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► **To cite this version:**

Alain Geoffroy. John M. Coetzee: The Issue of Writing for a South African Writer. *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 1994, The Quest for Identity in a Multicultural Society: South Africa, International Seminar, 09, pp.201-212. hal-02350289

**HAL Id: hal-02350289**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02350289>**

Submitted on 6 Nov 2019

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# *John M. Coetzee : The Issue of Writing for a South African Writer*

*We do not write out of plenty, he wants to say — we write out of anguish, out of lack.<sup>1</sup>*

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The richness of fiction writing in South Africa today testifies to its exceptional fecundity and originality. Shaped by a variety of traditions and urged on by manifold claims and hopes, black, white or coloured literatures have however seldom managed, in the past decades, to elude political constraints. If coercion and injustice were undeniably powerful sources of inspiration under the apartheid regime, the destructive, stifling effects induced by censorship unquestionably led artistic expression — even anti-establishment voices — to oversimplification and conformism. When she was interviewed in 1987 by Itala Vivian, Nadine Gordimer pessimistically observed: “the history of South Africa is tragic, even seen from a literary point of view: it is the history of a mess and of the erasing of a whole civilisation, the Black one.”<sup>3</sup> Unquestionably, censorship was particu-

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (New York: Viking, 1994), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Université de La Réunion, Groupe de Recherches sur l’Afrique du Sud, 15 av René Cassin, 97715 Saint Denis Messag Cedex 9.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from “Vers une culture commune ?, entretien avec Nadine Gordimer,” *Europe*, n° 708, “Littérature de l’Afrique du Sud,” 1988, 43.

larly inflexible towards black writers,<sup>4</sup> even though it did not always spare white literature. In 1974, André Brink's novel *Kennis van die Aand* (*Looking on Darkness*) was the first work in Afrikaans to be banned by censorship.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, the repressive political context of the times went far beyond Brink's indisputable commitment and threatened every writer, as moderation or neutrality failed to shield literature from government inquisition. No printed matter can actually escape the political environment in which it is produced, and the subjectivity and the artistry of the writer are not always convincing enough devices to adorn his or her personal, more or less radical position with the skin-deep conformity required by censorship. As Georg Lukács put it:

Every action, thought and emotion of human beings is inseparably bound up with struggles of the community, i.e., with politics; whether the humans themselves are conscious of this, unconscious of it or even trying to escape from it, objectively their actions, thoughts and emotions nevertheless spring from and turn into politics.<sup>6</sup>

This is amply the case for black "realistic" literature in South Africa, but many white writers follow more metaphorical paths to express their disapproval and uneasiness. Their commitment, often openly exhibited outside the field of literature, constitutes their major source of inspiration under the cover of fictions coined in the very political situation they live in, according to the implicit "moral rule" evoked in André Brink's *States of Emergency*. "Does one not have a weightier 'obligation' — as a human being, as a citizen, as a writer — towards what is happening around one?"<sup>7</sup>

John M. Coetzee's fictions apparently betray this conception of a literary activity anchored in the local social and political fabric. If some of his novels clearly refer to South Africa (the second narrative of *Dusklands*,<sup>8</sup> *In the Heart of the Country*,<sup>9</sup> *Life and Times of Michael K*,<sup>10</sup> *Age of Iron*<sup>11</sup>), many are situated far from Africa: the first narrative of *Dusk-*

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<sup>4</sup> See Geoffrey V. Davis. "Censorship in South Africa." In *Commonwealth*, "L'Afrique du Sud aujourd'hui," 1990, 53-66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Lukács. Preface to *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> André Brink. *States of Emergency* (London: Flamingo, 1988) p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> J. M. Coetzee. *Dusklands*, (1974) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Coetzee. *In the Heart of the Country*, (1977) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Coetzee. *Life and Times of Michael K*, (1983) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Coetzee. *Age of Iron* (1990) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991).

*lands* — "The Vietnam Project" — is located in California; *Foe*<sup>12</sup> depicts life on an unknown remote island in the Atlantic, then the plot is transferred to England; *Waiting for the Barbarians*<sup>13</sup> fictionalises an imaginary country at an undetermined time, which leaves the reader free to find in the story the parables he is ready to see... As for his last work, *The Master of Petersburg*, it is staged in 19th century Russia. Moreover, none of his South African fictions — with the notable exception of *Age of Iron* — seem tightly connected with contemporary political reality: "The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" (*Dusklands*) takes place in the remote past of South Africa, whereas *Life and Times of Michael K* mentions a civil war still to come. As for *In the Heart of the Country*, it comprises no indication of date nor place. In fact, Coetzee's novels seem, somehow or other, to scorn present day history<sup>14</sup> — though the latter is not systematically ignored — as if his works were meant to serve other aims than protest, less rooted in circumstances, but more universal. The critics, however, responded in various ways to these original works. Some bitterly regretted the apparent lack of direct political commitment of the author — at least in his fictions —, such as, for instance, Irving Howe who alleged that "such invocations of universal evil can deflect attention from the particular and at least partially remediable social wrongs Mr. Coetzee portrays."<sup>15</sup> Other commentators endeavoured to bring Coetzee back into the ranks of the politically committed writers by interpreting his writings as parables, as if they were nothing but literary tricks, not only meant to elude the critical reading of the censors, but first and foremost to project the history of South Africa into the wider destiny of mankind. Let us mention here Kelly Hewson:

By its autonomy, its freedom from any distinctly political programme, a novel like *Life and Time of Michael K* can slip through the censor's net to help remind us, his Western audience, that oppression and injustice are not limited to South Africa, that, in some sense, they are eternal.<sup>16</sup>

Jean Sévry emphasises the difficulty for the white South African writer to express, in a repressive society, a sense of guilt inherited from colonialism. For him, the weight of the never-ending list of tragic events induced by apartheid and the general anxiety about the

<sup>12</sup> J. M. Coetzee. *Foe*, (1986) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Coetzee. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> See Nadine Gordimer's study "The Essential Gesture." In *Granta*, 15, 1985, 137-51.

<sup>15</sup> Irving Howe. "A Stark Political Fable of South Africa." *New York Time Book Review*, April 1982, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly Hewson. "Making the *Revolutionary Gesture*: Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer's Responsibility." In *Ariel*, 19, n° 4, 1988, 70.

future of the country lead the writer to project his personal torments into fictionalised events:

White literature is a literature of moral helplessness. From this point of view, it constitutes an attempt to stage in fictions — on the imaginary level — all that cannot and must not be said on the level of the realities of everyday life.<sup>17</sup>

Even if, according to Susan Van Zanten Gallagher's expression, it cannot be denied that "in suggesting universal truths about torture and oppression, Coetzee also obliquely condemns his own country,"<sup>18</sup> Coetzee's fictions betray a hierarchy of values which makes his writing singular — if not unique — in today's South African literary production. Though often apparently centred on political issues, his books seem to follow other tracks that both transcend and outshine the other components of his narratives. In other words, Coetzee's commitment in favour of human rights is primarily a means to express his dedication to a more basic fealty. In an interview delivered in 1987, he clearly asserted his personal position as a writer:

What I am now resisting is the attempt to swallow my novels into a political discourse, because I'm not prepared to concede that the one kind of discourse is large or more primary than the other. . . . I have to resist them because, frankly, my allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels not with the discourse of politics.<sup>19</sup>

However, this aloofness as regards South African realities is apparently not so easily accepted by the critics who seize every opportunity to try to force the "dissident" writer into a more traditional line. For instance, after the publication of *Life and Times of Michael K*, many were prompt to see in the novel an undeniable indication of the author's intention to eventually "come back home." This is what Coetzee answered Tony Morphet when he was questioned about his would-be literary homesickness:

Q : The location of the story is very highly specified. Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Prince Albert, somewhere between 1985-1990. This puts it very close to us, closer than any of your previous work. Were you looking for a more direct and immediate conversation with South African readers ? Or was it part of another strategy?

<sup>17</sup> Translated from Jean Sévry. "Littératures d'Afrique australe, l'apartheid : la situation et ses représentations." In *L'Afrique littéraire*, n° 75, Paris, 1985, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Van Zanten Gallagher. "Torture and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." In *Contemporary Literature*, 29, n° 2, Summer 1988, 282.

<sup>19</sup> Interview accordé à Thorold and Wichersterd (1987), cité par Teresa Dovey, in *J. M. Coetzee, a Bibliography*, Grahamstown National English Library Museum, 2.



COETZEE : The geography, I fear, is less trustworthy than you imagine, not because I deliberately set about altering the reality of Sea Point or Prince Albert but because I don't have much interest in, or can't seriously engage myself with, the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the "real" world<sup>20</sup>.

After the issuing of *Age of Iron*, André Viola asked him whether his latest book, staged in contemporary South Africa, "represent[ed] a rupture with [his] other novels." Coetzee answered:

No more than each of the others represents a rupture with the ones that preceded it. The identifiability of its historical and physical setting — compared with, say *Waiting for the Barbarians*, — seems to me a comparatively trivial matter.<sup>21</sup>

The emphasis laid by the author himself on his literary priorities questions the very relationships between the author and his readers. But again, Coetzee evades the issue as he refuses to conform to the traditional image of the writer, protesting that "[he is] hesitant to accept that [his] books are addressed to readers."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, refusing to be seen as a committed writer by his fellow citizens as well as by foreign readers, he goes as far as declaring: "My ideal reader is, I would hope, myself. But I know something of the insidious pressures faced by South African writers to simplify and explain for a foreign audience."<sup>23</sup> Is this sheer provocation, or a mere reaction of defence against the "insidious pressures" exerted on him by the social and political contexts, as though taking up one's pen under the apartheid regime meant compulsory political commitment? Does the writer have no other choice than to be a militant and leave aside all concerns that would not feed on emergency? It seems, on the contrary, that Coetzee's assertion that he writes for himself must be taken at face value. His novels go far beyond the urge to stage the torments of mankind and question both the position of the writer and the very possibility of literature itself.

According to Nadine Gordimer's provocative words, "a writer is always writing the same story."<sup>24</sup> This is certainly true of Coetzee. Throughout his works, the same themes are recurrently developed, though treated from various angles. Relevantly, his very first narrative stages a man who, though he is not exactly a writer, struggles with writing.

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<sup>20</sup> Interview by Tony Morphet (1983) in *TRI Quarterly*, 69, Spring-Summer, 1987, 455.

<sup>21</sup> An Interview with J.M. Coetzee, (1991) in *Commonwealth*, "Southern Africa," vol 14, n° 2. Spring 1992, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Interview by Tony Morphet, 456.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 459-60.

<sup>24</sup> Interview donnée par Diane Cassere (1972) in *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*. ed. by Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 57.

Eugene Dawn does not care about literature and art, but he fancies himself in the role of a creator:

I am an egg, that must lie in the downiest of nests under the most coaxing of nurses before my bald, unpromising shell cracks and my shy secret life emerges... I am a thinker, a creative person, one not without value to the world.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, Dawn regrets being deprived of the support of his superior, significantly named Coetzee. Dawn sees him as "powerful, genial, ordinary [and] so utterly without a vision" (*Dusklands* 1), but he holds his elder in little esteem:

I would have expected more understanding from Coetzee, who should be used to handling creative people. Once upon a time a creative person himself, he is now a failed creative person who lives vicariously off true creative people. (*Dusklands*, 1)

The links between Dawn and Coetzee — "the kind of man who notices symptoms" (*Dusklands*, 5) — clearly reveal the special ascendancy over his subordinate of the one who "is not actually a brilliant man, [but] thinks authoritatively."<sup>26</sup> (*Dusklands*, 31) Dawn admits that "he is in power of [him], [that he] needs his approval" (*Dusklands*, 5) as he gets into the part of the pupil in front of the master he wants to surpass, aware of the risks he runs, for "when one ceases to be the pupil, . . . at the moment when one starts to strike out for oneself, one must expect one's teachers to feel betrayed and to strike back in envy." (*Dusklands*, 5) The real identity of this stern master is easy to guess. This revengeful elder, who, being a failed creator, built up his reputation on the works of other people, and whose authorisation and approval seem vital for the authentication of someone else's writing, looks like a fictionalised version of the literary critic. Far from being the result of arbitrary choice, the patronymic of this senior civil servant, more experienced than his apprentice, hardly veils the subjective position of John M. Coetzee himself. Like Dawn, he is facing *the process through which one becomes a writer* and, struggling in a schizophrenic situation, at the same time submitted to the exacting judgement of the critic and condemned to free himself from the latter, he just has to find his own way.

For the new-born writer<sup>27</sup> has to take on a new identity: leaving aside the critic's feeling of security, he now aspires to the more precarious position of the novelist and the resulting feeling of freedom is a far cry from the constraints of literary criticism:

The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road. When I write criticism, on the other hand, I am always aware of a responsibility toward the goal that has

<sup>25</sup> *Dusklands*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Authoritatively*: "with authority, peremptorily," but the word also calls to the mind "author."

<sup>27</sup> The "egg" metaphor (*Dusklands*, 1) does make sense here.

been set for me not only by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself.<sup>28</sup>

However, this radical break makes him vulnerable to the cold-blooded disapproval of the critic, let alone the unavoidable feelings of jealousy, envy or treason that do not fail to distort and prejudice the judgement of the scholar on the artist — all the more so when the commentator and the writer are one and the same person... This interior conflict is fictionalised by Coetzee in his very first novel, as though he were eager to ward off his most intimate doubts as to his literary capabilities: am I a true writer now, or am I just putting into practice — into fiction — my knowledge of literature? Aware of the necessity to cut off all links with his scholar's activity to be able to write at all, Coetzee provides Dawn with the following pertinent piece of advice: "and for God's sake, no footnotes." (*Dusklands*, 4) This last recommendation clearly reveals the alienation under the yoke of which John M. Coetzee enters upon his new career. Indeed, how can the apprentice writer avoid the traps set by the experienced critic who, exuding judicious suggestions and convinced that they must be followed, spoils at the same time all spontaneous creative process? In other words, how did Coetzee achieve the mutation of his writing, from "hunting with the critic-hounds" to "running with the novelist-hares?"<sup>29</sup>

Although he "prefers [the] love to [the] hatred" (*Dusklands*, 5) of his superior and censor, and though he "would do almost anything for his respect," (*Dusklands*, 15) Dawn claims loudly the autonomy of his creative power: "Nor, if I were to commit myself body and soul to some fiction or other, would I choose any fiction but my own. I am still the captain of my soul." (*Dusklands*, 10) This echoes strangely the author's very words; when he is asked: "Do you see yourself as exploring the deep structures of the South African imagination?" Coetzee answers: "The imagination is my own. If not, I am really in the soup."<sup>30</sup> We can take his word for it, for a creative — and personal — imagination is no doubt what radically differentiates the writer from the critic. For the new-born writer, to yield on that point would boil down to abandoning his specificity.

However, marking one's territory is not enough and Coetzee has still to overcome the apparently antagonistic coexistence within himself of a rather despotic critical agency and a still fragile, untrained creative power. His strategy consists in playing a double game. First, to transcend the dilemma, the new writer has to accept to make concessions: he may, for instance, fulfil the requirements of the critic by dedicating his work to him.

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<sup>28</sup> John M. Coetzee. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. By David Atwell (Cambridge MA, 1992), 246.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Glenn. "Politics of Interpretation." In *The Writings of J. M. Coetzee*, in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93:1, Winter 1994, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Tony Morphet, 461.



Such a compromise does not escape the notice of Dawn's superior: "I get the odd impression, going over your essay, that it is written for my eyes." (*Dusklands*, 4) This is clearly a fictionalised version of John M. Coetzee's own remark in which he claims that his ideal reader is no one but himself. But to dedicate his work to the critic leaves the writer in an unbearable position, so that to free himself from the yoke of his personal censorship, Coetzee ventures into the only field that escapes his own vigilance: the shady opaque zone in which words find their limits, where their meaning fades when they come brutally in touch with the realness of the world, on the border severing language from hard reality.<sup>31</sup> For Coetzee has no choice: to live his writer's life at all, he has to haunt those hazardous regions located near the limits of language and the confines of mankind and civilisation. Hence the numerous violent episodes, the recurrent allusions to torture throughout his works, his predilection for border-states, directly plugged into the real world: the wilderness, pain, diseases, craziness, death, all that outrageously reminds men and women that the world does exist beyond words. Hence his inclination to plunge his characters into the antic universe of insects, that alien world from which all meaning is banned. Hence his resort to insanity in his fictions — when the string of the signifiers goes "off the rails" — and, on a larger scale and often indirectly, to the violent and delirious institutional madness established by apartheid.

So, the unifying compromise eventually gives way to the fictionalisation of marginality, violence, rebellion and bloodshed. Comfort and security are replaced by suffering, distress and conflict. Coetzee's novels often relate the intimate experience of the disintegration of civilisation and social values. In his works, culture must be replaced by nature — at least temporarily — for the narrative to exist at all. Indeed, John M. Coetzee's writing is first of all regressive; then, in a second stage, it opens up on more synthetic activities often connected with writing. This is how Dawn frees himself from Coetzee's requirements: "I hope that firm and prolonged intercourse with reality, if I can manage it, will have a good effect on my character as well as my health, and perhaps even improve my writing." (*Dusklands*, 36) The obscene photographs he has always at hand are so many indications of his regressive desire: grotesque copulations, torture, dehumanised mutilated corpses, like those appearing on this snapshot taken during the Vietnam war:

Propped on the ground before him Wilson holds the severed head of a man. Berry has two, which he holds by the hair. The heads are Vietnamese, taken from the corpses or near-corpse . . . They look stony, as severed heads always seem to do. (*Dusklands*, 15)

Everyday horror, coldly suggested by the reification of what appears to be a total nonsense when separated from the rest of the body... Announcing his further novels, tor-

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<sup>31</sup> This "border" between nature and culture is metaphorically evoked by the settlement of *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

ture is already present in the first narrative of *Dusklands*, with the image of prisoners crammed in cages like animals; however, if one comes closer, pain and humiliation fade away for they can no longer be seen as evils affecting mankind, as they amount to mere inanimate matter, hardly decipherable: "I have also a second print, of the face alone in greater magnification. The glint in the right eye has become a diffuse white patch; shades of dark gray mark the temple, the right eyebrow, the hollow of the cheek." (*Dusklands*, 16) After his murderous fit, Dawn is suddenly deprived of the faculty of speech: "My mouth opens, I am aware, if that is awareness, of two cold parted slabs that must be the lips, and of a hole that must be the mouth itself" (*Dusklands*, 41) The organ allowing speech gives way to naked flesh and meaningless matter. At the mental hospital, Dawn recovers a limited access to language and the whole world amounts for him to a few words: "my bed, my window, my door, my walls, my room. These words I love . . . It is part of my cure to learn to form stable attachments. When I am set loose in the outside world I will have to transfer my attachments to new objects." (*Dusklands*, 43)

Then, after the return to basics, and only after it, rebirth becomes possible: "I am eager to confront life a second time, but I am not impatient to get out. There is still my entire childhood to work through before I can expect to get to the bottom of my story." (*Dusklands*, 49) The drudge of the critic is dead, now comes the writer.

In the second narrative of *Dusklands*, the insistence on names is quite relevant of John M. Coetzee's metamorphosis — "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, Edited with an Afterword by S. J. Coetzee, translated by J. M. Coetzee." All his favourite themes are already present: regression, torture, hard reality, insects, speech and writing. Like in all of Coetzee's works, the regression to the limits of the living is central. Jacobus Coetzee falls ill far from civilisation which he eventually reaches again alone, naked as a Native. Magda, who pictures herself as a "black widow" (*In the Heart of the Country*, 39), tries to survive alone in a remote farm as if she were a castaway on an island, not unlike Susan Barton, another shipwrecked person, first lost in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, then, later, on the roads of Great Britain and eventually in Foe's deserted home (*Foe*). Both of them call to the mind Michael K in his burrow, whose diet amounts to pumpkins and the lizards he manages to catch; but also the narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, humiliated and broken, who "licked his food off the flagstones like a dog because he had lost the use of hands" (*Waiting*, 124); and even Elisabeth Curren, dying from cancer, and Vercueil who spends his nights in cardboard boxes (*Age of Iron*). As for the illustrious protagonist of *The Master of Petersburg*, he suffers from epileptic fits during which he loses all contact with reality:

Everything spins; he has the sensation of falling into endless blackness. When he comes back he has again lost all sense of who he is. He knows the word /, but as he stares at it it becomes enigmatic as a rock in the middle of a desert. . . . Then the truth bursts over him and overwhelms him. (*Master*, 71)

As all characters come, sooner or later, into touch with torture, some even undergo its destructive effect, reduced then to the condition of insects, these intermediate existences between life and inanimate matter. In fact, torture in Coetzee's fictions is the key to the real, plain, nonsensical world of naked things and bare facts, beyond the logic of words. It lowers individuals to the level of dumb animals, forcing them to come into direct contact with hard reality — what else is pain? —, making them face their distress without the soothing filter of language, with no other means of expression than their shouts.

Words come later, when the victims are back to civilisation. Jacobus Coetzee remembers the humiliating tortures inflicted by his native hosts: "Like a great beetle I lay on my back and warded off my knees and feet from my vulnerable abdomen." (*Dusklands*, 90) He records his traumatising experience in the narrative supposedly translated for us by J. M. Coetzee. Magda, a "tortured" soul racked to the point of insanity by the torments she hides in her diary, lost herself in "a land made for insects who eat sand and lay eggs in each other's corpses and have no voice with which to scream when they die." (*Heart*, 108) — before she called for help: "Having failed to make my shouts heard . . . I turned to writing . . . Forming the stones into letters twelve feet high I began to spell out messages to my saviours." (*Heart*, 132) Michael K, lean as a "stick insect, . . . whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape," (*Michael K*, 149) is also the victim of unintentional torturers whose awkward benevolence foreshadows the unhealthy nosiness of the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Though the doctor undoubtedly wishes him well, his words could as well have come out of Colonel Joll's mouth: "Tell us the truth, tell us the whole truth, and you can go back to bed, we won't bother you any more." (*Michael K*, 138) But Michael K has not the means nor the will to obey, and the compulsive quest for truth carries on through the medium of the physician's pen when, falling short of arguments, he writes Michael a letter which will never reach its addressee: *scripta manent*. The Magistrate, during the mock hanging, feels "like a great old moth with its wings pinched together." (*Waiting*, 121) When he is back from hell, he decides to write "and begin to tell the truth." (*Waiting*, 154) Elisabeth Curren, confronted with pain, poverty, suffering, and approaching death, keeps writing her daughter letters she will probably never read. As for Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky — whose stepson a writer himself had "grown not in a human manner but in the manner of an insect that changes shape entirely at each stage of its evolution," (*Master*, 240) —, he feels like a fly at an open window" (*Master*, 140) and is still haunted by the vision of insects when eventually "the hand that holds the pen begins to move." (*Master*, 241)



Friday, whose mutilated tongue prohibits any relation of his own story, since "the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost" (*Foe*, 67) allows Coetzee to question openly the very nature of literature: "The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday." (*Foe*, 118) More systematically than in his other novels, Coetzee explores in *Foe* the issue of writing and its connection with the real world which he evokes as a "place where bodies are their own signs. . . . the home of Friday." (*Foe*, 157) For him, the narrative fills a vacuum, a hole, that Susan Barton, during her painstaking discovery of the nature of writing "picture[s] as a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting of the button." (*Foe*, 121) This is also Magda's intuition, when she craves for the presence of anybody who would speak to her, in order to escape the unbearable feeling of being "a hole crying to be whole," (*Heart*, 41) contrarily to Michael who only wants to hide deeper in his hole, far from civilisation and language, for "he was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong." (*Michael*, 110) In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee uses another term to signal the "hole" in the story. The word "blank" comes repeatedly to echo the Magistrate's questions to the young barbarian girl. This is how the same story is told again and again, until his latest book:

From the suitcase he takes Pavel's diary and turns to the first empty page, the page that the child did not write on because by then he was dead. On this page he begins, a second time, to write. (*Master*, 242)

Novel after novel, Coetzee outlines a theory of writing which links together the fictional discourse and the hole(s) of the real it both conceals and fills up. According to him, writing is an attempt to make the silent world speak, a world which is "out-language," as one says "out-law," a world which throws Magda into a panic when she is suddenly deprived of the powers of speech, and "from [her] throat comes something which is not a cry, not a groan, not a voice, but a wind that blows from the stars and over the polar wastes and through [her]. The wind is white, the wind is black, it says nothing." (*Heart*, 55) That very same breath, come from a realm in which neither symbols nor language reign, escapes from Friday's mouth like "the roar of the waves in a seashell; and over that, as if once or twice a violin-string were touched, the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird." (*Foe*, 154)

No wonder then if Coetzee keeps on pursuing that speechless world, though it resists his manoeuvres, constantly hiding itself from his view, fleeing ceaselessly before his impatient pen, like quick-silver between fingers. Pain, death, deprivation and terror are as many components of the human condition that betray the silent presence of the real and assert the ineffable realness of the world. But that is why writers write, because language does not suffice to catch the realness of the world, and because this deficiency is for man



at large, and for Coetzee in particular, an inextinguishable source of torment and inspiration.

Moreover, Coetzee's obstinate pursuit of the genetics of writing has no doubt other roots; for by building up, novel after novel, a convincing theory of literature, the novelist pays his debt to the critic and the writer satisfies the academic.

Coetzee's taste for the study of language is no secret. Quite logically, his theory of literature owes a lot to modern linguistics and evokes uncannily Jacques Lacan's speculations on the mechanism of delirium. Deeply influenced by Roman Jakobson's linguistic theories, Lacan sees in the appearance of delirium a desperate attempt to fill up a symbolic gap — existing within psychotic persons — which "consists in a hole, a fault in the network of the signifiers."<sup>32</sup> Lacan explains that this symbolic fault, when approached, plunges the predisposed individual into open psychosis, the consecutive delirium being an effort to mend the symbolic web "around the hole, [where] the fabric of the signifiers is torn for the subject."<sup>33</sup>

Though the gap in psychosis and the role of the real in the process of writing differ in their very essence,<sup>34</sup> the mechanism at work is the same. When no signifier corresponds to the real and language finds its own limits, when one is at a loss for words, when the real shows itself, naked, harsh, without the mask of words, and cannot be assimilated, then comes the response of the writer in the form of fiction. The essential link between Coetzee's texts and the South African "context" of apartheid appears now more clearly: repression, censorship, the arbitrary codification of human relationships, violence, torture are so many "holes" through which the real reveals itself, hideous, unbearable and nonsensical. Such gaps are relevantly symbolised by Friday's mutilated mouth<sup>35</sup> from which pours out "a slow stream . . . soft and cold, dark and unending, . . . beat[ing] against [his] eyelids, against the skin of [his] face. (*Foe*, 157)



<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan. *Les psychoses*, Le Séminaire III (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 227 (our translation).

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan. *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 564 (our translation).

<sup>34</sup> It is the very connection of the subject to language which is biased in the psychotic personality.

<sup>35</sup> Even if South Africa seems a long way off in *Foe*, Coetzee asserts that it is only true "in a narrow temporal perspective. It is not a retreat from the subject of colonialism or from the question of power." Interview with Tony Morphet, 462.