

J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of Africa

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Summary

The debate over representations of Africa in J.M. Coetzee's fiction tends to collapse into two irreconcilable positions: (a) he is either uninterested in the African subject or represents it as diminished, or (b) this accusation is naïve and oblivious to the autotelic qualities of Coetzee's fiction. This article seeks to move beyond these positions by looking at moments in Coetzee's writing when he actually does deploy Africa as sign. Analysis of these moments reveals that the sign of Africa in Coetzee is frequently rendered potent, mysterious and obscure – occulted – in order to achieve certain aesthetic effects. These effects are consistent with his efforts to enable fiction to reprise prevailing historical discourses.

Opsomming

Die debat oor voorstellings van Afrika in J.M. Coetzee se fiksie is geneig om in twee onversoenbare kampe uiteen te val: (a) Die kamp wat meen dat hy óf nie in die onderwerp van Afrika belangstel nie óf dit as "verklein" voorstel, en (b) die kamp wat meen dat voornoemde beskuldiging naïef is en nie die outoteliese eienskappe van Coetzee se fiksie in aanmerking neem nie. In hierdie artikel probeer die outeur by hierdie standpunte verby te beweeg deur te kyk na momente in Coetzee se fiksie wanneer hy Afrika wel as teken benut. 'n Ontleding van hierdie momente toon dat die teken van Afrika in Coetzee dikwels kragtig, geheimsinnig en duister – okkulties – gemaak word ten einde bepaalde estetiese effekte te bewerkstellig. Hierdie effekte vorm deel van sy poging om fiksie in staat te stel om heersende historiese diskoerse te hervat.

[M]y intellectual allegiances are clearly European, not African.
(J.M. Coetzee, *Dagens Nyheter* 7 December, 2003)

There are two obvious positions in the polemics suggested by this title, which I shall begin by naming in order to open other possibilities. The first would be that in J.M. Coetzee the African subject or African humanity is under-represented and undervalued. The kind of evidence that is ready to hand for this argument would be that in *Foe* (1986) Friday is mutilated and voiceless; in *Disgrace* (1999) Petrus is a schemer who connives in Lucy's rape; in *Age of Iron* (1990) the youths, Florence and Thabane, allow their

war with the regime to become a war on the very concept of childhood, ensuring that the new order will be incapable of regeneration. This position finds it regrettable that the novels tend to place resistance in question rather than representing it positively; where it is represented it is displaced onto faceless subjects like the barbarians, or marginal characters like Michael K whose refusals are unrecognisable in terms that have any connection with the African experience of colonialism. Especially awkward in this view is the indubitably seedy figure of Emmanuel Egudu, the Nigerian novelist in *Elizabeth Costello* (2004) who manufactures authenticity by celebrating the ersatz orality of the African novel to sustain himself in the Western literary marketplace. He also uses his exoticism to achieve sexual conquest (that Costello reveals herself to have succumbed to him in the past matters little – the character seems mildly offensive).

The opposing position points to the literary naiveté of these objections: they all demand that the game being played is that of representation, *Darstellung* as Gayatri Spivak would describe it, mimesis, or rather, a simplified understanding of realism, whereas the games the novels play are autotelic, referring frequently to other discourses and not, in the first instance (or as the immediate referent) to social conditions themselves (Spivak 1994: 71). Typically, Coetzee deconstructs the discourses of power from within. In this view Coetzee is also said to acknowledge the African presence, but he withdraws from directly representing it for what is an ethically defensible reason, which is that he avoids the epistemological capture that would only confirm the position of privilege. Coetzee is sensitive to the problem of *Vertretung*, Spivak's other term for representation, in the political sense of standing-in-for (2004: 71). This position would also argue, finally, that Coetzee is scrupulously circumspect in acknowledging the positionality of his work – indeed in foregrounding positionality itself in a complex reflection on the limits and possibilities of writing under South African and broadly postcolonial conditions.

The second position would appear to be more sophisticated than the first, but it has not settled the matter. The Africanist objections, if I may refer to them as such, do not disappear, and the fact that they continually resurface in discussions of Coetzee (often in the voices of students, certainly South African students) suggests that there might be an intimate or inescapable connection between a wounded historical memory and the representational practices associated with mimesis. In which case, no amount of nuanced positionality on the part of the author can displace it.¹ Coetzee himself seems to acknowledge something like this when he says, “[I]t is not that one

1. The larger question here would be about the social energies carried by the form of the novel. If it is the case that the realist tradition has contributed to the historical achievements of the bourgeoisie, it would not be surprising if the emergent middle classes of postcolonial states wished to secure this advantage for themselves.

grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power” (Coetzee 1992: 248). But perhaps the most salient reason for revisiting this question is the fact that Coetzee’s writing *does* gesture towards homogeneous ideas about Africa in ways that *do* place it within a history of exogenous representations of the continent. That being the case, we should not shirk the question posed by my title; on the contrary, we should be willing to explore the implications and possible functions of the idea of Africa in Coetzee’s writing. The scope of this article will not allow me to track every instance in his oeuvre in which Africa as sign appears; instead I shall be isolating three distinct moments that might be discussed as points of departure.

Coetzee declares that his intellectual allegiances are European, but that is surely not the end of the story. We can ask of his work the questions he asks of other writers who work within a European tradition but who take Africa as their provenance. In a review of Karel Schoeman’s *'n Ander Land* in *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (1985), for example, Coetzee points to a “hiatus in the philosophical argument” of the novel that corresponds to a “hiatus in the social reality it represents” (1985: 48). The philosophical hiatus is that “if there is a lack of congruence between European language and African reality”, does it follow that there must be “a congruence between African language and African reality?” Is Africa *known* (“in the most metaphysical sense of this term”) to those “to whom African language is native?” The hiatus in Schoeman’s novel is that it neither asks nor answers this question; instead, it has its protagonist Versluis pursue a metaphysical truth by immersing himself in the African landscape. But why, Coetzee asks, “must the truth about life be learned from the African landscape (*koppies, vlaktes, bossies*), as Versluis learns it, rather than from the mouth of the African? Thus at the social level the hiatus in the book is: dialogue with the African” (p. 48).

In *White Writing* (1988), which is collected from essays he was writing at the time, Coetzee takes up the question of dialogue with Africa in a more abstract sense – predominantly in terms of literary representations of landscape and the ways in which they obscure colonial social relations. Seldom is the problem of dialogue with *the African* as sharply focused as it is in the review of Schoeman’s novel, especially in relation to the task of the novelist. What is startling is that Coetzee’s characters, on the whole, are the bedfellows of Versluis, who themselves repeatedly fail the test Coetzee asks of Schoeman’s protagonist. Indeed, Coetzee’s novels continue to elaborate the hiatus found in Schoeman rather than sublimate it. Or, instead of speaking of a hiatus we could refer to an anomaly: why should his protagonists persist in the failure to hear the language of the African, when that language might enable them to overcome the alienation from the African landscape which they experience as their most pressing dilemma? Rather than attempting to get beyond this anomaly, Coetzee’s characters repeatedly fail to overcome it and fail so acutely that the anomaly itself and

its consequences become the stuff of the fiction. Failure thus transmutes into success; having taken this turn, the novels open themselves to modernist and postmodern self-staging and self-examination.

The repetition of failed reciprocity is a central trope in Coetzee and lends itself to a range of interpretations – philosophical, ethical and aesthetic.² The particular aspect of this problematic that I wish to take up here is the one suggested by the review of Schoeman: how do representations of Africa figure in it? I am therefore interested in Africa *as sign* within Coetzee, but also within Coetzee’s particular reprisal of the tradition of European representations discussed by V.Y. Mudimbe in *The Idea of Africa*, in which he identifies a paradox that “if, indeed, these outsiders [Africans] were understood as localized and far away geographically, they were nonetheless imagined and rejected as the intimate and other side of the European-thinking subject, on the analogical model of the tension between the being In-Itself and the being For-Itself” (1994: xi).³ Africa as the Sartrean being-in-itself, then, failing to rise fully to self-consciousness.

The hiatus found in Schoeman, and Mudimbe’s paradox point to Africa as the place – or the sign of a place – of a crisis of representation arising from a crisis of non-relation, a sign standing for a founding violence of cultural alterity. Achille Mbembe’s analysis in *On the Postcolony* (2001) is consonant with this reading: as a fund of images representing absolute otherness, “Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world” (p. 2). The life of Africans “unfolds under two signs”: the sign of “the strange and the monstrous”, which can only be grasped by “abandon[ing] our world of meaning”; and the sign of intimacy that involves “a process of domestication and training, bring[ing] the African to where he or she can enjoy a fully human life” (pp. 1-2). In Coetzee, these positions find a perfect analogue in the figure of Friday in *Foe*, to whom I shall turn later in this essay. In Mudimbe’s analysis this violence of alterity is not easily shaken off, as its continuing life in discourses of African cultural nationalism reveals. The African subject as propounded by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, for

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2. Arguably the most powerful ethical-philosophical interpretation of failed reciprocity in Coetzee is that offered by critics working within the terms of Emmanuel Levinas, and in particular Stefan Helgesson and Michael Marais. In *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* and *The Singularity of Literature* Derek Attridge develops the aesthetic implications of this position, exploring the ways in which the failure of social allegory draws attention to the performativity of the text.
 3. Far from being a distraction, Mudimbe’s Sartrean language is entirely germane to Coetzee’s treatment of this theme, especially in *In the Heart of the Country* (1978) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983).

example, is marked by it (Mudimbe 1994: 45), though both these writers in different ways sought to overcome it with lyricism.

Coetzee accepts this originary violence, but instead of seeking a compensatory lyricism he discerns in it a moral and political authority that has the power to cancel the self-absorption of the European subject. I shall explore this more fully later, but for the moment I wish to argue that in addition to the idea of Africa as the site of non-relation and the source of an irresistible but hostile authority, Coetzee's Africa is also a site of *occultation*. By this I do not mean *the occult* as that term is commonly understood, nor am I drawing on the psychoanalytic possibilities of occultation: notions of displacement and repression, although these implications are relevant to some of the ways in which Coetzee's characters relate to Africa. I mean something like the older, astronomical meaning of the word: a planetary object is occulted when it is eclipsed; it does not disappear but it is rendered potent and mysterious. Outrageous though it may seem, I am proposing that Coetzee deliberately subjects Africa as sign to a process of occultation so that it becomes a source of aesthetic power. The opposite of occultation would be the assumption that the full apprehension of objects was possible; it would deliver an accretion of detail, in extreme form, as in naturalism, perhaps. Occultation means that Africa is installed not as a place for knowledge, but as a place where the subject is at a distance, removed, and frequently awed. The occulted sign of Africa ensures that the eclipsed object continues to hold sway over the subject's imagination, releasing an aesthetic charge and leaving an ethical disturbance. These are familiar effects in Coetzee; what I am suggesting is that the sign of Africa is frequently deployed specifically to achieve them.

Let me illustrate this first with *Age of Iron* (1999). In this novel, Mrs Curren's moment of deepest crisis arrives not when she goes out to Cape Town's shack settlements to find Bheki – where in the violence involving the revolutionised youth, the police, and the vigilantes, she lives through a kind of personal purgatory – but later, when the police come to her home, where the weapons trail has led them to John who is hiding in the servant's quarters of her backyard. There, John is executed: the door of the room is flung open and the police kill him before he is able to fire a pre-emptive shot. (“John” is one of Coetzee's many doubles: the name is one of those routinely given as Christian names to black, specifically African, labourers; this John has kept it as a *nom de guerre* – Mrs Curren believes – to overturn the colonial nomenclature. However, as one of John Maxwell Coetzee's names, it implies the other within – *pace* Mudimbe, the intimate other of the European subject.) “John” is now dead and Mrs Curren finds herself implicated in his insurrection. She chooses to be implicated, in fact, by claiming that the pistol John is found with is her own, that she lent it to him to protect himself, perhaps even from the police, although she is evasive on that point. There has been no suggestion that Mrs Curren ever owned a weapon, indeed we deduce it most unlikely that with her liberal

temperament and charitable, humanistic views, she would ever have done so. Besides, John is also discovered to have possessed detonators, of which she knows nothing. The detonators reveal that he has placed himself in the supply chain of the guerrillas, the liberation forces acting from outside the country. By claiming to own the pistol, Mrs Curren seeks to protect him from the implications of this fatal association – except that the impulse is anachronistic. That we are in a time warp where Mrs Curren’s ethical gestures have ceased to be meaningful is clear from the policeman’s comment in response to her demanding the return of her private papers: “Nothing is private anymore,” says the officer (Coetzee 1990: 157). This is a peculiarly misplaced statement: implausible in the mouth of a policeman, it belongs properly to the narrator, or to Mrs Curren herself where it helps to define the post-ethical world in which she finds herself. Be that as it may, Mrs Curren is sufficiently in touch with reality to know that since the police are onto the trail of weapons, whoever else might be linked to John is also in danger, so she tries to phone Thabane, her domestic worker Florence’s brother, who acts as their political mentor and spokesperson, to warn him that his association with the youths could cost him his life.

In my account thus far, I reduce the novel to its plot, but in their context these events are presented through Mrs Curren’s distracted and despairing consciousness. As she approaches her own death through what appears to be rapidly metastasising breast cancer, she would like her world to be a place of meaningful last acts – though in every sense, it is not. The terms of the phone call are revealing:

A word appeared before me: Thabanchu, Thaba Nchu. I tried to concentrate. Nine letters, anagram for what? With great effort I placed the *b* first. Then I was gone.

I awoke thirsty, groggy, full of pain. The clockface stared at me but I could make no sense of the hands. The house was silent with the silence of deserted houses.

Thabanchu: *banch?* *bath?* With stupid hands I unwrapped the sheet from around me. Must I have a bath?

But my feet did not take me to the bathroom. Holding to the rail, bent over, groaning, I went downstairs and dialled the Gugulethu number. On and on the phone rang. Then at last someone answered, a child, a girl. “Is Mr Thabane there?” I asked. “No.” “Then can I speak to Mrs Mkubuleki – no, not Mrs Mkubuleki, Mrs Mkubukeli?” “Mrs Mkubukeli does not live here.” “But do you know Mrs Mkubukeli?” “Yes, I know him.” “Mrs Mkubukeli?” “Yes.” “Who are you?” “I am Lily.” Lee-lee. “Are you the only one at home?” “There is my sister too.” “How old is your sister?” “She is six.” “And you – how old are you?” “Ten.” “Can you take a message to Mrs Mkubukeli, Lily?” “Yes.” “It is about her brother Mr Thabane. She must tell Mr Thabane to be careful. Say it is very important. Mr Thabane must be careful. My name is Mrs Curren. Can you write that down? And this is my

number.” I read out the number, spelled my name. Mrs Curren: nine letters, anagram for what?

(Coetzee 1990: 158)

The name, Thabane, must be deciphered from its encryption in another, Thabanchu. The way is not clear to the ethical act; it may be possible after a decipherment; however, the word that comes to her in place of Thabane (“Thabanchu”) remains indecipherable, circulating in her mind like an inassimilable stone (to borrow a metaphor from *Life & Times of Michael K*). The name of the person for whom she is assuming ethical responsibility surfaces only as code: “Nine letters, anagram for what?” The encryption deepens when she tries to put the *b* first, producing more indecipherable elements: the nonsensical *banch*, and *bath*, which is a red herring. The problem is not simply that Mrs Curren is shocked and medicated; it goes further, because the sociolinguistic conditions governing the conversation over the phone contribute to the miasma. She is unused to having to refer to Florence by her own given name, as Mrs Mkubukeli, so she has to correct herself when she says Mkubuleki. The isiXhosa speaker on the other end, Lily, confuses male and female pronouns in English, leaving Mrs Curren in doubt about whether they are referring to the same person. Mrs Curren actually doesn’t hear the speaker’s (English) name “Lily”, at first, but only its pronunciation, “Lee-lee”. Then, Lily turns out to be a child of ten, who should not be burdened with passing on a message on whose reception someone’s life may depend. (That this is happening confirms Mrs Curren’s impression that the age of iron, with its ethical upheavals and reversals – including the destruction of childhood – has indeed arrived.) Since the conversation is a mess, the translation and completion of the ethical act which it promises are stalled. The result is that to the physical debilitation and ethical frustration we must now add *existential* crisis: “Mrs Curren: nine letters, anagram for what?” Her name might be code to Lily, who is writing it down; but worse than that, it has become code to Mrs Curren *herself*. Like “Thabanchu”, her own name becomes mysteriously encrypted, and like many other Coetzeean protagonists she slips deeper into isolation and solipsism following a moment of attempted but failed reciprocity. In this case, reciprocity with what? Surely, the African subject. The supposed impermeability of the child’s speech, and of African speech in general figured in the unassimilated word, “Thabanchu”, is a key ingredient in this process, facilitating the destruction of a secure image of her own identity.

Since the pattern is paradigmatic, let me reflect on the choice of the word “Thabanchu” as the hinge on which this passage turns. Coetzee uses it as a fragment, a misplaced and unintelligible sign in Mrs Curren’s discourse. In doing so, he lifts it out of another complex lattice, out of well-established patterns of naming and history and of intelligibility in which it sits much more comfortably. Thabanchu, or Thaba Nchu: in Setswana, “black mountain”. It is the site of a Wesleyan mission station in the eastern part of

the Free State Province, in the Plaatberg region near the Lesotho border. Its founding in 1833 was negotiated by James Archbell and John Edwards with the Sotho king Moshoeshe as a refuge for a party of several thousand Barolong-Tswana people who had been displaced from their home near Mafikeng by Mzilikazi's troops during the *difaqane*, the period of migrations following the consolidation of the Zulu kingdom (Comaroff 1985: 23-24). In South African literature, the story is told prominently in Sol Plaatje's novel, *Mhudi* (1978). The very existence of Thaba Nchu (and the existence of Plaatje's novel) speaks of numberless acts of translation and cultural transaction: of Rolong-Tswana's orality into print; of Christianity into African epistemologies and spirituality; of conversations about everything under the African sun, including, surprisingly, the forging of a military alliance between Moroka, the Chief of the Barolong, and a party of Voortrekkers, a detail which is central in *Mhudi*. All this took place under the eyes of another mission station not far away: Morija, where members of the Paris Evangelical Society had been busy for some years under Moshoeshe's authority creating a print culture in Sesotho that would in due course produce the first novel of substance in an indigenous southern African language, Thomas Mofolo's famous epic, *Chaka*.⁴

Mrs Curren's "Thabanchu" registers none of this history. Indeed, so well known and so *literary* is the name in South African letters that it seems reasonable to suggest that it is disavowed. There are other moments in which local histories are subsumed beneath their fictional refashioning in Coetzee's novels. Michael Green has shown how different Mariannahill Mission, the Trappist monastery and hospital near Durban, is from its fictionalisation in Coetzee's story, "The Humanities in Africa" (Green 2006: 136). No one would dispute that writers are in the habit of appropriating places and their names to their own narratives and structures of meaning, but these particular appropriations are revealing; they involve emptying signs that are *not* free of social content and filling them with something else. They are a classic instance of the social semiotics of the sign as outlined by V.N. Vološinov:

By no means does each member of the [speech] community apprehend the word as a neutral medium of the language system, free from intentions and untenanted by the voices of its previous users. Instead, he receives the word from another voice, a word full of that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with intentions of other speakers. His own intention finds the word already occupied.

(Vološinov 1973: 199)

4. The missionary patriarchs of Thaba Nchu sat together with their French counterparts of Morija discussing the recording of the Sesotho language, an event that lies in the deep-historical background of these tradition-defining novels. John Edwards records this event in his notebook (unpublished).

The name Thaba Nchu is thus reoccupied, and occulted, becoming a fragment serving the representation of Mrs Curren's purgatorial journey.

Mrs Curren's "Thabanchu" has less to do with the place's history than with another (equally familiar) tropic pattern in South African letters, in which the dominant image is of a silent, brooding and untranslatable Africa – the figure of Adamastor.⁵ Adamastor is the last of the fallen Titans who rebel against Jupiter in Luís Vaz de Camões's epic of Renaissance Portugal, *The Lusiads*. Camões's poem of 1572 writes the journey of Vasco da Gama in 1497 around the Cape of Good Hope to open the trade route to India both as a Homeric tale and an allegory of the Portuguese entry into global modernity. At the midpoint of the epic, the mariners reach the Cape and encounter Adamastor materialising out of the storm clouds to threaten them with the consequences of their hubris. As a suggestive trope in English-language writing, Adamastor's reactivation in South African literature and historiography, especially in modernist writing, involves the Titan being increasingly localised.⁶ As Jonathan Crewe puts it, he becomes "the punitive ghost in the white South African cultural imaginary" (1997: 32). Behind Mrs Curren's fragment stands this other, nine-letter word, this other "black mountain" of South African literature.

What is surprising about this is that Coetzee is an especially astute critic in pointing out what Jonathan Crewe calls "the imperviousness of Southern Africa to literary penetration and occupation"; the essays collected in *White Writing* tell the story of the "painfully discovered resistance to already encoded literary desire" (Crewe 1997: 35). It seems it is one thing to acknowledge this resistance of Africa to being-known, and another to reposition oneself, to find a position to refuse being perpetually interpellated by it. Given Coetzee's analysis of the failures of his literary forebears, we might ask whether Mrs Curren's "Thabanchu" is perhaps a doubly-encrypted sign, a sign that conveys both the "punitive ghost" of settler-colonial representations, and the *shame* of its reactivation? The occultation is a function not only of a discursive appropriation but also of the continual resurfacing of stubbornly unreconstructed knowledge, the very recalcitrance of colonial myths. The continual interpellation of the present by the past traps the European subject in the caste, confining him or her in the ethical

5. In *White Writing*, Coetzee speaks of the failure of the romantic poetry of landscape to translate "the desert of the Southern African plateau" as anything other than "the home of a Sphinx, a Sphinx all the more baffling for having no material form, for being everywhere present yet nowhere apprehensible" (1988: 177). As a literary figure Coetzee's Sphinx is of course suggestive, but the trope which has represented more frequently the impenetrable, untranslatable interior – coupled with imagined prophecies of doom for the settler-colonist – is that of Adamastor.

6. I am grateful to Lucy Graham for this observation.

malaise: “The masters in South Africa form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste ... you cannot resign You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but short of shaking the dust of your country off your feet, there is no way of actually *doing it*” (1992: 96). Linguistic acts of self-refashioning (the stuff of so much postcolonial writing) have no purchase; colonial history is such that subjects are doomed to repetition.⁷

Let me turn now to a second use of Africa as sign, this time in *Foe* – by way of one of the interviews in *Doubling the Point* (1992). Here Coetzee is reflecting on the centrality of the body and of suffering in his fiction (and the reader will find the context for the remarks quoted earlier):

Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable.

(Coetzee 1992: 248)

The passage is cited often, but usually in order simply to corroborate the critic’s interest in representations of the body; the counter-intuitive notion of the suffering body *assuming the position of power* is much less discussed. But the point is perfectly explicit, and the context in which the suffering body, for political reasons, takes authority is also explicitly stated: it is South Africa. The idea of the African subject that this passage encodes is similar to, but also quite different from, the representations suggested by Mudimbe. This is an instance of the Sartrean “being-in-itself” because Coetzee is referring to the *body*, after all, in Cartesian terms, half-a-subject (in the context of *Foe*, the mutilated half) but what Coetzee adds to Mudimbe’s account is that this subject’s suffering is *undeniable*, ensuring that it is *not* “that which is not” (1992: 248). We appear to have another anomaly here: a being-in-itself that, by definition, is not fully conscious of

7. Coetzee occasionally seems to be sceptical about the scope of cultural translation. Consider the name Pollux, for example, the youngest of Lucy’s rapists in *Disgrace*. David Lurie is exasperated by its incongruity. One way of reading the name is to give it allegorical status: track its source in Greek mythology (Pollux and Castor are fratricidal twins) and then decide who are the analogues in the novel of the mythic figures. But such a reading does not seem compelled by the textual context – we are free to take it or leave it. It is more useful, I suggest, to be guided by Lurie’s reaction, and simply to accept that the name represents an *imperfect* cultural translation. As such it becomes another unassimilable fragment much like “Thabanchu”. Cultural translations merely throw up more anomalies; they do not transform.

itself but which nevertheless is capable of taking authority. This half-subject has agency, enough to render its representation (by those who falsely assume the authority to do so) incomplete, marginal, and turned-in-on-itself. The result of the anomaly is to ensure that the emphasis falls not on the half-subject itself (or the being-in-itself) but on its effects on the traditionally authoritative subject. One of those effects is that the traditionally authoritative subject who lives through this confrontation and lives to tell the tale is made aware of his or her failure to grant full recognition. In this sense, the taking of authority is a *taking-away* of the power to recognise, a loss which leaves the traditionally authoritative subject diminished, less than fully human. The suffering body, in its real power, strips the illusions from the subject falsely assuming the position of power.

This is exactly the progress of all the narrators in *Foe* in their relationships with Friday, and Coetzee's comments on the authority of the body and its suffering are made specifically with this novel in mind: "Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body," he says (1992: 248). Friday manifests the anomalous terms of the agentive half-subject: he is mute but he does not disappear; he is indubitably Mudimbe's European idea of the African subject, but he acts out a political return of the repressed. Coetzee's Friday is therefore clearly *not* a figure representing the wholly other because he is other in his very historical *specificity* (Spivak 1994: 187-190). It is in keeping with this distinction, after all, that Coetzee turns Friday into an African. In *Robinson Crusoe*, he says, "Friday is a handsome Carib youth with near-European features. In *Foe* he is an African" (1987: 463). In the novel, Susan Barton's narration is remarkably clear on this point:

The man squatted down beside me. He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers. I lifted myself and studied the flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust.

(Coetzee 1986: 6)

Friday's agency is rendered explicit in the novel's closure. As the author-narrator descends into the wreck which represents the narrative tradition inaugurated by *Robinson Crusoe*, seeking to divine its still-unresolved mysteries (which are judged by those with powers of representation to be associated with Friday and his history) this, memorably, is what is found:

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.

(Coetzee 1986: 157)

This is an image of undeniable power, but power without subjectivity, an irruption into the world of an indecipherable being-in-itself; power without consciousness; another occultation. What Coetzee achieves here is extraordinary in a particular sense: he *covers* the narrator's loss of the power to authorise subjectivity – it is now Friday's power – with the modernist gesture of self-cancellation. What is gained in so doing? Surely it is to preserve the self in some other guise, despite the claim of self-cancellation – preservation in some supervening sense, possibly of the aesthetic, or perhaps in the notion of a larger, encompassing order of language which is tacitly agreed upon in the compact between author and reader.

The end of *Foe* gives us an occultation of Friday's authority, then. It is an extraordinary textual event but it is not one without precedent in South African literature. It is an intensification of, rather than a departure from, the terrain broached by Roy Campbell's poem on the Adamastor theme, "Rounding the Cape" (of which the title, "Doubling the Point", is also surely a deliberate echo). Here is Campbell:

Across his back, unheeded, we have broken
Whole forests: heedless of the blood we've spilled,
In thunder still his prophecies are spoken,
In silence, by the centuries, fulfilled.

(Campbell 1968: 16)

As the mariners sail on east to India, Cape Point "sinks into the deep, /The land lies dark beneath the crescent, and Night, the Negro, murmurs in his sleep" (p. 17). It is not far from there to Friday's silence "washing the cliffs and shores of the island, [running] northward and southward to the ends of the earth". One of Campbell's editors, Malvern van Wyk Smith, remarks that the poem was both a "valediction" and an "exorcism" as the poet left South Africa seeking to establish himself in Europe (1988: 28). There is nothing proleptic here about Coetzee's departure from South Africa, which took place nearly two decades later, but one could use these terms to account for the ending of *Foe*, in reference to the implied narrator whose journey into the wreck is also both a valediction and an exorcism. It is a valediction spoken about the entire tradition on which *Robinson Crusoe* is based, and whose detritus lies in the wreck; it is also a valediction spoken at the passing of a life in which the authority to speak has been assumed but has now passed into history. It is an exorcism of the inevitable powerlessness that lies in the future. The familiar self-cancelling gesture of the modernist tradition is raised to another power, one in which the act is registered as not self-chosen but which the subject still miraculously manages to survive.

Friday's irresistible authority is what distinguishes Coetzee's treatment of the African subject from earlier modernist treatments of Africa, beginning, arguably, with Conrad. Whereas Marlowe is left at the end of *Heart of*

Darkness to ponder guiltily both his own capacity to lie and Europe's capacity for degradation (a contemplation facilitated by his horror of life in the Congo), at the end of *Foe* the narrator is simply overwhelmed. He does not face a life of protracted self-disgust; on the contrary, he has been eclipsed, so what Coetzee adds to the Conradian moment is a sense of bounded historicity, leading to the narrator's self-conscious self-cancellation. The subject who survives this annihilation does so in some other textual realm.⁸

Let me turn now to a third and final example of Coetzee's deployment of Africa as sign. Also in *Doubling the Point* (1992) he speaks of the "social vitality" of the literature of pastoralism in Europe. He is referring to the poem by Zbigniew Herbert called "Five Men" in which condemned men are executed after a night of talking about girls and remembering card games. He continues: "Herbert writes: *therefore* one can write poems about flowers, Greek Shepherds and so forth. A poem ... justifying poems that stand back from calls to revolutionary action" (p. 67). In Poland, Coetzee then remarks, it appears one can oppose "the power of [pastoral] poetry" to "the shambling beast of history"; "in Africa", however, he goes on to say (and this is the argument I wish to take up),

the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure unmediated representation; what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one's face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history. "The only address one can imagine" – an admission of defeat. *Therefore*, the task becomes imagining this unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place.

(Coetzee 1992: 67-68)

Africa is offered as a place of unmediated representations. In the language of *Foe*, Africa is a place "where bodies are their own signs"; that is a related observation, but here the stakes are still higher. Coetzee has shifted the emphasis from Friday and his peculiar agency to the continent itself with Africa indistinguishable from the real – Africa as a place where history powers through mediations, a place which traumatises by threatening the work of signification, or in the older register of the extract, by threatening the imagination.

But is it possible for "Africa", or any place for that matter, to force "pure unmediated representation" on the subject? Surely not: surely, to put it simply, the encounters to which Coetzee's remarks testify are those in which certain representations are not *recognised* in the terms of the subject's own semiotic economy? The force, or the "brutal directness" of an African mode of address is less a case of having one's face thrust into the

8. This is another version of Coetzee's repeated efforts to use fiction's self-reflexivity as a way of speaking back to the political on fiction's terms.

Kantian “thing in itself” than a matter of having the contingency and precariousness of one’s habitual systems of representation exposed. The notion of a “brutal directness” speaks less of an invasion of the real than of the shame of one’s own nakedness. It is this moment of exposure, of self-doubt and vulnerability, that Coetzee has turned into a special kind of *metier*, enabling him to begin “imagining this unimaginable”, “imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place” (1992: 67-68).

We are in the world of Schoeman’s *Versluis* because this begs the question whether the African representations that are part of this world of supposedly undifferentiated power are decodable in some other form, perhaps a form used by Africans themselves. As one might expect from its title, the story, “The Humanities in Africa” (first published independently and then taken up in *Elizabeth Costello* (2004)) attempts an answer to this question. It does so in the person of Blanche, or Sister Bridget, Elizabeth Costello’s biological sister, who has made a life of service to her patients in a mission hospital in Zululand where the HIV/AIDS pandemic is rife. In Sister Bridget’s perspective, Friday coalesces with the figure of Christ: Africans, who know all about suffering, are by their plight especially able to identify with the saviour. In these terms, the story offers a fairly benign view of a transculturated world of religious signs and discourses where dialogue across the racial divide is possible – Sister Bridget recuperates Africa in these terms. Costello, however (who carries more of the story’s sympathy), cannot accept Sister Bridget’s verdict, and amongst other things she is critical of the carver Joseph’s derivative Gothic productions. Costello would like to affirm a very different, preferably Greek model of sculptural beauty, but Sister Bridget is not impressed:

“Well, the Zulus [know] better.” She waves a hand towards the window, towards the hospital buildings baking under the sun, towards the dirt road winding up into the barren hills. “This is reality: the reality of Zululand, the reality of Africa. It is the reality now and the reality of the future as far as we can see it. Which is why African people come to church to kneel before Jesus on the cross, African women above all, who have to bear the brunt of reality. Because they suffer and he suffers with them.”

(Coetzee 2004: 141)

As in the discussion of Herbert’s poem, Africa is a place of unmediated representations – “this is reality, the reality of Zululand, the reality of Africa”⁹ – but to Sister Bridget this very lack of mediation makes it more

9. Here too, Coetzee abrogates a previously mediated sign, in this case the famous first sentence of Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*: “There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills”, so that the barren hills around the mission de-spiritualise Paton’s religious-allegorical landscape.

amenable to religious rescripting. To Costello, this is all insufferable, literally: the heat of the church, combined with the heavy liturgical discourse of the service she attends, leave her feeling asphyxiated and she faints like Adela Quested in *A Passage to India*, “the one who cannot take it, who panics and shames everyone. Who cannot take the heat” (p. 144). The rest of the story plays out as a series of attempts on Costello’s part to revisit and replace Sister Bridget’s religious aesthetic and the spare but purposeful embodiedness that lies at its heart. Costello even attempts to turn her own preferred aesthetic of Hellenic perfection into a living philosophy to rival her sister’s by linking it with sensuous empathy and compassion, a *mélange* that she dignifies with the term *caritas* but which leads to the story’s oddest moment when she recalls baring her breasts and later performing fellatio on an elderly and dying family friend. The sober assessment of this moment would probably have us observe that Costello’s accommodation of physicality includes sex in a way that Sister Bridget’s could not. Behind these developments in the story, however, it is not difficult to discern Africa as their putative origin, as a place of explicit physicality; Costello has, in terms of this logic, been Africanised. Or, to put it in the terms of this essay: here the idea of Africa is occulted into a certain complex of ethical and aesthetic impulses where spare embodiment becomes a source of renewal. *Disgrace* (1999) takes a similar turn: when Africa – in this novel, the village of Salem, as the site of a rural frontier where colonial violence and anti-colonial vengeance are locked in a kind of death-struggle – proves irredeemable, David Lurie’s perspective shifts to a vision of embodiment that he shares with distressed animals. *Caritas* is offered here as an ideal based on the relationship Lurie develops with animals, suggesting that the postcolonial (but still racialised) social relations of Salem are incapable of producing a redemptive position, but nevertheless, some of the novel’s most intense moments of defamiliarisation – of ethical chastening and aesthetic self-consciousness – are played out against this background of what Graham Pechey correctly refers to as purgatorial Africa (2002: 374).

Let me conclude by trying to clarify an area of ambiguity that would not have escaped the reader. I have isolated three moments in which Coetzee develops the idea of Africa in ways that chasten and embolden his art but at the price of rendering Africa obscure. I have argued, furthermore, that the rendering-obscure, or the occultation of the sign of Africa, is part of, indeed serves, the chastening and emboldening of the art. Why is it (we must surely ask) that when described in these terms, the aesthetic achievement strikes us as not just bold, but outrageous? The reason is no doubt that we would prefer Coetzee to do equal justice to two compulsions: we would wish from him an aesthetically powerful rendering of Africa, but equally, we would also wish that his representations of African history, subjectivity and humanity accord with our desire for an Africa in which a full and meaningful life is possible. We would like to leave open the possibility of a

quotidian Africa, and also a dynamic Africa in which processes of cultural translation enable us to put aside the unreconstructed myths of the past. But perhaps it is the case that we cannot have it both ways; perhaps the price that is paid for the aesthetic achievement is disquiet without resolution.

What Jacques Derrida says about the effects of structuralism in his essay “Force and Signification” seems relevant to Coetzee’s treatment of the sign of Africa – Africa as a place of mutilated meanings and hostile intentions. Structuralism, says Derrida, provides the basis for a “catastrophic consciousness” in which the “living energy of meaning” is “neutralised” but in which the structures of language and representation stand out more clearly, like “the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture” (1978: 4). Coetzee’s emphasis on the processes of representation, chastened and charged by the history of colonialism and apartheid, produces similar effects, effects that, as literature, have left their mark on the times. As with so much else in Coetzee, his treatment of the idea of Africa ensures that he avoids becoming the worm pinned beneath the pitchfork of history. However, there is something emblematic about the situation described in *Youth*, where the protagonist, another John, finds himself sharing a house briefly with Theodora, a Malawian woman employed as the Merringtons’ housekeeper in London. Theodora says little, but John feels accused by her very silence. Before this presence, as the ex-colonial on the run, and as an artist in the making, still unsure of his affiliations, he is tempted to say – but doesn’t: “Africa belongs to you, it is yours to do with as you wish” (2002: 121; my emphasis). Before this figure of Theodora, as much as before Friday, Coetzee’s fiction performs its *danse macabre*.

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