

## Imagining Other and Moral Obligations in Coetzee's The Master of Petersburg

**Median Mashkooor Hussein**

*Ministry of Education General Directorate of Education in Waist*  
median.hussein@hotmail.com

Submission date: 22 /10 /2020

Acceptance date: 17/11/2020

Publication date: 24 / /2021

### Abstract:

This paper investigates the moral obligations in imagining others in literature. It focuses on J.M. Coetzee's masterpiece *The Master of Petersburg*. It argues that in this novel, Coetzee uses truth, betrayal, confession, and responsibility to the foreign other to introduce an elusive text that not only challenges but also evades any attempt to fit it into a simple or traditional frame of analysis. Such elusiveness emphasizes the complexity of imagining the foreign other as well as provoking unsettling thoughts about the role of literature as an influential instrument for our moral actions. The responsibility towards the other can be discussed in numerous levels but in this essay, I will discuss the text as semi-biographical. In other words, the discussion will focus on how Coetzee introduces the historical Dostoevsky and how Coetzee responds to such ethical burdens in his task of introducing the fictional and the historical Dostoevsky.

**Keywords:** Dostoevsky, Other, Self-criticism, Moral, Semi-biographical, Coetzee.

### تحليل الإختر والإلتزامات الأخلاقية في رواية سيد بطرسبرغ للكاتب كوتزي

مدين مشكور حسين

وزارة التربية المديرية العامة للتربية في واسط

### الخلاصة

هذا البحث يحقق في الإلتزامات الأخلاقية في الأدب. حيث يركز على الرواية المميزة سيد بطرسبرغ للكاتب جون ماكسويل كوتزي. يستدل البحث على أن الكاتب استخدم الحقيقة، الخيانة، الاعتراف، والمسؤولية تجاه الآخر الغائب ليقدّم نصاً عصياً ومقاوماً لكل محاولات تحليله حسب الإطار التقليدي البسيط. عدم الوضوح هذا يؤكد على صعوبة تحليل أو تقديم الآخر الغائب في الأدب بشكل عام، كذلك يشكك في دور الأدب بوصفه أداة للتأثير في الأخلاقيات. المسؤولية تجاه الآخر يمكن أن تتناقش من عدة زوايا ولكن في هذا البحث تم مناقشتها من زاوية السيرة الذاتية. يركز النقاش على الكيفية التي قدم بها كوتزي شخصية الكاتب الروسي الشهير دوستويفسكي والاعباء الأخلاقية المترتبة على هذا التقديم.

الكلمات الدالة: دوستويفسكي، الآخر، نقد ذاتي، أخلاق، سيرة ذاتية، كوتزي.

Concerns of ethical qualities of literary texts are as old as the invention of literature itself. Such questions, which usually consider the ethical and the aesthetic qualities of literary works inseparable, were “asked by philosophers throughout the ages[...][1,p.101]. In modern reviews, ethical assessments represent an integral part of any literary criticism. As Wayne C. Booth puts it, the moral value of a literary work is closely linked to its aesthetic value [2,p.89]. Other critics, such as Martha C. Nussbaum, take a very radical view regarding the connection between literature and its moral values. Nussbaum thinks that the moral beauty and the aesthetic beauty of any literary work are inseparable [3,pp.89-90]. Similarly, Berys Gaut also claims that the legitimacy of any aesthetic evaluation of a literary work is conditioned by the moral values that this work reflects [4,p.110]. However, as this paper tries to demonstrate, moral implications in sophisticated texts are not always clear or easy to be grasped; Coetzee’s texts are of this group that “are capable of challenging our moral discriminations regarding characters and events” [5,p.90]. In this essay, by discussing the idea of imagining the other in Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg*, I will investigate how Coetzee’s elusiveness, which is represented by his use of truth, betrayal, confession, and responsibly to the foreign other, challenges and evades any attempt to fit the text into a simple/traditional moral frame of analysis. Such elusiveness emphasizes the complexity of imaging the foreign other as well as provoking unsettling thoughts about the role of literature as an influential instrument for our moral actions. The responsibility towards the other can be discussed in numerous levels in this novel; however, in this essay, I will discuss the novel as semi-biographical. The discussion will focus on how Coetzee introduces the historical Dostoevsky. Furthermore, I will examine how the novel introduces authors’ moral obligations of being imagining the foreign other in general, and how Coetzee responds to such ethical burdens in his task of introducing the fictional and the historical Dostoevsky.

Discussing Coetzee’s novel as a semi-biography, firstly, we need to deal with the author as a creator who should be held accountable for what he creates. Coetzee seems to agree to this condition: “What shall we say of a story, a work of fiction?” [...] ‘A private matter, an utterly private matter, private to the writer, till it is given to the world’” [6, pp. 39-40]. Once a story becomes public, it will be placed under moral scrutiny. According to Anthony Uhlmann, we are, as readers, always tempted to hold writers accountable for what they write; in fictional works, the writer is the creator and therefore s/he is responsible for what happens inside such fictional world [7,p.63]. Secondly, we have to distinguish the fictional events from the historical facts, and, as already established, we need to see how honestly they represent the historical Dostoevsky. In this sense, Coetzee’s book can be interpreted as an act of distortion of Dostoevsky’s legacy, an “act of literary terrorism” as Zinovy Zinik describes it [8,p.55].

From the very start, we are introduced to Dostoevsky as a scrounger who secretly enters the country with fake identification papers to hide himself from his creditors, a long list of creditors as Anna Sergeyevna reveals later: “I don’t want to belong to a long list of people you are in debt to” [9,p.168]. After that, Coetzee gradually reveals the perverted nature of Dostoevsky: he appears as savage person who, in his moments of rage, wishes to dash a newborn baby against a rock or tears the girl’s limbs apart [10, pp.

9,16]; then, near the end of the story, he is introduced as an unredeemable depraved person whose assault upon the innocence of a child cannot be forgiven.

The theme of rape is repeatedly emphasized by the way Dostoevsky looks at the child Matryosha: “[ he] has no difficulty in imagining the child in her ecstasy” [11,p.76]. Similarly, the memories of the child-prostitutes he has known [12, p.76], and the prisoner who strangled his daughter after raping her [13,p.124] suggest that Dostoevsky is able to commit such a crime or at least is able to imagine himself raping the innocent girl. It is also foreshadowed by the relationship between Dostoevsky and his landlady Anna. As the novel progresses, we discover that he has no regret for cheating on his wife: “But in the present case he feels no guilt. On the contrary, he has an invincible sense of his own rightness. He wonders what this sense of rightness conceals; but he does not really want to know” [14,p.62]. The relationship with Anna also shows the way he views women as subjugated others. Every time we see Anna through his eyes, she is introduced as a sexual object to satisfy his erotic desire: “He has a vision of Anna Sergeyevna [...] Her petticoat is pushed high up, so that beneath it her breasts are bared. He lies between her legs: her long thighs grip him. Her face is averted, her eyes closed, she is breathing heavily [...] It is her thighs that dominate the vision: his hands curve around them, he presses them against his flanks” [15,p.131].

This master-slave relationship is highlighted later when Anna admits that she agrees to sleep with him because she wants to protect her daughter from him: “‘But you use me as a route to my child.’ ‘To Maunya! what nonsense You can’t believe that!’ ‘It’s the truth, clear for anyone to see! You use me as a route to her, and I cannot bear it!’ She sits up in the bed, crosses her arms over her naked breasts [...]” [16,p.231]. In this scene, through Dostoevsky’s eyes, we see Anna as a pornographic object whose passivity signifies her complicity in her subjugation. On the other hand, Dostoevsky shows no strong objection for what she says, and that forecasts his real intention of writing the two short texts, through which he wants to corrupt the child. Coetzee seems to imply that the act of writing is not only to corrupt the child’s memories of his son, but also to fulfil his sexual desire for her: “...Dostoevsky turns out to be remarkably similar in this novel to the ‘criminal’ that Freud accuses him of being in ‘Dostoevsky and Parricide’” [17,p.135].

However, this traditional moral assessment that shows, on one level, how Coetzee intentionally violates the legacy of the historical Dostoevsky cannot be adequate for several reasons. The first reason, as Uhlmann points out, is that Coetzee does not really seem to believe in the existence of a writer as a creator [18,p.63]; in other words, he does not believe that the writer, who is the creator of his fictional world, should be responsible of his creation; this idea is repeatedly implied by his character Dostoevsky when he informs the police that what people writes on papers cannot be used against them as evidence: “‘Do you really intend to construe this as evidence against my son- a story, a fantasy, written in the privacy of his room?’” [19,p.42]. This idea, which aligns with what Barthes argues in his essay ‘The Death of the Author’, separates the author’s intention from his literary work [20,p.148]; consequently, it problematizes the identity of the narrator/ speaker: it will become impossible to identify him/her with the author. When Anna associates Dostoevsky, who is a writer like Coetzee himself, with the idea of God,



he denounces such power: “‘You are an artist, a master,’ she says. ‘It is for you, not for me, to bring him back to life’ [...] Master of life: strange term [...] ‘I am far from being a master,’ he says” [21,p.140]. This form of authorial disavowal is further emphasized by the way Dostoevsky satirizes the idea of God: “‘If you are there, save me [...] But there was only silence [...] God said nothing [...] God did not appear. God did not intervene’ [...] ‘Who knows? Perhaps God does not like to be tempted [...] Or perhaps the reason is simply that God does not hear very well. God must be very old by now, as old as the world or even older. Perhaps he is hard of hearing and weak of Vision too, like any old man” [22,p.75]. In this quotation, besides the context, the style also signifies the idea of authorial denial by repeating the word “‘perhaps”” or using expressions such as “‘Who knows””.

Secondly, what Coetzee does in his novel, manipulating history and mixing it with fiction to create a new meaning, is like what Dostoevsky does in his novel *Demons*; Coetzee seems to suggest that what counts here is the process of manipulating history and not the result of it. In *Demons*, Dostoevsky uses the real revolutionary Nechaev and his implication in the murder of a student, Ivanov, to reproduce Nechaev’s understanding to the idea of revolution. Depending on Nechaev’s handbook and using his name as well as his alleged crime, Dostoevsky composes history with fiction to depict Nechaev’s revolutionary agenda as a destructive idea that has no moral obligations. He introduces it as a tool to manipulate people by any possible means to reach its aim: to destroy the current oppressive system and replace it with a new oppressive one. What Dostoevsky does is refracting historical facts to make them more understandable to his Russian audience, therefore, what he depicts is not the real history but his own understanding of it.

On the other hand, in his novel, by using Dostoevsky’s methods, Coetzee represents the representation. He uses historical facts from the life of the Russian’s author and blends them with fictional events that he takes from *Demons* to introduce the process of writing *Demons*. Yet what we have in Coetzee’s novel is the writer himself, Dostoevsky, who becomes the nihilist, behaves in an outrageous way, and has lost his place in his soul: “‘He remembers Maximov’s assistant and the question he asked: ‘What kind of book do you write?’ He knows now the answer he should have given: ‘I write perversions of the truth. I choose a crooked road and take children into dark places’ [...] In the mirror on the dressing-table he catches a quick glimpse of himself bunched over the table. In the grey light, without his glasses, he could mistake himself for a stranger” [23,pp.235-6]. In both cases, the writers distort history to achieve subjective aims. Coetzee seems to imply ethical questions about the validity of the process itself and not the reason or the result of it: are we allowed to manipulate historical facts? If the answer is yes, then who has the right to decide how or why we do that? However, Coetzee only addresses such worthwhile questions, but he gives no answers.

Furthermore, if we agree that what Coetzee does is, to some extent, an imitation of Dostoevsky’s work, then we have a new puzzling situation where there is no way to distinguish the real from the fake, the historical facts from the fictional events, the original from the imitation: “a crisis of historicity” as Fredric Jameson calls it [24,p.22].

In this case, any moral stance against the way Coetzee manipulates some historical facts seems irrelevant because the work becomes a kind of simulacrum where real history, in Jameson's words, "remains forever out of reach" [25,p.25].

The third reason is the way that Coetzee questions the necessity of putting literary texts under moral examination. In this novel, Coetzee satirizes the ethical system that we use to assess literary texts because, as he implies, the system itself is based on immoral values and beliefs: the values of the western capitalism. The system that is built on power and domination, profit and exploitation, slavery and colonialism will not be able to make an unprejudiced ethical judgment. This idea of complicity is represented in the conversation between Dostoevsky and Nechaev: "And don't tell me the story that you were a revolutionary who went to Siberia for your beliefs. I know for a fact that even in Siberia you were treated like one of the gentry. You didn't share the sufferings of the people at all, it was just a sham" [26,p.188]. Here, the fictional Dostoevsky, who is like Coetzee himself, criticizes the system whilst he enjoys its privileges. Coetzee uses the fictional writer to show the complexity of being insider and outsider at the same time, and to question the validity of any moral stance in such situation.

The last and most important reason is the way that Coetzee implicates real events from his own life in this book: he uses the circumstances of his son Nicholas's death and attributes them to the death of Dostoevsky's stepson Pavel. In this sense, Coetzee's work can be interpreted not only as an imagining of Dostoevsky's composition of Demons, but as a lamentation that reflects the unreconciled relationship between the father and the son, Coetzee and his son, Nicholas.

The historical Dostoevsky had a stepson named Pavel, who outlived his stepfather, and Coetzee's novel, to a certain extent, reflects the tension between them; however, this tension can be attributed to the relationship between Coetzee and his son Nicolas: like Pavel in the story, Nicolas also left his home to study abroad and he was financially supported by his father. After his return to South Africa, the son participated in several criminal actions and that affected his relationship with his father. The scene of Pavel's death that we see in Coetzee's text imitates the mysterious death of Coetzee's son Nicolas. He fell off from the balcony of his apartment and died at the age of twenty-three: "On the night of October 12th, in the year of our Lord 1869, my stepson Pavel Alexandrovich Isaev fell to his death from the shot tower ... A rumour has been circulated that his death was brought about by the Third Section of the Imperial Police. This rumour is a wilful fabrication" [27,p.202]. Furthermore, the way that the character Dostoevsky feels about his stepson's betrayal, when Pavel revolts against Dostoevsky's authority and ideals by joining a radical revolutionary group, parallels the way Coetzee feels about his rebellious son Nicolas. The parallels between both fathers suggests that "Coetzee chooses not to talk about himself through himself but to exorcize his demons through the trauma of another person, be it real or fictional, in this case being real and fictional Dostoevsky"[28,p.76].

In this context, the fictional Dostoevsky's desperate attempts to bring his stepson to life, by identifying himself with Pavel, reflect Coetzee's grief and anger for losing and not knowing his own son. They reflect his yearning to a kind of reconciliation that even

literature cannot offer: “At moments like this he cannot distinguish Pavel from himself. They are the same person; and that person is no more or less than a thought, Pavel thinking it in him, he thinking it in Pavel. The thought keeps Pavel alive, suspended in his fall” [29,p.21]. The negative image of Pavel that Dostoevsky repeatedly invokes symbolizes the impossibility of reconciliation. This image, in fact, reflects Dostoevsky’s, as well as Coetzee’s, rejection of himself, of his role as a father: “And ask yourself: are you in mourning for Pavel or for yourself” [30,p.141]? It is a trap that he will never be able to escape it: “He turns the pages back and forth distractedly. Forgiveness: is there no word of forgiveness, however oblique, however disguised? Impossible to live out his days with a child inside him whose last word is not of forgiveness” [31,p.219]. The only way to live with it is to blame Pavel for not granting him forgiveness; however, the father knows that even such suspended forgiveness will not be able to heal the trauma of the past: “I have done what I can, he thinks. But he knows in his heart he has not. There is more he could do, much more” [32,p.93].

However, the parallelism between Coetzee and his character Dostoevsky is used not only to highlight the pain and the grief of the fathers who lose their sons, but also to mirror their plight as fathers and authors at the same time: the way that their traumatic experiences affect their writing. It is a self-criticism, a meditation on the process of writing itself. Coetzee, through his character Dostoevsky, reflects on what it means to be a writer in general as well as showing his own experience as a father and a writer who uses his son’s suffering to create his fictional works.

Coetzee introduces writing as a double-edged weapon. It is a kind of madness that is influenced by pain and anguish: “You write because your childhood was lonely, because you were not loved [...] We do not write out of plenty [...] we do not write out of plenty, he wants to say—we write out of anguish, out of lack” [33,p.152]. Once you transport your pain into papers, to set yourself free, the consequences will be unpredictable: “But the writing, he fears, would be that of a madman—vileness, obscenity, page after page of it, untameable” [34,p.18].

Through his character Dostoevsky, Coetzee exemplifies such devastated consequences: a mix of disgrace, betrayal, sacrifice, and nihilism. In his attempt to escape his grief and anger, Dostoevsky appeals to writing, and, consequently, this act costs him everything he believes in or stands for. Firstly, he disgraces himself by using his pain, the pain of those he loves, to make fame and wealth: “They pay him thousands of roubles to write books and he keeps it all for himself!” [35,p.157]. He requires only a single success to wipe out all his debts, but this success is achieved at the expense of losing those who he cherishes most: “I pay and I sell: that is my life. Sell myself, sell the lives of those around me. Sell everyone [...] Sell you, sell your daughter, sell all those I love. Sold Pavel alive and will now sell the Pavel inside me, if I can find a way” [36,p.222]. But it is not only about shame, it is about his betrayal of those that he brings to life without their permission: those who are forced to live their trauma again and again.

For the fictional Dostoevsky, as well as for Coetzee, some kinds of pain cannot and will not be healed. Even though writing manages to ease his pain, it does not heal the pain of the writer but rather transforms it into a kind of anger that antagonizes and betrays



everyone around him: “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” [37,p.235]. In this scene, by showing the moral fall of his character, Coetzee questions the role of fiction in remembering the horror of past. Are writers allowed to transform this kind of pain into fictional works? Or should such painful scenes remain buried in the deepest part of their memories? Will they remain the same if they travel to these dark places of their souls?

The final page of the novel suggests that such painful memories, like Demons, should never see the light of the day because whenever we reveal them, we will never be the same again: “He picks up his hat and leaves his lodgings. He does not recognize the hat, has no idea whose shoes he is wearing. In fact, he recognizes nothing of himself. If he were to look in a mirror now, he would not be surprised if another face were to loom up, staring back blindly at him” [38,p.250]. Ironically, by involving his son’s painful past into his narration, and reimagining the censored chapter in Dostoevsky’s novel, Coetzee not only reveals his Demons but also forces Dostoevsky to do the same.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

#### References

- [1] E. MacFarlane, Reading Coetzee, New York: Editions Rodopi, 2013.
- [2] J. Lothe, Narrative Ethics, New York: Editions Rodopi, 2013.
- [3] J. Lothe, Narrative Ethics, New York: Editions Rodopi, 2013.
- [4] E. MacFarlane, Reading Coetzee, New York: Editions Rodopi, 2013.
- [5] J. Lothe, Narrative Ethics, New York: Editions Rodopi, 2013.
- [6] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [7] A. Uhlmann, "Excess as Ek-stasis: Coetzee's The Master of Petersburg and Giving Offense," The Comparatist, pp. 54-69, 2014.
- [8] A. Uhlmann, "Excess as Ek-stasis: Coetzee's The Master of Petersburg and Giving Offense," The Comparatist, pp. 54-69, 2014.
- [9] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [10] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [11] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [12] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [13] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [14] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [15] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [16] J. M. Coetzee, The Master of Petersburg, London: Vintage, 2004.

- [17] A. Harris, "The Fathers' Dark Triumph: terror and the end of revolution in J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*," *Journal for Cultural Research*, pp. 132-145, 2014.
- [18] A. Uhlmann, "Excess as Ek-stasis: Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* and Giving Offense," *The Comparatist*, pp. 54-69, 2014.
- [19] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [20] R. Barthes, "The death of the author," in *Image, music, text*, London, Fontana, 1977, pp. 142-148.
- [21] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [22] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [23] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [24] F. Jameson, *POSTMODERNISM, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- [25] F. Jameson, *POSTMODERNISM, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- [26] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [27] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [28] A. Civieri, "The Master of Petersburg: Coetzee and Dostoevsky Merging Through Fiction.," *Iperstoria*, pp. 72-81, 2015.
- [29] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [30] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [31] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [32] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [33] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [34] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [35] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [36] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [37] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- [38] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 2004.