul West is not a devil but a hero : he has ventured into the labyrinth of Europe's past and faced down the Minotaur and returned to tell his tale*" (EC, 168) – Elizabeth ironically wonders later, after she had realized that Paul West is one of the invited guests at the conference.

What should a writer do facing *the horror* ? Should a writer either be a witness, running the risk of being "obscene" in telling what has to be *off-stage*, or should he

commit the evil of history to oblivion ? How can language collapse into history without being itself corrupted ?

In *L'Écriture du désastre* Maurice Blanchot defined the Shoah as “l'événement absolu de l'Histoire”, the *absolute disaster* that had literally *burnt* any possibility of having a language, of speaking and writing :

L'holocauste, événement absolu de l'histoire, historiquement daté, cette toute-brûlure où toute l'histoire s'est embrasée, où le mouvement du Sens s'est abîmé, où le don, sans pardon, sans consentement, s'est ruiné sans donner lieu à rien qui puisse s'affirmer, se nier, don de la passivité même, don de ce qui ne peut se donner. Comment le garder, fût-ce dans la pensée, comment faire de la pensée ce qui garderait l'holocauste où tout s'est perdu, y compris la pensée gardienne ?

*Dans l'intensité mortelle, le silence fuyant du cri innombrable.*¹⁷

This very crucial point obviously recalls the aphorism of W.T. Adorno in *Minima moralia*, that to still *write* a poem *after Auschwitz* is barbaric¹⁸. Adorno, as is well known, overcomes this aporia by widely developing a theoretical reflection that, starting from the assumption that Auschwitz showed the absolute failure of Western culture, puts at its core the need to rethink the traditional concept of *humanism* according to an idea of art as being conceived in ethical terms of responsibility¹⁹.

In her talk on the problem of evil, Costello's premises lie in general theories on literature, starting from the relationships between writing and truth, and focusing on the concepts of “author and authority”, and in particular on the claims made by poets either to “speak a higher truth, a truth whose authority lies in revelation”, or (in Romantic times) to have the right “to venture into forbidden or tabooed places” (*EC*, 172). The question she poses to the audience is therefore “whether the artist is quite the hero-explorer he pretends to be, whether we are always right to applaud when he emerges from the cave with reeking sword, in one hand and the head of the monster in the other” (*EC*, 172). The case of *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* by Paul West may in fact be taken as an example of how realistic novels can touch “the absolute evil” and transmit its power : “Through reading him that touch of evil was passed on to me. Like a shock. Like electricity” (*EC*, 176). Costello thus implicitly points out that it is the direct, unveiled representation of evil that may be *obscene* and barbaric, transferring to the writer's subject what Martin Buber in *Images of Good and Evil* generically attributes to the nature of images (every image we invent is wicked, because it is separated from the bare reality created by God²⁰). But at the same time as she is showing that the work of the writer is never *innocent* at all, Elizabeth is also dealing with the possibility of getting over the *impasse* of representation establishing differences between the images themselves. It is not actually to any type of intellectual or public *ensorship* she is appealing²¹. More subtly, what

17. Maurice BLANCHOT, *L'Écriture du désastre*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

18. See also THEODOR W. ADORNO, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1952, T. I, p. 30.

19. ID., *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1966, p. 360. See also Jonhatan DRUKER, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz*, *Posthumanist Reflections*, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2009.

20. MARTIN BUBER, *Bilder von Gut und Böse, Bilder von Gut und Böse*, Köln und Olten, Jakob HegnerVerlag, 1952.

21. See JOHN M. COETZEE, *Giving Offense. Essay in Censorship*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1996 ; ID., « Obscenity and Censorship », in *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*,

Costello here denies is the gratuitousness and the aesthetic allure of evil, which makes poetry – and writing in general – *barbaric* according to Adorno's statement.

It is for this reason that Costello indirectly beseeches Paul West to leave her the right to turn her eyes away : “*Let me not look*. That was the plea she breathed to Paul West (except that she did not know Paul West then, he was just a name on the cover of a book). Do not make me go through with it ! But Paul West did not relent. He made her read, excited her to read. For that she will not easily forgive him” (*EC*, 179). She is not trying to argue that writers should refrain from representing evil, but that their images should have respect for *humanity* : it is to save our humanity – we read – that certain things should remain *off-stage*.

In line with Adorno, Coetzee's work puts at its core the idea of *humanity/-ism* but at the same time poses the basis for changing the traditional conception of it. This also comes out in “*Lesson Five*” of *Elizabeth Costello*²², when the old writer is imagined face-to-face with her sister Blanche, who works as a medical missionary at the hospital of Mariannhill in Zululand. Trained as a classical scholar, Blanche is visited by Elizabeth when she was going to be awarded an honorary degree at the university of Johannesburg. They talk about Blanche's oration, about the classics, the *studia humanitatis* (or humanities), including the relationships between Africa and Europe as widely conceived as the historical centre of the cultural world. Starting from a traditional, historical and Biblical notion of Humanism, Blanche's oration looks on the dark side of the future of the classics. From her point of view, the humanities are still deeply related to textual scholarship, and specifically with scholars' attempts to find out “the true message of the Bible” (*EC*, 120), in order to recover the *true text*, the *true translation* and the *true interpretation*, “just as true interpretations turned out to be inseparable from true understanding of the cultural and historical matrix from which the texts emerged” (*EC*, 121). Hence the difficulty for the humanities to survive out of the academic interpretation of Humanism (i.e. spiritualism and historicism), and their being nowadays metaphorically “on their deathbed” (*EC*, 123)²³. Furthermore, if from a religious point of view the classics had always been supposed to “redeem mankind” (“So to grasp the purpose behind the Incarnation – that is to say, to grasp the meaning of redemption – we must embark, through the classics, on *studia humanitatis*” – *EC*, 122), on the contrary we are aware that the classics are completely helpless in giving “the redemptive word” :

That word cannot be found in the classics, whether you understand the classics to mean Homer and Sophocles or whether you understand them to mean Homer and Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. In an happier age than our own it was possible for people to bluff themselves into believing that the classics of antiquity offered a teaching and a way of life. (*EC*, 122-123)

During the lunch – which, because of the overlapping of the various guests' philosophical positions, assumes the characteristics of an authentic Platonic Sym-

David ATTWELL (ed.), Cambridge Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 241-295. See, in particular, the relationships between politics and censorship in the references to the South African society.

22. See Gilbert YEOH, « Reading Ethics in J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* : The globalizing World, the Normal and Damnation », in *English Academy Review*, n° 25, 2008, 1, pp. 77-88.

23. For the general debate on the humanities, see also : Edward SAID, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 2004.

posium – Blanche’s oration is discussed again. Speaking from “a secular vision of salvation” (*EC*, 133), and from a secular, even atheist position including “dark gods” such as D. H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Shakespeare and Blake (*EC*, 127), Elizabeth argues that we cannot place “hopes and expectations on the humanities that they never fulfill” (*EC*, 125) : the classics are not supposed to either reveal the truth or to give *the redemptive word*, but at least to represent a “guidance in perplexity” , conserving those energies and that craving for guidance that they must respond to, “a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation” (*EC*, 127). Professor Godwin suggests that, if the humanities are the proper study of mankind and man, they are also a study concerning “a fallen nature” (*EC*, 125). From another point of view, a young scholar adds that, since the humanities stem also from contact with other cultures “each with its own language and history and mythology and unique way of seeing the world”, they reveal the vital role to allow us nowadays “to steer our way through this new multicultural world” (*EC*, 129).

All these positions remain nevertheless quite unsatisfying, and it is only through a symbolic and unusual changing of perspective that the notion of the humanities becomes definitely more clear. We find it the last day Elizabeth spends with her sister Blanche, when she visits the hospital of Mariannahill. Here, what really catches the attention of the writer are not the images of patients seen a thousand times on television (“the stick limbs, the bloated bellies, the great impressive eyes of children wasting away” : “She has not the stomach for it” – *EC*, 133), but the figure of a carved wooden crucifix “showing an emaciated Christ with a mask-like face crowned with a wreath of real acacia thorns, his hands and feet pierced not by nails but by steel bolts” (*EC*, 134), a sculpture done by a local carver on the pattern of *Grünewald and Holbein* (who is the author of the same subject seen by *Myskeïn* before having an attack of epilepsy in the *Idiot* by Dostoevsky²⁴).

It is a conception of art and literature which may remind us of Modernism and, among others, of Joseph Conrad in the preface of the novel *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, where we read that it is not the discovery of an intellectual truth that plays a vital role in writing, but above all the displaying of a sensible, physical, corporeal one, “which binds together all humanity” :

the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom [...] He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives ; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain ; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation [...] to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspiration, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.²⁵

Similarly, for Elizabeth Costello *beauty* (either it is a tragic, suffering beauty or a blessed form of perfection), as for Dostoevsky and Conrad²⁶, is meant to be

24. See J. M. COETZEE, *Doubling the Point*, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

25. Joseph CONRAD, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984-1992, p. xi.

26. See also ID., *Lord Jim* (1900), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 256 : Beauty “floats elusive, obscure, half submerged, in the silent still waters of mystery”.

an *enigma*, and it is the only human and aesthetic experience that really *binds together* human beings, and those with works of art.

It is precisely what is shown by the short tale that ends this chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, where the protagonist, already at home, writes a letter to her sister Blanche to tell something else missed during their meeting. While their mother was at hospital, several years before, Elizabeth tells of having met a patient, Mr Phillips, who had the hobby of painting in watercolours, and sat for him. He had had a laryngectomy and he could not speak (“At best he could produce a kind of croaking” – *EC*, 146), but the “erotic energy”, “that heady mix of the ecstatic and the aesthetic” he put in his picture produced in her a moment of “*blessing*” (*EC*, 149) : the feeling of being at the same time a goddess (“Aphrodite or Hera or perhaps even Artemis. I was of the immortals” – *EC*, 149) and a *mother* as represented in Greek and Renaissance painters : “not the shy virgin of the Annunciation but the mother we see in Correggio, the one who delicately raises her nipple with her fingertips so that her baby can suck ; who, secure in her virtue, boldly uncovers herself under the painter’s gaze and thence under our gaze” (*EC*, 149).

What is missed and misconceived in Blanche’s oration and in the following conversations is therefore the nexus between *culture* and *human beings* : “In all our talk about humanism and humanities there was a word we both skirted : *humanity*” (*EC*, 150). The notion of humanity and humanism here invoked by Elizabeth has not so much to do with the solemn truth claimed by “poets laureate”, but with a profound conception of culture that should be able to embrace the ideal and the low, the rapture and the agony, sensuality and death, laughter and folly, and finally to cross most boundaries between human beings : “*Blanche, dear Blanche [...], why is there this bar between us ? Why can we not speak to each other straight and bare, as people ought who are on the brink of passing ? [...] Sister of my youth, do not die in a foreign field and leave me without an answer ?*” (*EC*, 155)²⁷.

2. A WAY INTO THE LIGHT

In Coetzee’s fiction, however, the relationships between *culture* and *humanity* are not so easily worked out. South African history, as well as the history of European supremacy in the colonies, for example, shows how political conquest is often achieved under the disguise of a cultural dominance²⁸.

As anticipated, in general his novel’s main focus is *language*, with all its potentialities and risks. It is language that provides human beings with the basic means of communication to know and understand each other, but at the same time also to establish

27. See Peter SHILLINGSBURG, « Textual Criticism, the Humanities and J. M. Coetzee », in *English Studies in Africa. A Journal of the Humanities*, n° 49, 2006 (2), pp. 13-27 ; Frances E. MASCIA-LESS – Patricia SHARPE, « Cruelty, Suffering, Imagination : The Lessons of J. M. Coetzee », in *American Anthropologist*, n°108, 2006 (1), pp. 84-134 ; Jean-Paul ENGELIBERT, *J. M. Coetzee et la littérature européenne : écrire contre la barbarie*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007 ; J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual, J. POYNER ed. and introd., Athens, Ohio University Press, 2006 ; Chiara LOMBARDI, « Coetzee e i classici, l’umanesimo, il mito », in *J. M. Coetzee : percorsi di lettura tra storia e narrazione*, Giuliana FERRECCIO and Carmen CONCILIO (eds.), Siena, Gorée, 2009, pp. 63-108.

28. Michela CANEPARI-LABIB, « The Language of Silence », in *op. cit.*, pp. 223-250.

a political dominance over the Other²⁹. Language can, in fact, be intimately double ; ambiguous, even. In *The problem of Evil* we read that the devil is “everywhere under the skin of things searching for a way into the light” (EC, 167). It is through words, through speaking and writing in particular, that we may give the devil *a way into the light*.

Coming back to Maurice Blanchot, in *L'Écriture du désastre* the original, cultural meaning of the Platonic myth of the cave is overturned to show the *violence* implied either in the act of seeing the light of the philosophical *truth* or of coming back to the cave to communicate the truth itself and to set other men free (from *ignorance*) :

Dans la caverne de Platon, nul mot pour signifier la mort, nul rêve ou nulle image pour en faire pressentir l'infigurabilité. La mort y est en excès, en oubli, survenant du dehors dans la bouche du philosophe comme ce qui le réduit préalablement au silence ou pour le perdre dans la dérision d'un semblant d'immortalité, perpétuation d'ombre. La mort n'est nommée que comme nécessité de tuer ceux qui, s'étant libérés, ayant eu accès à la lumière, reviennent et révèlent, dérangeant l'ordre, troublant la tranquillité de l'abri, ainsi désabritant. La mort, c'est l'acte de tuer. Et le philosophe est celui qui subit la violence suprême, mais l'appelle aussi, parce que la vérité qu'il porte et dit par le retour est une forme de violence.³⁰

When cultured, the main characters in Coetzee's fiction (the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the medical officer of Jakkalsdrif in *Life and Times of Michael K*, Susan in *Foe*, David Lurie in *Disgrace*, Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*, among others) always embody a frightful ambiguity because of their being divided between the inclination to take care of the Other and the temptation to exercise a power, either to use culture in order to dominate (the Magistrate vs the barbarian girl), and to seduce (David Lurie vs Melanie Isaacs), or in general to interpret the Other by completely unveiling him (the medical officer of Jakkalsdrif vs Michael). The act itself of *finding out the truth* contains in fact a subtle form of violence, which from an extreme point of view becomes a form of torture, as is shown in the chapters of *Waiting for the Barbarians* when the Magistrate – after having saved the barbarian girl and brought her to the other barbarians in the desert – is made prisoner, questioned by Colonel Joll and brutally tortured on suspicion of “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (WB, 77)³¹. The crucial function of those characters in the plot is therefore that they can at the same time embody and deconstruct – thanks to the use of language and imagery (i.e. metaphors, similes, dream symbology, and so on) – the two typical structures of Western society and thought (according to Derrida) : *logocentrism* and the *metaphysics of presence*³².

Through the allusion to the orphic myth, in particular, but also through the guiding metaphors of *light* and *darkness*, and the images of *blankness* and those

29. See, among others, David ATTWELL, « The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee », in *Rendering Things Visible : Essays on South African Literary Culture of the 1970s and 1980s*, M. Trump (ed.), Johannesburg, Ravan, 1990, pp. 94-133 ; Susan VAN ZANTEN GALLAGER, *A Story of South Africa : J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1991 ; Sue KOSSEW, *Pen and Power : A Post-colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, Rodopi, 1996 ; *A Universe of (hi)stories. Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, Liliana SIKORSKA (ed.), Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2006.

30. Maurice BLANCHOT, *L'Écriture du désastre*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

31. All the following quotations are taken from John M. COETZEE, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, London, Penguin, 1980.

32. Michela CANEPARI-LABIB, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

correlated with *blindness* and *sight*, the language of Coetzee tries to bite into those structures, displaying the constant, painful strain between the ignorance and the desire of truth/knowledge, and showing the aporetic and irresolvable relationship between the self and the Other (being it either a love affair or the act itself of writing, reading and interpreting a text³³). As Coetzee points out in *Doubling the Point*, writing should in fact be conceived as a result of a form of *resistance to the truth* :

Writing [...] involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but part is also an automatism built into language : the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as true.³⁴

Accordingly, in *Waiting for the Barbarian* we may see a correspondence between the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl – whose language and body together tend to remain close to every attempt at *disclosure* – and the hobby of the Magistrate of excavating barbarian ruins trying to decipher the characters of some “dry and powdery” wooden slips there contained (*WB*, 13-14). The girl is often described according to figures of blankness (“a blankness that overtook all of her” – *WB*, 86) and to metaphors of metamorphosis (“changes shape, sex, size” – *WB*, 86) ; for example, when the Magistrate blends the realistic description of the girl with his dream visions : “I have a vision of her closed eyes and closed 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” (*WB*, 42). The wooden slips' odd and unknown alphabet does not offer the possibility of any translation but the poetic chance to imagine a variety of intriguing and mysterious meanings :

I look at the lines of characters written by a stranger long since dead. I do not even know whether to read from right to left or from left to right. In the long evenings I spent poring over my collections I isolated over four hundred different characters in the script, perhaps as many as four hundred and fifty. I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake ; or does a circle merely stand for “circle”, a triangle for “triangle”, a wave for “wave” ? Does each sign represent a different state of the tongue, the lips, the throat, the lungs, as they combine in the uttering of some multifarious unimaginable extinct barbarian language ? Or are my four hundred characters nothing but scribal embellishments of an underlying repertory of twenty or thirty whose primitive forms I am too stupid to see ? (*WB*, 110-111)

It is a conception of language as *fossil poetry*, according to Ralph W. Emerson's definition in *The Poet*, a language which at the same time reminds us of the Magistrate's attitude towards the woman as a whole (his feeling of being “like an incom-

33. See also my essay : Chiara LOMBARDI, « “The face I see is blank” : il personaggio di J. M. Coetzee e l'atto della lettura, tra ‘illuminazioni’ e ‘pudore’ », in *Il personaggio nelle arti della narrazione*, Franco MARENCO (ed.), Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007, pp. 245-267.

34. John M. COETZEE, *Doubling the Point*, *op. cit.*, p. 18. See Derek ATTRIDGE, *Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, *op. cit.*, p. 144 ; Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *Everything you always wanted to know about Lacan : (but were afraid to ask)*, London, Verso, 1992.

petent school-master, fishing about with my maieutic forceps when I ought to be filling her with the truth”, 41), and towards her body as a part, as the metonymic object of desire :

It is then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself ; or it is the case (I am not stupid, let me say these things) that it is the marks on her which drew me to her but which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough ? Too much or too little : is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears ? (*WB*, 64)

Both uncovering those slips, and trying to establish love and sexual relationships with the barbarian girl, means in fact for the Magistrate to be involved in a strong, frustrating sense of responsibility towards the Barbarians which deconstructs him as “a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire”, a responsibility which takes the form of a novel written by a stupid, blind man (like Derrida’s *Aveugles*)³⁵ aware that it is impossible to *stare* directly at History and at its dazzling shame :

I think : “I have lived through an eventful year, yet understand no more of it than a babe in arms. Of all the people of this town I am the one least fitted to write a memorial. Better the blacksmith with the cries of rage and woe”... I think : “When one day people come scratching around in the ruins, they will be more interested in the relics from the desert than in anything I may leave behind. And rightly so.”... I think : “There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it”. (*WB*, 155).

3. EROS AND PSYCHE, ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

As anticipated, Coetzee adapts the myth of Orpheus to display the ambiguous and painful power of language which may be compared to that exercised by love. The act of Orpheus represents in fact the paradox of *seeing* and *disrupting* as theoretically interpreted by Blanchot in *L’Espace littéraire* :

[...] en se retournant vers Eurydice, Orphée ruine l’œuvre, l’œuvre immédiatement se défait, et Eurydice se retourne en l’ombre. Mais ne pas se tourner vers Eurydice, ce ne serait pas moins trahir, être infidèle à la force sans mesure et sans prudence de son mouvement, qui ne veut pas Eurydice dans sa vérité diurne et dans son agrément quotidien, qui la veut dans son obscurité nocturne, dans son éloignement, avec son corps fermé et son visage scellé.³⁶

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, similarly, the young barbarian girl is described “without aperture, without entry” (*WB*, 24). As we have seen, filling that *blankness* actually means for the Magistrate running the risk of *exercising an arbitrary power over the girl, and* doing violence to her. Every attempt to fill the *blanks*, to attribute any kind of meaning to her, and to *throw any light* on her is destined to fail by the

35. Jacques DERRIDA, *Mémoires d’aveugle. L’autoportrait et autres ruines*, Paris, R.M.N., 1990.

36. Maurice BLANCHOT, *L’Espace littéraire, op. cit.*, p. 226.

Magistrate. On the other hand, keeping himself from establishing contact means surrendering to the impossibility of any vital care of her. Hence the use of the symbolic, literary reference not only to the myth of Orpheus but, as I will argue, also to the tale of Eros and Psyche as narrated in the Western tradition. In the *Metamorphosis* of Apuleius, specifically, we read how Psyche, who is married to Eros but forbidden from seeing him directly, looks suddenly at him in the light of a lamp while he is sleeping, and accidentally wakes him with a drop of oil which falls from the lamp itself :

Sed dum bono tanto percita saucia mente fluctuat, lucerna sive perfidia pessima sive invidia noxia sive quod tale corpus contingere et quasi basiare et ipsa gestiebat, evomuit de summa luminis sui stillam ferventis olei super umerum dei dexterum. Hem audax et temeraria lucerna et Amoris vile ministerium [...]. Sic inustus exsiluit deus visaque detectae fidei colluvie protinus ex osculi set manibus infelicissimae coniugis tacitus avolavit.³⁷

Like Orpheus' gaze, Psyche's sight implies the loss of her beloved and the disruption of previous bliss. But it also marks the beginning of an exhausting quest for expiation and atonement which find its correspondence in the activity of writing.

Accordingly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee uses this myth to indicate the ambivalent risks (but also the responsibility) of knowledge meant as the result of a symbolic act of "throwing light" on the Other. The *lantern* the Magistrate uses to see the Barbarian prisoners for the first time ("I hold the lantern over the boy. He has not stirred ; but when I bend to touch his cheek he flinches and begins to tremble in long ripples that run up and down his body" – *WB*, 7), for example, becomes the symbol of his tragic involvement in the history, which will conduct him to share with the Barbarians the experience of torture. From the beginning, it is in fact the direct knowledge of the Barbarians (as a social group before, and through the private relationship with the girl later) that metaphorically opens the Magistrate's eyes and brings about in him *le soupçon d'autre chose* (to use an expression taken from Albert Camus' *La Peste*) :

But it is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation. I know somewhat too much ; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering. I ought never to have taken my lantern to see what was going on in the hut by the granary. On the other hand, there was no way, once I had picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again (*WB*, 21).

The descent into the Barbarians' prisons involves violating the symbolic holiness of their space ("what has become holy or unholy ground") and at the same time jeopardizing the "mysteries of the State" (*WB*, 6), of that Empire who persecutes the Barbarians and which the Magistrate works for. The knowledge of the Barbarians is thus meant to be a *contamination*, a shared infection with no way out.

As we have seen, the images connected with the barbarian girl refer to a *blank space* conceived as an unknown territory which reflects not only the conquest but

37. *Metamorphoseon*, libri XI, V, 23.

also the frustration, the silence, the *blindness* : “Bewildered” by that body fallen on him “from nowhere”, divided between the erotic attraction and a sense of vivid repulsion and non-involvement with her (“I feel no desire to enter this stocky little body glistening by now in the firelight. It is a week since words have passed between us. I feed her, shelter her, use her body, if that is what I am doing, in this foreign way” – *WB*, 30), the Magistrate describes himself according to the act of *profanation* made by Psyche in *Elizabeth Costello*, “the girl who, not content with the ecstasies provided night after night by the visitor to her bed, must light a lamp, peel back the darkness, gaze on him naked”³⁸ :

I am the same man I always was ; but time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere : this body in my bed, for which I am responsible, or so it seems, otherwise why I do keep it ? For the time being, perhaps forever, I am simply bewildered. It seems all one whether I lie down beside her and fall asleep or fold her in a sheet and bury her in the snow. Nevertheless, bending over her, touching my fingertips to her forehead, I am careful not to *spill the wax*. (*WB*, 43, *italics mine*)

The *curiosity* of Psyche could recall the *impatience* of Orpheus described by Blanchot, “le cœur de la profonde patience, l’éclair pur que l’attente infinie, le silence, la réserve de la patience font jaillir de son sein, non pas seulement comme l’étincelle qu’allume l’extrême tension, mais comme le point brillant qui à échappé à cette attente, le hasard heureux de l’insouciance”³⁹. The *disaster of seeing*, as well as the *disaster of writing*, proves thus to be deeply connected with the destiny of man as a fallen creature (and with the “fallen nature” of mankind). *Disaster* and *desire* are etymologically connected to each other, and at the same time linked with “astera”, “sidera” : “Desire”, as John Gregg observes, “predetermines the encounter as a failure” ; consequently, “writers follow the same path traced out by Orpheus, which takes them from an initial stage of (misplaced) confidence in their power to have mastery over language to a second stage characterized by indecision and loss of personal identity”⁴⁰.

Orpheus, therefore, deals with a recurrent symbol that Coetzee re-tells from different points of view (also in *Foe*, 1986) : the act of writing meant as an extreme act of loving, as a reckless attempt to give compensation to a loss, to a condition of *disgrace*, an act destined to fail, to annihilate, to die, and to drag the reader into the same abjection⁴¹.

In *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) – which tells of Dostoevsky, while in exile in Dresden, being drawn to Petersburg to discover the truth behind the death of the stepson Pavel, to whom he was intensely yet ambiguously connected – the

38. John M. COETZEE, *Elizabeth Costello*, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-184. We find this text also in J. M. COETZEE, « *Eros and Psyche* », in *Erotikon. Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, Shadi BARTH and Thomas BARTSCHERER (eds.), Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 293-300.

39. Maurice BLANCHOT, *L’Espace littéraire*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

40. John GREGG, *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 69.

41. “[...] the most fundamental engagement between the literary and the ethical occurs not in the human world depicted in works of literature but in the very act of reading such works, whether or not they deal with situations and relations that could be called ethical” (Derek ATTRIDGE, *Ethical Modernism : Servants as Others in J. M. Coetzee’s Early Fiction*, *op. cit.*, p. 653).

protagonist compares the pain for the loss of Pavel to Orpheus' experience in the underworld :

He thinks of Orpheus walking backwards step by step, whispering the dead woman's name, coaxing her out of the entrails of hell ; of the wife in grave-clothes with the blind, dead eyes following him, holding out limp hands before her like a sleepwalker. No flute, no lyre, just the word, the one word, over and over.⁴²

Like Orpheus, Dostoevsky calls his son "back to life" ; but it is in the attempt to establish a relationship with him, as in general with the Other, that he kills him : "I will come back. The same promise he made when he took the boy to school for his first term. You will not be abandoned. And abandoned him"⁴³. Finally it is not the protagonist who walks in Orpheus' footsteps, but the bare language : *the one word, over and over*.

The ironic rewriting of an orphic Byron in *Disgrace* (2000)⁴⁴ plays a similar role. David Lurie is professor of Literature, specialist in Romantic literature and Wordsworth, at the University of Cape Town, in the *post-apartheid* South Africa, but he is fired from his position for having an affair with a young student, Melanie Isaac (a name that should evoke the Biblical Isaac sacrificed by his father : see *Gen.*, 22, 1-19). After being catapulted into rural South Africa where his daughter Lucy lives, he is attacked by a group of savages : one of them rapes Lucy, the others kill the dogs in the stockyard, another one tries to kill him by burning him with an inflammable liquid (*D*, 96 sq.). "Physically removed (from society) and metaphysically dislodged (from a public psyche)"⁴⁵, David retells his own story turning to the *classics* he loves : Wordsworth, Byron, Shakespeare, Flaubert, and even Sophocles, whose famous sentence from *Aedipus at Colonus* ("call no man happy until he is dead") was mentioned at the beginning of the novel (*D*, 2). But if the classics, as we have seen, cannot come back in their Authority, nevertheless they are invoked to reflect the same condition of *disgrace* to which Lurie has fallen. Byron, in particular, is parodistically rewritten for his love story with *contessa* Teresa Guiccioli, a story told to the sound of a banjo's "silly plink-plonk" (*D*, 184). Teresa, old and fat, looks for her Byron "from the cavern of the underworld", like a grotesque Orpheus : "*Mio Byron*, she sings a third time ; and from somewhere, from the disembodied, the voice of a ghost, the voice of Byron. *Where are you ?* He sings ; and then a word she does not want to hear : *secca*, dry. *It has dried up, the source of everything?*" (*D*, 183).

Through the devalorisation⁴⁶ of the myth as well as of the language, the reader is thus also drawn to the same state of *disgrace* as the protagonist : as Jane Taylor points out, in fact, "by the imagination we place ourselves in his situation,

42. J. M. COETZEE, *The Master of Petersburg*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1994, p. 5.

43. *Ibidem*.

44. ID., *Disgrace* (1999), London, Vintage, 2000. For the allusions to the orphic myth, see Michel MARAIS, « J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination », in *Journal of Modern Literature*, n° 29, 2006 (2), pp. 75-93 ; ID., « The possibility of ethical action : J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* », in *Scrutiny2 : Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, n° 5, 2000 (1), pp. 57-63.

45. Coleen M. SHEILS, « Opera, Byron and a South Africa Psyche in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* », in *Current Writing. Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, n° 15, 2003 (1), p. 38.

46. For this expression I refer to Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, « Points Essais », 1992.

we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensation”⁴⁷.

4. LANGUAGE AS “TRANSFORMATIVE IMAGINATION”

At the end of *Disgrace*, David Lurie is described while spending his days in the veterinary clinic of Bev Shaw : he is in charge of ensuring a dignified *death* (*they call it sessions of Lösung*) for the *dogs who suffer for an incurable illness*. That is the destiny David reserves for the dog he loves most, “the young dog left, the one who likes music” which, when David opens the cage door to give him death, “wags its crippled rear, sniff his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears” (*D*, 219-220) :

He will do all that for him when his time comes. It will be little enough less than little : nothing.

[...]

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

‘Yes, I am giving him up.’ (*D*, 219-220)

“It will be little enough less than little : nothing” : *donner la mort* (according to Derrida) is what literature can finally do. As Michel Marais observes, “Coetzee’s use of the Orfic encounter indicates the ability of alterity to affect the writer and the work. That is, Coetzee’s deployment of this analogue of writing raises the possibility that the writer’s desire for the Other may be transmuted into self-substituting responsibility for the Other and suggests that this alteration manifests itself in a prosopopeial form, that is, a form which indicates *the failure of presence*”⁴⁸.

Nevertheless, once the language has deconstructed its role and its centrality, condemning itself to death, its *presence* is invoked once again as a symbol of extreme love. In the more recent *Diary of a Bad Year* (2008), for example, Coetzee retells the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice from a different perspective, where Orpheus’ fault, his tragic *hamartema*, is that of *not loving Eurydice enough* :

The story of Eurydice has been misunderstood. What the story is about is the solitariness of death. Eurydice is in hell in her grave-clothes. She believes that Orpheus loves her enough to come and save her. And indeed Orpheus comes. But in the end the love Orpheus feels is not strong enough. Orpheus leaves his beloved behind and returns to his own life.

The story of Eurydice reminds us that as of the moment of death we lose all power to elect our companions. We are whirled away to our allotted fate ; by whose side we get to pass eternity is not for us to decide. (*DBY*, 159)

47. Jane TAYLOR, « The impossibility of ethical action », in *Mail & Guardian*, 23-29 July 1999, p. 25.

48. Michel MARAIS, « “Little Enough, Less than Little : nothing” : Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee », in *Modern Fiction Studies*, n°46, 2000 (1), p. 164, italics mine. See also Simon CRITCHLEY, *Very Little... Almost Nothing : Death, Philosophy, Literature*, New York, Blackwell, 1992, p. 73.

The tale is quoted in the short section entitled *A dream*, or “Desolation” (DBY, 157-159) : a dying man has a vision of his death, and he is laid to rest by a young woman that, like Orpheus, does not love him enough to have the force to save him from death. Her presence is invoked, but it is helpless.

I think we should focus our attention on that *invocation of presence*. As Roland Barthes writes in that distressed mourning diary for his mother which is the *Journal de Deuil*, “Écrire pour se souvenir ? Non pour *me* souvenir, mais pour combattre le déchirement de l’oubli *en tant qu’il s’annonce absolu*. Le – bientôt – «plus aucune trace», nulle part, en personne. Nécessité du «Monument». *Memento illam vixisse*”⁴⁹.

The poetic language and the literary character thus meet in the need to save the Other without destroying him. They are invoked, but helpless too. We have seen that in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the Magistrate represents his puzzling relationship with the barbarian girl through the metaphors of light and dark, and those of blankness. From an ethical point of view, we may release the tension between these opposites through the symbol of the “caress” as theoretically conceived by Levinas :

La caresse est un mode d’être du sujet où le sujet, dans le contact d’un autre, va au-delà de ce contact. Le contact en tant que sensation fait partie du monde de la lumière. Mais ce qui est caressé n’est pas touché à proprement parler. C’est ne pas la velouté ou la tiédeur de cette donne dans le contact que cherche la caresse. Cette recherche de la caresse en constitue l’essence par le fait que la caresse ne sait pas ce qu’elle cherche. Ce “ne pas savoir”, ce désordonné fondamental en est l’essentiel.⁵⁰

In order to highlight his attitude towards the girl, the Magistrate also uses the forceful image of his *swooping* around her in his tendency to cast over her a “net of meanings”, describing himself as divided between the risk of being seen like a “coward crow” and the hope to be “a guardian albatross” : “So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meanings after another over her [...] What does she see ? The protecting wings of a guardian albatross or the black shape of a coward crow afraid to strike while its prey yet breathes” (*WB*, 81).

The same tension, as we have seen, concerns the language (and especially the literary, poetic language), whose activity and effect (and whose risks) can be compared with Magistrate’s hobby of “archaeology” practised on barbarian ruins, and with his attempt to decipher their wooden slips, and to give meaning to them. Instead of being realistically translated, the slips are conceived as the expression of “some multifarious unimaginable extinct barbarian language”, and poetically interpreted according to the widest notion of allegory : “They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. [...] There is no agreement among scholars about how to interpret these relics of the ancient barbarians. Allegorical sets like this one can be found buried all over the desert” (*WB*, 112). (Also, the emphasis given in Coetzee’s work, in *The Lives of Animals* as well as in *Disgrace*, for example, to animals’ “moral status”⁵¹, responds to

49. Roland BARTHES, *Journal de deuil*, Paris, Seuil/IMEC, 2009, p. 125.

50. Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Le Temps et l’autre* (1979), Paris, P.U.F., « Quadrige », 1983, pp. 82-83.

51. John M. COETZEE, *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001. For the developments of this conception, see in particular Stephen MULHALL, *The Wounded Animal* :

the necessity to create such an allegorical frame of correspondence, where animals are meant to be “the absolute other”⁵², but at the same time tragically linked with human beings : “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” – *EC*, 229-230).

Therefore, if in modernity the traditional realism sounds old-fashioned and the realistic approach toward reality runs the risk of touching the *obscenity* (as Paul West’s novel does), the *allegorical* and “*transformative*”⁵³ *imagination* (always shifting towards its extravagant and naughty Romantic correlative *fancy*, like in *Disgrace*) does not represent an innocent means of representation at all ; but, thanks to its capacity to create *blanks* and deconstruct the referential structures of the reality with the free associations of poetic thinking, we may see it as the only means that the *fallen nature* of man provides him to tell his stories, the only (orphic) *language* in which we can repose our hopes.

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J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008.

52. See also, among others : Ortwin DE GRAEF, « Suffering, Sympathy, Circulation : Smith, Wordsworth, Coetzee (But there’s a dog) », in *European Journal of English Studies*, n°7, 2003 (3), pp. 311-331 ; Chris DANTA, « Like a Dog... Like a Lamb : Becoming Sacrificial animal in Kafka and Coetzee », in *New Literary History*, n° 38, 2007 (4), pp. 721-737 ; Paul GOETSCH, *Coetzee’s ‘The Lives of Animals’ and ‘Elizabeth Costello’ : Probleme postmoderner Ethik und Literature*, in J. ZIMMERMAN and B. SALHEISER (eds.), *Ethik und Moral als Problem der Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft*, Duncker & Humboldt, Berlin, 2006, pp. 151-170.

53. “In the cruciform logic of Coetzee’s art of fiction, the allegorical triad of Florence, Hope and Beauty is offered towards the end of *Age of Iron*, with the kind of *transformative imagination* that is unique and appropriate to fiction, as a reminder of a regenerative principle which makes survival possible, and which in Europe, centuries ago, ushered in a renaissance in which an image of motherhood was recovered” (Johan U. JACOBS, « J. M. Coetzee and Cruciform Logic », in *J. M. Coetzee : percorsi di lettura tra storia e narrazione*, op. cit., p. 58, italics mine).

