

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

'How Shall I be Saved?' The Salvation of Mrs Curren in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. William M. Purcell

In announcing the selection of J. M. Coetzee as the Nobel Prize laureate in literature for 2003, the Swedish Academy wrote that Coetzee's works follow a recurring pattern: an investigation into the 'the downward spiraling journeys he considers necessary for the salvation of his characters.'¹ Though salvation is a strong motif in Coetzee's novels, explicit connection with Christian salvation is avoided in virtually all of his novels, except for one, *Age of Iron*. Oddly, however, *Age of Iron* has been viewed from just about every lens but the Christian one. Susan VanZanten Gallagher and others have correctly noted that Mrs Curren, the novel's central protagonist, serves as a human allegory for the plight of South Africa. VanZanten Gallagher's analysis notes references to Virgil and 'the unborn dead,' Charon, Dante's boatman at the river Styx, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and Tolstoy's 'What Men Live By.' In a later work she includes *Age of Iron* in the category of South African confessional literature, but provides no analysis and discussion of how the work fits in the genre.² Derek Attridge writes that the role of the 'other' in Coetzee's work, particularly *Age of Iron*, is key to understanding the author's writing. For Attridge the conjoined interaction of self and the 'other' lead to a recognition of perspective. Although he acknowledges that recognition of the 'other' in religious work is transcendent, Attridge does not seem to appreciate fully the role of Christian scripture in *Age of Iron*.³ Gilbert Yeoh focuses his attention on 'love,' with emphasis on such distinctions as 'agape' and 'caritas' to explore ironies. Acknowledging the Christian apparatus, however, Yeoh connects Mrs Curren's ordeal to I Corinthians and ignores obvious allusions to the broader Biblical context. Yeoh appropriates the language of Christianity, but is not attentive to what I regard as the predominant Christian imagery contained in the novel.⁴

There is no doubt that *Age of Iron* is an allegory for the social and political struggles of South Africa as it emerged from apartheid. The thesis of this paper is that *Age of Iron* should also be read as an account of Christian salvation in which a lost soul, Mrs Curren, is saved by learning to love the unloved and unlovable. The narrative of Mrs Curren's salvation is crafted via references to a variety of Christian scriptures including John, Luke, Matthew, Mark, Hebrews, Corinthians, James, and Amos, as well as the *Dies irae*, a portion of the Requiem Mass.

Attridge has written that Coetzee's characters often use religious expression as a means to describe certain aspects of society: 'although they apparently have no orthodox religious beliefs, they cannot talk about the lives they lead without such language.'⁵ Indeed, *Age of Iron* is wholly dependent upon such language. This is no accident. As VanZanten Gallagher writes 'For many years, South Africa had the strongest civil religion of any

¹ Swedish Academy, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/press.html.

² Susan Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 193-212.; Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *Truth and reconciliation: The Confessional Mode in South African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002) 45.

³ Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 98-9.

⁴ Gilbert Yeoh, 'Love and Indifference in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, (2003) 38: 107-34.

⁵ Attridge 180.

"'How Shall I be Saved?' The Salvation of Mrs Curren in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*.' William M. Purcell. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013. <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

twentieth-century nation,' as the ruling National Party defined the nation as a 'Christian country.'⁶ Moreover, Lyn S. Graybill has written that 'South Africa is a country that is "Christian" in a sense that would be unrecognizable to Americans. Theological discourse on political matters is taken seriously.' She continues, noting that 'Biblical language' 'resonates' throughout South African thought as it was used both by the ruling National Party to justify its apartheid policies and by resistance leaders as a critique of those policies.⁷ Coetzee, as he tells us in *Boyhood*, attended Catholic school and was deeply attracted to Catholicism at one point in his youth.⁸ Mrs Curren, the fictional character, as a University Classics Professor, would have a decent grounding in Catholicism/Christianity and its doctrine of salvation. Additionally, a Christian view of salvation is cogently articulated by Blanche, a Roman Catholic Nun in Coetzee's 2003 novel, *Elizabeth Costello*.⁹

Christian salvation involves the transformation of a person's soul. As Paul S. Fiddes writes, the transformation 'does not just involve the individual, but always places the person in relationship.'¹⁰ The person moves from one status to another. Salvation is reached through atonement, 'the restoring of relationships between human beings and God, who are estranged from each other.'¹¹ Those relationships are restored through a 'personal relationship in which those who have broken them are actively involved' (178). A second stage in salvation is sanctification. According to Wilhelm Niesel, Roman Catholic theology sees sanctification as beginning with God's grace, but also requiring that the person's '*will is active in the reception of grace*, by ... free will and cooperation.'¹² Progress toward sanctification requires '*the meritorious character of the works*' done by the sanctified person through hope, love, and faith.¹³ Though the Reformed tradition maintains that Sanctification is only bestowed by God, the resulting salvation still involves the transformation of the person.¹⁴

Age of Iron takes the form of an extended letter, written by Mrs Curren, a retired South African Classics professor, to her adult daughter, who now lives in the United States. The novel is set in South Africa from 1986 to 1989, a period during which Mrs Curren is dying of cancer. Concurrent with her terminal diagnosis, a homeless man, Vercueil, takes up residence in Mrs Curren's home. During the 3 year period, Mrs Curren develops a relationship with Vercueil and eventually relies on him to post the letter to her daughter. Mrs Curren also becomes more involved with her domestic servant, Florence, and her family, when Florence's son Bekhi and his friend, John, are savagely beaten by police. As Mrs Curren becomes intimately involved with a homeless man and black South Africans, one sees, as many commentators have noted, a human allegory of South Africa as a country. The allegory, moreover, follows quite familiar Christian forms.

⁶ VanZanten Gallagher 38.

⁷ Lyn S. Graybill, 'South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Ethical and Theological Perspectives,' in Joel H. Rosenthal, ed., *Ethics and International Affairs: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (Georgetown University Press, 1999) 378.

⁸ J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from a Provincial Life* (New York: Viking, 1997).

⁹ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Viking, 2003).

¹⁰ Paul S. Fides, 'Salvation,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 177.

¹¹ Fides 178.

¹² Wilhelm Niesel, *The Gospel and the Churches: A Comparison of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism*. Trans. David Lewis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962) 57.

¹³ Niesel 63.

¹⁴ Niesel 62

Age of Iron is divided into four chapters that each detail successive stages in Mrs Curren's salvation. The narrative opens with Mrs Curren's first encounter with Vercueil. She has just received her terminal diagnosis and returns home to encounter a man, whom we learn later is named Vercueil, sprawled out in a cardboard box at the end of her alley: 'Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette's, his jaw agape. An unsavory smell about him: urine, sweet wine, moldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean.'¹⁵ Mrs Curren asks Vercueil to leave her property. As Mrs Curren recalls the situation she ponders its significance: 'Two things, then, in the space of an hour: the news, long dreaded, and this reconnaissance, this other annunciation' (15) As Yeoh has written, the use of 'agape' invites the connection to the Greek term 'agape,' Christian love.¹⁶ Even more relevant to a Christian reading are the descriptions of smell and clothing which resonate with Jesus' encounter with Lazarus in John 11: 28-44.¹⁷ In that passage, Mary and Martha, firm believers, take Jesus to the bedside of their brother, Lazarus. Lazarus is described as having an 'odor, for he has been dead four days.' Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, and in so doing becomes an enemy of the Pharisees. In consorting with the unclean Vercueil and later with Florence and her family, Mrs Curren violates a variety of mores expected of a woman of her race, class, and station. Jesus repeatedly violated the Jewish cleanliness laws in touching lepers (Mark 1: 40-42), a bleeding woman (Mark 5: 24-34) and other outcasts. Jesus, of course, was well known as a prophet when he performed these acts. Mrs Curren is a broken woman, estranged from family and country and now facing a terminal illness.

The reference to the encounter with Vercueil as an annunciation, of course, invites comparison to the 'The Annunciation' in the Christian Scriptures, the Angel Gabriel's appearance before Mary and his forecasting of the birth of Jesus and his eventual legacy (Luke 1: 26-37). Just as the Christian annunciation foreshadowed a transformation so too does the annunciation of Mrs Curren.

In spite of Mrs Curren's initial resistance, Vercueil returns and Mrs Curren allows him to stay, first in her carport and eventually in the house. She offers him food and money in exchange for chores that he does not really do. She writes: 'All in all, more trouble than he is worth. But I did not choose him. He chose me. Or perhaps he chose the one house without a dog' (18). One is reminded here of Jesus' remarks to his disciples in John 15: 16: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.' Again, Mrs Curren's ultimate harbouring of Vercueil and her various remarks connecting him with angels resonates with the passage in Hebrews where Paul cautions that one should show hospitality to strangers 'for some have entertained angels unaware' (13.2; also James 2.2-7).

Mrs Curren's relationship with Vercueil is uncomfortable from the beginning. She is disturbed by his 'strange green eyes,' 'animal eyes,' and his smell' (6). She smells his presence in her room at night. She likens him more to an insect 'emerging from behind the baseboards' than to an angel (13-14). Nonetheless, the relationship between the two deepens. As she understands Vercueil more her attitude toward him begins to shift. The smell, she learns, comes from his feet: 'He needs new shoes. He needs a bath. He needs a bath every day; he needs clean underwear; he needs a bed; he needs a roof over his head, he needs three meals a day, he needs money in the bank. Too much to give: too much for someone who

¹⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1990) 4. Subsequent references to this text will be included in parentheses in the text.

¹⁶ Yeoh 130.

¹⁷ Biblical references are to *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, Revised Standard Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

longs, if the truth be told, to creep into her own mother's lap and be comforted' (20). Vercueil's neediness, emphasised with the repetitive use of the word, is reminiscent of the Beatitudes (Mark 5) with its repeated use of 'blessed.' The needy people, Jesus tells us, are blessed and 'they shall inherit the earth.' The consideration of Vercueil's neediness moves Mrs Curren to a contemplation of charity and ultimately helps her to deal with her own needs.

Mrs Curren is resistant to providing for Vercueil without work in return. She tells him that 'we can't proceed on charity.' Vercueil asks why. 'Because you don't deserve it,' she responds. Vercueil replies, 'keeping his smile to himself: Deserve ... Who deserves anything?' Mrs Curren responds in anger and 'thrusts' him her purse (21). Thus, a discussion of charity leads to the contemplation of grace, undeserved and freely given. At one point Vercueil has asked her why she doesn't convert her house into a boarding house or a soup kitchen. Mrs Curren responds with something of a tirade: 'Because the spirit of charity has perished in this country. Because 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 go from the heart? What do you think charity is? Soup? Money? Charity: from the Latin word for heart.' She then notes to herself that her etymology is false. Caritas, charity, comes from care. Vercueil, she feels is 'beyond caring and beyond care' (22). Subsequently, however, she discovers that there is greater depth to Vercueil.

Mrs Curren is a lover of music. She plays classical pieces on her piano and notices that Vercueil is listening. At one point she plays the Goldberg Variations on her phonograph and notices Vercueil, squatting in the alley, smoking, and listening. She looks at him and muses: 'At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love' (30). The thought repulses her, but she considers it nonetheless. She has connected with Vercueil on visceral, transcendent, and aesthetic levels.

Chapter One closes with Mrs Curren asking Vercueil to perform a task for her after she has died. She wants Vercueil to post her letter and some other documents to her daughter. Though Vercueil is resistant, he finally agrees and the first chapter ends. Mrs Curren's terminal diagnosis puts her in the frame of mind to contemplate something of a spiritual calling. The arrival of Vercueil sends her thoughts to biblical teaching she has known since childhood. Vercueil, in her mind, could be an angel. The fact that her angel is far from perfect moves her to contemplate the nature of charity and its basis, the love of another person. Vercueil's agreement to post Mrs Curren's letter puts him in the role of dual messenger: Mrs Curren perceives that he may be a messenger from God; she, in turn, sends him to deliver a message of her own. The message, as becomes evident in the pages that follow, is the story of her soul's salvation.

The next chapter opens with the return of Florence, Mrs Curren's black domestic, and her children, Bekhi, a 15 year old boy, and two young daughters, Hope and Beauty. Bekhi is later visited by a friend, John. Both boys are infused with the revolutionary militancy of the generation that would soon topple the apartheid regime. The boys taunt Vercueil and provoke an altercation with him. Mrs Curren breaks up the fight and tells the boys they must leave Vercueil alone, that he lives there. Florence gets involved in the discussion: 'He lives here,' she says, 'but he is rubbish. He is good for nothing.' Mrs Curren corrects Florence, saying 'There are no rubbish people. We are all people together. ... He is my messenger' (30). Mrs Curren's reference to a messenger certainly refers to his role in conveying the message she is writing for her daughter, but it also alludes to her thought that Vercueil is a messenger for her and the vehicle for her salvation.

Mrs Curren has a subsequent discussion with Florence about what is going on in the

townships. Florence states that the oppression of the whites has made her people cruel. Florence is proud of the children: 'These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them.' Mrs Curren reflects on the comment:

Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The Age of Iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? A Spartan matron, iron-hearted, bearing warrior sons for the nation. 'We are proud of them.' We. Come home either with your shield or on your shield. (50)

Mrs Curren has come to question her training as a classicist and her role in perpetuating a regime that created that Age of Iron. John and Bekhi are children of iron. Curren's classicism represents the influence of humanism and the limitations that the humanist outlook has had on her own time.¹⁸ Their militant behaviour contrasts sharply with the names of Bekhi's two younger sisters, Hope and Beauty. They represent the South Africa that is yet to come.

Eventually, John stays at Mrs Curren's home, along with Bekhi. A policeman comes to Mrs Curren's door, asking for the boys. Mrs Curren speaks to Florence, telling her she does not want trouble. Florence responds that it is safer there than in the township, Guguletu. When the rainy season arrives Mrs Curren invites Vercueil inside the house. Vercueil brings a drunken street woman into the house and Mrs Curren, jealous and angry, banishes the woman. Shortly thereafter a police van intentionally hits Bekhi and John, while they are riding a bicycle. Mrs Curren runs into the street screaming desperately for an ambulance. John is badly wounded in the incident. His forehead is cut open, leaving flesh 'hanging in a loose flap' and blood flowing onto his face. Mrs Curren pinches the skin tightly, trying to staunch the flow of blood. She is drawn by the sight of the 'precious' blood. 'Blood,' she muses in a theological train of thought, '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' (62-4). She also notes the absence of bleeding in her own post-menopausal body. John is taken to a hospital. Mrs Curren and Florence treat Bekhi's wounds at home. When Bekhi holds up his bleeding palms Mrs Curren wonders if the wounds are 'honorable' 'wounds of war.' Curren's thoughts on blood utilise Christian imagery. Blood is communal. Blood is 'sacred' and 'abominated.' Mrs Curren is washed in the blood of John and Bekhi, sacrificial lambs necessary to the conversion of both Mrs Curren and the white South Africa she represents. Coetzee and Mrs Curren characterise the event in the language of salvation.

Mrs Curren leaves with Vercueil to search the hospitals of the area for John. Part of her awakening is the realisation that there are separate hospitals for Blacks and Whites. While waiting in the car with Vercueil, she muses that she is becoming used to Vercueil's smell: 'Is this how I feel toward South Africa: not loving it but habituated to its bad smell' (70). Vercueil grumpily asks her what she needs him for. She responds, again emphasising her lack of choice in the relationship, 'it is hard to be alone all the time. That's all. I didn't choose you, but you are the one who is here, and that will have to do. You arrived. It's like having a child. You can't choose the child. It just arrives' (71). They continue the discussion with

¹⁸Curren's classicism represents the influence of humanism and the limitations the humanist outlook has had on her own time. This is a theme Coetzee places in much sharper focus in *Elizabeth Costello* when Elizabeth debates the merits of humanism with her sister, Blanche, a Roman Catholic nun. Elizabeth smugly takes her humanist position back to the Greeks. Blanche responds the Greek ideal with withering scorn.

comments about Mrs Curren's daughter. Her daughter, she says, will not come home to South Africa. She is 'like iron', she says. Vercueil responds: 'You are like iron too' (75). She tells him that something inside her broke when he made the comment. What was breaking was her iron resolve, her unwitting complicity in the dysfunction of her country and her life. Vercueil remarks that Curren's daughter is in exile. She responds: 'No, she is not an exile. I am the exile' (76). Mrs Curren's acknowledgment of her exile status prepares her for a shocking entry into Guguletu township, a foreign country in her own land. Her sins have been washed away by the blood of the lambs, but she has yet to realise fully the extent of her sins. Mrs Curren has explored the consequences of involvement in the lives of others as in Chapter Two. In the next chapter she learns what that involvement demonstrates about what it means to love.

The third chapter opens with a phone call to Florence. There is trouble concerning Bekhi and she needs to go to Guguletu. Mrs Curren decides to drive Florence and the children to Guguletu. Going in to Guguletu is like traveling into another world. The rough road is abandoned and their car is engulfed by swirls of mist. They drop the oldest child, Hope, off with a relative and pick up Florence's brother, Mr Thabane. They drive 'through a landscape of scorched earth, blackened trees' (76). They eventually have to stop and go on by foot. The scene is grim: 'around us was a wilderness of gray sand dune and Port Jackson willow, and a stench of garbage and ash. Shreds of plastic, old iron, glass, animal bones littered both sides of the path' (93). The houses are shacks, many covered only by plastic. Gunshots can be heard in the distance. Beyond a sand dune people are gathered watching some of the shacks burn. Others struggle to remove possessions from burning structures. A man in a black coat hacks at doors and windows with an axe as his companions douse the dwellings with gasoline. The crowd screams and throws rocks at their attackers. Government troops surround the area, riding in armored cars. Mrs Curren is exhausted and asks to go home. Mr Thabane mocks her: 'You want to go home,' he said, 'but what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?' (97). Mrs Curren speaks, trying to condemn the situation, but her words are inadequate. A man from the crowd dismisses her words, telling her that she is talking 'shit'. Mrs Curren agrees, but points out that to describe the scene would 'require the tongue of a god.' Again, the man replies 'shit' (99). They journey further into the devastation and encounter Florence emerging from a building, her face in tears. Inside the building is a mass of rubble and, against a wall, are five dead bodies, including Bheki. Mrs Curren returns home in outraged disbelief.

Guguletu is Gehenna, Hell, a dumping ground for discarded things and people. Mrs Curren must literally pass through Hell in order to be saved. At home she contemplates the futility of her life. She thinks about her family. She thinks about Hell. She thinks about Judgment day, invoking a line from the Requiem Mass: '*Dies irae, dies illa* when the absent shall be present and the present absent' (111). Death and her day of judgment are near.

At home, depressed, Mrs Curren contemplates suicide. She and Vercueil drive around town and she talks of driving into the sea and setting herself on fire. Vercueil eggs her on, but for some reason she resists. Vercueil gets a bottle of liquor and they share it. Vercueil urges her to get drunk. She tries to explain her anger and sorrow to Vercueil:

When I walk upon this land, this South Africa, 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 for me to go, waiting to be raised

up again.’ (125-6)

She rails at Vercueil: ‘You think I am upset but will get over it. ... What I cannot get over any more is that *getting over*. If I get over it this time I will never have a chance *not* to get over it. For the sake of my own resurrection I cannot get over it this time’ (126).

At this point Mrs Curren is quite conscious of the fact that the welfare of her soul is dependent upon her relationship with another, particularly Vercueil. In contemplating her situation she invokes the parable of the sower: ‘Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him. I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul’ (130). Her unrequited love with Vercueil is like ‘rain falling on barren soil’ (Matthew 13:3-23; Mark 4:2-20; Luke 8:4-15).

The relationship with Vercueil is crucial to the salvation of Mrs Curren’s soul. She sees her fate inextricably connected with Vercueil: ‘I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him’ (131). Again, she has invoked Scripture, Isaiah 42.3, in considering her relationship.

Subsequently, John, Bheki’s friend, who was wounded earlier, comes to her house looking for Bheki. She tells him that Bheki is dead. She feeds the young man, all the while thinking that she despises him, yet knowing that she must love him:

That is my first word, my first confession. I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. ... That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. ... He is part of my salvation. I must love him. (136)

Ultimately, she thinks of the absurdity of her impulses, noting it is ‘Cruciform logic which takes me where I do not want to go!’ (137). Here Mrs Curren explicitly struggles with the Christian connection, aware for the first time, perhaps, of her transformation.

The police come to her house to take John. She tries to order them away. Ultimately, the police force Mrs Curren from her house and she wanders away, wrapped in a quilt, to an overpass, where she lays down to rest. She lies asleep, wetting herself and suffering the attention of homeless scavengers, who pick at her frail body, looking for valuables. She dozes off again and awakes to a familiar odor, Vercueil. He holds her, gives her a drink from his bottle of wine, and listens as she talks: ‘it is a confession I am making here this morning, Mr Vercueil. ... I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!’ (165). Vercueil responds to this confession and communion with Mrs Curren with a snore. He has fallen asleep. They stay the night together under the overpass. In the morning Mrs Curren and Vercueil return home. The police interrogate her and again she falls asleep.

Mrs Curren has plunged further into the world as she comes face to face with the conditions in the township. In the aftermath, considering suicide, she hits rock bottom as she finds herself asleep, under a highway bridge, soaked in her own urine. She is now equal to Vercueil, no better, no worse. She is nearly prepared for death.

In the final section Mrs Curren wakes from a confusing dream about the afterlife, Aphrodite, and Florence, her servant. She discusses the dream with Vercueil, trying to talk out its significance. She tells Vercueil that there is more that she needs to know. ‘I want to see you,’ she tells Vercueil, ‘as you really are’ (179). Vercueil responds that he is merely a man who came with no invitation. Vercueil denies choosing her, stating that he merely came

to the house that did not have a dog. Mrs Curren is in pain and has bought more pain pills from the pharmacy. Vercueil offers to kill her and puts his hands to her throat. She refuses, but invites Vercueil into her bed, where she sleeps fitfully along with the man and his dog. After a while, Vercueil tells her about his life. She tells him about her life, her career as a teacher of classics.

Time progresses toward the old woman's death and Vercueil helps her as her needs increase. She writes of her relationship with Vercueil:

I have fallen and he has caught me. It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand, not I who fell under his: we fell under each other, and have tumbled and risen since then in the flights and swoops of that mutual election. ...

He does not know how to love. ... He does not know how to love as a boy does not know how to love. ... Does not know what he has to do.

The nearer the end comes, the more faithful he is. Yet still I have to guide his hand. (196)

The book closes with a mysterious scene in which Mrs Curren wakes to see Vercueil standing at the balcony, before an open window. She asks at what he is looking and then, knowingly, 'Is it time?' Vercueil nods. They climb into the bed together. '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 with a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had' (198).

Is Vercueil the angel of life or death?

I think he is both. Vercueil has prepared Mrs Curren for her physical death and in so doing facilitated her spiritual rebirth. The fact that Mrs Curren can no longer smell Vercueil indicates that her transformation is complete. The distinctions between Mrs Curren and Vercueil are gone. Mrs Curren, like South Africa, is being transformed from the old into the new. Having loved again, she must die in order to be reborn.

Age of Iron is the New Testament of Mrs Curren's life. Mrs Curren's conversion narrative, written in the first person, takes her from a cursory and dismissive recognition of another to a familiar and trusting one. Over the course of her three year journey she becomes increasingly aware of the world around her. As her connections to that world deepen she becomes connected with the people who inhabit it. The judgmental and distanced attitude Mrs Curren has toward Vercueil dissipates and she rediscovers what it is like to connect with the soul of another. As she connects with Vercueil, Bekhi, and John she becomes humbled to the point where she can meet death with a certain amount of grace. The entire journey is narrated with frequent references to Christian scripture.

The Christian scriptures represent one of the largest bodies of consolatory and inspirational literature in the Western world. The dominance held by Christianity in South African culture insures that South African Literature is infused with the essence of this literature. Coetzee, himself, was quite aware of the themes of redemption and salvation in western literature. In 1985, five years before the publication of *Age of Iron*, Coetzee traced themes of confession in an article in *Comparative Literature*. In regard to Dostoevsky he wrote: 'True confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self, but ... from faith and grace.'¹⁹ As Mrs Curren, Mr Vercueil, Bekhi, John, and Coetzee himself show, the

¹⁹ J. M. Coetzee, 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,' *Comparative Literature* 37 (1985) 230.

message may sometimes transcend the bounds of the person delivering it. The salvation of Mrs Curren, South Africa, and perhaps Coetzee is a work in progress, literally and allegorically. When asked about grace for Mrs Curren in a 1990 interview with David Attwell, Coetzee responded: 'As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet.'²⁰ Grace and salvation are again raised in *Elizabeth Costello* via the dialogue of Elizabeth Costello and her sister, Blanche, a Roman Catholic Nun. The humanities, Blanche argues in response to Elizabeth, are not sufficient for the salvation of humanity. Rather, '*Extra ecclesiam nulla salvatio*.'²¹ Later, in the book's eighth chapter, we find Elizabeth being barred admission through the 'Gate' because she has no beliefs on which to stand.²² And as can be seen in Coetzee's most recent work, *The Childhood of Jesus*, Coetzee is still not yet a Christian. He is intrigued by its mystical allusions and allegories, but also by what he has learned in philosophy, and literature. At best, though, he is still troubled about where he stands. His explorations into the human condition, frank and often very personal, nonetheless move his readers to negotiate the world around them. Coetzee is ultimately a contemporary religious philosopher, having moved to a point beyond the Catholic and Reformed Christianity of his South Africa. His works are forming their own testament.

Salvation is at the centre of *Age of Iron*. For Mrs Curren to be saved she must recognise her sins and connect with the souls of those around her. Her journey through Guguletu makes her painfully aware of her sins, as she acknowledges in her subsequent confession to Vercueil. It is not so important that she be explicitly forgiven by Vercueil, but that she forgive herself. Again, as Coetzee wrote in 1985: 'The end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself.'²³ Opposing sides can tell their versions of the 'truth' in perpetuity. The difference is made when we move beyond posturing, accept what has happened, and move on. The *Age of Iron* is an allegory for South Africa, not just in the dysfunction, but in the denouement as well. The Truth and Reconciliation hearings, though years ahead at the time of *Age of Iron*'s publication, are the logical response to this allegory and a testament to the Christian character of this still troubled nation.

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²⁰ J. M Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 250.

²¹ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 133.

²² Earlier, Elizabeth denies that her advocacy of vegetarianism comes out of a 'moral conviction.' Rather, she says, 'It comes out of a desire to save my soul.' Adding to this perceived inconsistency she points out that she is wearing leather shoes and is carrying a leather handbag (88-89).

²³ Coetzee, *Confession* 230.