

# J.M. Coetzee and the Limits of Language<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

In this article, with particular reference to *Waiting for the Barbarians* ([1980]2000) and *Disgrace* (1999), I explore the ways in which Coetzee's texts confront the difficulty of bringing meaningfully into linguistic range that which appears without precedent in given language. The irruption caused by the not-yet-said has the capacity to disturb the assumption that a meaningful language, recognised and shared by addressor and addressee, is being spoken at all. Yet the enquiries set up in the worlds of Coetzee's fiction never end with the first thought that something may be beyond discursive limits, even in the recognition that the effect of subsuming difference under the homogenising effect of a dominant discourse can be just as ethically fraught. In the course of the article I suggest a link between Coetzee's ethical enquiry about the limits of language, and that of Holocaust writer, Jean Améry, in his book, *At the Mind's Limits* ([1966]1980).

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word daar met spesifieke verwysing na *Waiting for the Barbarians* ([1980]2000) en *Disgrace* (1999) gekyk na Coetzee se unieke wyse om dit wat in geen taal voorheen bestaan het nie op 'n komplekse talige wyse aan te roer. Die irrupsie wat deur die nog-nie-gesegde veroorsaak word, het die vermoë om die aanname te versteur dat 'n betekenisvolle taal wat deur die implisiete stem en aangesprokene gedeel word, wel bestaan. Tog eindig alle ondersoeke wat na die fiksionele wêreld van Coetzee onderneem word nooit met die eerste aanname dat iets buite diskursiewe grense eties belaaï mag wees nie. Selfs in die herkenning van hierdie onderliggende verskille onder die homogeniserende effek van die dominante diskoers is daar verskillende vlakke of lae. In hierdie artikel suggereer ek 'n ooreenkoms tussen Coetzee se etiese ondersoeke oor die grense van taal en die werk van Jean Améry in *At the Mind's Limits* ([1966]1980).

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1. A somewhat different version of this essay was presented as a response to David Attwell and Rita Barnard at the "Coetzee and His Doubles" conference in New York in April 2007 – sincere thanks to Mark Sanders and to Nancy Ruttenburg for organising this wonderful meeting. Thank you also to Mark for his incisive comments on an earlier draft. In its present form my essay is based on a lecture (of the same title) that I presented at the University of Oslo on 6 February 2008.

A leading preoccupation in much of Coetzee's writing is this: how does one write about something *else*, but within the constraints of a recognisable language and idiom in which the words one chooses have been said before, thus dictating in advance what can be said? How does one write the other, the singular, the as-yet-untold, in language that inexorably follows tracks of the known, the familiar, the already-said?<sup>2</sup> Coetzee alerts us to this dilemma in his essay, "Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language", where he refers to Newton's attempts to explain, not only in the language of pure mathematics, but also in Latin and English, the force of gravitational attraction. Instead of assuming that Newton found a Whorfian "seamless continuity ... between syntax and logic and world view", Coetzee speaks of Newton's "real struggle" (Coetzee 1992: 194), of signs of Newton's "wrestling to make the thought fit into the language, to make the language express the thought, signs perhaps even of an incapacity of language to express certain thoughts, or of thought unable to think itself out because of the limitations of its medium" (Coetzee 1992: 184). In this essay I explore the ways in which Coetzee himself confronts the difficulty of bringing meaningfully into linguistic range that which is not immediately recognisable or sayable in language.

The difficulty seems to me to be played out in Coetzee's fiction in at least two distinct but interrelated processes: first, how does one bring to the surface of the writing some event, some place, some person, that has not entered into the language before; second, how does the author *invent* something new in writing, when what the writer has is a shared language, a literary heritage, words that have already been said? Several of Coetzee's characters (for the most part intellectuals, writers, academics) find themselves staring at words, exploring the possibility of a necessary – perhaps even a primal – link between a name and its referent. Characters like Mrs Curren, the Magistrate, David Lurie, Elizabeth Costello and Paul Rayment pick out isolated words, reconfigure them in declension, compare related words in different languages, trace etymological roots. A question of

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2. These questions have been formulated in different ways by several Coetzee scholars, most notably Derek Attridge. Attridge's book, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (like several essays written by Mike Marais and others), is situated within continental discourses of the ethical relation to alterity: "Coetzee's works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?" (Attridge 2004: xii). David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* is deeply attentive to the historical situatedness of Coetzee's work, which "seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a particular historical locale" (Attwell 1993: 1). I look forward to Kjetil Enstad's doctoral thesis (University of Oslo, September 2008), which brings narrative theory to bear on the preoccupations outlined above.

language – English in particular – and its capacity to articulate the truth, is pivotal in the worlds of Coetzee’s fiction: one immediately thinks of Lurie’s conviction that “English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa” (Coetzee 1999: 117) and his yearning to sound, at the very least, “a single authentic note” in the opera he is composing (Coetzee 1999: 214). These citations from *Disgrace* exemplify the two distinct processes that I have just mentioned, and bring us to the realisation that in Coetzee, the seemingly opposite literary engagements with history and postcolonial concerns on the one hand, and of self-reflexive postmodern strategies on the other, are inextricably connected. The moment of attempting to reach out beyond the limits of a given conceptual or representational scheme, and hence beyond what has been sayable in the language before, is also a linguistic breaking-point, and in this moment, Coetzee’s characters self-reflexively expose, as much as they attempt to shift, their discursive limits.

My point of departure is the scene from *Disgrace* in which David Lurie learns the name of the boy who is one of his daughter’s rapists. This part of the article can be read alongside – if not in direct or extended conversation with – the contributions to this issue by David Attwell and Rita Barnard. What are the ethical implications of deeming something untranslatable? My discussion moves on to consider in some detail excerpts from *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* in relation to the writings of Holocaust writer, Jean Améry.<sup>3</sup> Coetzee surely had Améry in mind, and strikingly so, while writing certain passages for *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In this part of the article I explore the consequences of the author’s attempt to translate into writing something that is essentially extralinguistic. If the intensity of physical events is betrayed by the familiar and figurative patterns of prose, are there ways in which Coetzee hints (as he says Kafka does) “that it is possible, for snatches, however brief, to think outside one’s own language” (Coetzee 1992: 198), and to convey that in writing? What, then, are the ethical implications of *linguistic* commentary in moments of unthinkable human confrontation, or of physical suffering, or of pain, in Coetzee’s work? My article concludes with a reflection on the artwork more generally: does it have the potential to erode the limits that the medium of its own construction sets?

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Lucy, David Lurie’s daughter in *Disgrace*, has been gang-raped, and some time after the event, she matter-of-factly informs her father that one of her

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3. Thanks to Stephen Clarkson for alerting me to W.G. Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003), which includes the essay on Jean Améry.

rapists is related to Petrus (her employee and neighbouring landowner) and that he is now living with Petrus in the neighbouring house. “‘His name is Pollux’, says Lucy. Lurie is shaken: ‘Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?’

‘P-O-L-L-U-X. And David, can we have some relief from that terrible irony of yours?’” (Coetzee 1999: 200). The name “Pollux” is perfectly pronounceable, placing its bearer decidedly, if disconcertingly for Lurie, within the literature professor’s appellative reach. On his own admission, Lurie “understands not a word” of Xhosa (Coetzee 1999: 75), and had Pollux’s name been unpronounceable, untranslatable, it might have been easier for Lurie to vindicate his desire to have his daughter’s new neighbour absolutely beyond his responsive range.<sup>4</sup> Recall the conversation where Petrus announces his intention to marry Lucy, seeing as Pollux himself is too young to do so. Lurie responds, “‘Explain to me what you mean. No, wait, rather don’t explain. This is not something I want to hear. This is not how we do things.’ We: he is on the point of saying, We Westerners” (Coetzee 1999: 202).

Naming, as Coetzee points out in *Giving Offense*, “can put the one named at a measured arm’s length quite as readily as it can draw the named one affectionately nearer” (Coetzee 1996: 2); the currency of proper names thus reveals something of the relation between namer and named – there is much more to the question than simply the link between a name and its bearer. In this case, “Pollux” does not guarantee an alienating distance from the “we Westerners” that Lurie would hold apart, and Lurie is powerless to assign a name to the boy. At the same time, though, Pollux may well be the father of Lurie’s grandchild. Coetzee is particularly sensitive, in both his fiction and his critical prose, to the implications of the use of proper names.<sup>5</sup> “‘Afrikaner’ is a name”, he writes, “and naming and making a name stick is above all, as we know, an exercise in power. A child is born wild; we name it to subjugate it” (Coetzee 1992: 342). In *Disgrace* the balance of power has shifted; Pollux is not in the position of subjugated farm-labourer, and as Lucy points out, “I can’t order him [Pollux] off the property, it’s not in my power” (Coetzee 1999: 200).

When Lurie sees Pollux spying on Lucy through the bathroom window, he succumbs to the racist and class violence from which he tries to distance

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4. Charles Dickens was acutely aware of the ways in which naming can be used to set the limit on a responsive range, and, by implication, to determine a field of responsibility (see Clarkson 1999: 169-173). For an extended discussion about the distinction between notions of the “irresponsible” and the “non-responsible” see Clarkson (2007).
  5. See, for example, the first chapter in *Giving Offense*. I have written about Coetzee’s engagements with the question of proper names – especially place names (see Clarkson 2008).

himself, but in which, as a white landowner in South Africa, he finds himself inexorably complicit. He falls into an “elemental rage”, strikes Pollux and shouts, “You swine! ... You filthy swine!”

The word still rings in the air: Swine! ... He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: Teach him a lesson, Show him his place. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a savage!

(Coetzee 1999: 206)

Finally Lurie kicks Pollux, sending him sprawling, as he mutters to himself, “Pollux! What a name!” (p. 207). In the heat of this violent encounter, Lurie is at once racist colonial settler and savage attacker, and, in relation to both subject positions (which in themselves are not simply mutually exclusive) he is powerless to effect either distance from, or control over, the other or himself through language. Pollux is inalienable – like Friday, he “does not disappear” (Coetzee 1992: 248) – and for Lurie this is surely registered with searing and intimately personal irony in the boy’s mythic name.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, as the encounters between Lurie and Pollux show, deeming something untranslatable, unpronounceable, perhaps even to the extent of wishing it so, can constitute an ethically inadequate response, as David Attwell’s essay in this issue implies.<sup>7</sup> *Lurie thinks to himself that he “would not mind hearing Petrus’s story one day. But preferably not reduced to English”* (Coetzee 1999: 117). What is the alternative, though? Hearing Petrus’s story in Xhosa – which Lurie does not understand at all? Is there then no possible channel of meaningful communication?

In Coetzee, the enquiry does not end with the first thought that something may be beyond discursive limits, yet any attempt to subsume difference

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6. Pollux, Helen, Castor and Clytemnestra are the offspring of Leda, who was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan. Pollux and Helen were born from the same egg (Willis 1993: 135); “Helen” is also the name of Lucy’s former partner.

7. Of particular interest to me is Attwell’s carefully defined and sustained deployment of the term “occultation” in his argument:

Coetzee’s Africa is also a site of occultation. The term has psychoanalytic implications suggesting displacement and repression, implications that may be relevant to some of the ways in which Coetzee’s characters refer to Africa, but I prefer 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 arguing that Coetzee deliberately subjects Africa as sign to a process of occultation so that it becomes a source of aesthetic power.

(Attwell 2009: 71)

under the homogenising effect of a dominant discourse can be just as ethically fraught. If, on the one hand, a prevailing language may grant to non-native speakers a subject-position from which to speak, it is difficult to be sure (as Derrida points out) whether this language exercises a “rule of decorum”, of “politeness”, of “hospitality”, whether it exercises “the equitable law of democracy”, or instead, whether it exercises “the law of the strongest” (Derrida 2002: 232). Thus, for Derrida, “the violence of an injustice has begun when all the members [*partenaires*] of a community do not share, through and through, the same idiom” (Derrida 2002: 246). It is in this context that I would say there is something deeply troubling about the procedure of Coetzee’s imagined future English-speaking pool of “no recognisable ethnos,” into which more “people of colour” would supposedly “drift”, and “in which differences [would] wash away” (Coetzee 1992: 342).<sup>8</sup> Throughout his fiction, however, it is precisely in a contingent liminal zone of language, and along contested linguistic borderlines, that Coetzee sustains complex ethical enquiries.

### 3

Within the fictional worlds of Coetzee’s novels, characters express misgivings that European languages and cultures offer any legitimate medium of response to South Africa at all. Insistently in *Disgrace*, the sociopolitical aftermath of colonialism is indexed in the anachronistic disjuncture between a European language and intellectual literary heritage and the Africa it attempts to address, or represent. Lurie’s near-obsessive interest in being articulate himself results in his unearthing of a number of European resonances in each English word that he so carefully turns over. Here are just three examples:

A man of patience, energy, resilience. A peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country.

(Coetzee 1999: 117)

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8. The violence of cultural translation is made poignantly clear in Zoë Wicomb’s account of the Khoikhoi woman, Krotoa (called “Eva” by the Dutch colonists), who, from the age of ten, and shortly after the arrival of van Riebeeck in the Cape in 1652, lived in the Dutch fort as an interpreter and mediator between the settlers and the indigenous people. “Her much vaunted assimilation in the European fort must ... be questioned”, writes Wicomb: “Studies of early settler society as racially inclusive and encouraging of mixed marriages ... do not take into account the violence that characterises the history of Krotoa’s translation” (Wicomb 2002: 212-213).

She loves the land and the old, *ländliche* way of life.  
(Coetzee 1999: 113)

Modern English *friend* from old English *freond*, from *freon*, to love.  
(Coetzee 1999: 102)

A curious tension arises in these examples. On a semantic level the words raise associations of chthonic rootedness (“*paysan*”, “*ländliche*”), of home and community (“neighbour”, “friend”, “benefactor”). But the translingual and etymological enquiries themselves, regardless of what the words *mean*, recall a distant culture and a time past.<sup>9</sup> To invoke the histories and etymological connections of these words, while uttering them *in South Africa* is to place the speaker in a double bind. On the one hand the testing of language is generated by a sincere desire to speak the truth, to find the right word. On the other hand, the etymological forays, which expose European roots, are a reminder of an imperial elsewhere, which draws attention to the amphibology of the individual words, and hence to the precariousness of supposed univocal meanings. This is something that Coetzee deliberately exploits in his writing. “[W]hat I like about English”, Coetzee tells Jean Sévry,

and what I certainly don’t find in Afrikaans ... is a historical layer in the language that enables you to work with historical contrasts and oppositions ... there is a genetic diversity about the language, which after all is not only a Germanic language with very heavy romance overlays, but is also a language which is very receptive to imported neologisms so that macaronic effects are possible – you can work with contrasts in the etymological basis of words.  
(Coetzee 1986: 2)

Coetzee’s attention to the effects of the historical traces of his artistic medium reminds me of Jacques Derrida’s “Force and Signification” – an early essay which offers a detailed and provocative reading of Jean Rousset’s structuralist work, *Forme et signification: Essais sur les*

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9. Rita Barnard, in her article, “J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral”, makes a related comment about the many foreign words in the novel. She singles out the word, “*eingewurzelt*” (rooted in):

[T]he word, redolent with notions of organic community and peasant tradition, is intended to affirm the man’s [Ettinger’s] tenacity. But the very fact that it is a German word effectively undermines its dictionary definition: Ettinger’s origins ... may be too European for him to survive without a brood of sons on the post-apartheid platteland.

(Barnard 2003: 206-207)

*structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel*.<sup>10</sup> In what amounts to a sustained critique of a structuralist approach, especially as it is evinced by Rousset, Derrida makes the point that structuralism practises a certain literary geometry; it “grants an absolute privilege to spatial models, mathematical functions, lines, and forms ... in fact, time itself is always reduced. To a *dimension* in the best of cases” (Derrida [1963] 1978: 16). Rousset, in Derrida’s reading, is preoccupied with the lines that trace out the internal thematic structures and patterns of the work, but to delineate the thematic patterns in this way is to presuppose a static structural and temporal boundary of that literary work in advance. It is to consider the work as self-contained *representation*, rather than as a complex, historically inflected *appeal*; it is to disregard the implications of the heritage of its medium, as much as it is to ignore the impact of the address sent out to potential future readers. This is the sense in which we can understand Derrida’s interesting claim that “there is no *space* of the work, if by space we mean *presence* and *synopsis*” (Derrida [1963] 1978: 14). In its lapse in the attention given to forces of meaning over time, a structuralist reading is conducted in *purely* spatial terms, running the risk of overlooking a

history, more difficult to conceive: the history of the meaning of the work itself, of its *operation*. This history of the meaning of the work is not only its *past*, the eve or the sleep in which it precedes itself in an author’s intentions, but is also the impossibility of its ever being *present*, of its ever being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness.

(Derrida [1963]1978: 14)

Spelling out etymologies, testing the valency of English spoken in Africa, mentioning place-names no longer in use<sup>11</sup> – these are just some of the ways in which Coetzee *invites* attention to the effects of historical forces operative in his fiction, at the level of the constitutive medium of the work. In leading the reader to ask unsettling questions about the assumed ahistoric presence of a work of fiction – through self-conscious reflection on the temporal contingency of an explicitly historically situated language that at the same time generates the fictional narrative – Coetzee’s writing (as it does in the few instances I have cited from *Disgrace*) brings about a convergence of postcolonial and postmodern concerns.

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10. I have written in detail about “Force and Signification” in an essay, “Drawing the Line: Justice and the Art of Reconciliation” ([2008b]). In this essay I ask what a post-apartheid aesthetic might entail.

11. I am thinking specifically of references to the Eastern Cape as “Old Kaffraria” in *Disgrace*.



## 4

The point of departure in this section is the series of events and responses surrounding Lucy's rape in *Disgrace*. Making particular reference to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, my discussion moves on to consider the implications, for literature, of Jean Améry's account of the time he spent in Nazi concentration camps. I am not suggesting that the events Coetzee portrays in *Disgrace* are comparable to those of which Jean Améry writes. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that Coetzee is acquainted with Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*, and shares the latter's concern about the difficulty – perhaps even the impossibility – of conveying extreme physical and psychological suffering in literary language.

David Lurie regains consciousness to find himself in the lavatory with the door locked from the outside while his daughter, Lucy, is being gang-raped in the bedroom on a smallholding outside Salem in the Eastern Cape. In this incident we see the most complicated clash of events at once political, personal and brutally physical – a clash that resists sanguine assimilation in prose. If at first the *languages* of Italian and French – that Lurie suddenly thinks about – are laughably outlandish, the horror of Lucy and Lurie's experience soon exceeds measure in any language, and it is the *experience* that simultaneously falls beyond structured linguistic reach, even while it encroaches upon, and disrupts, that linguistic terrain. The ability to articulate these events with a strong conviction that the truth is being told, is rendered questionable.

Lurie will shortly be doused in methylated spirits and set alight. He mordantly reflects on his uselessness and helplessness:

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see.

(Coetzee 1999: 95)

Lurie's parodic and ludicrous image here, at a moment when his continued existence (and that of his daughter) is by no means assured, reminds me of Jean Améry's observation about the effects of what he calls "the problem of the confrontation of intellect and horror" (Améry [1966]1980: 6). The experience of time spent in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, writes Améry, did not make him "wiser" or "deeper" or "better, more human, more humane ... more mature ethically". Instead he gained the certain insight that

for the greatest part the intellect is a *ludus* and that we are nothing more – or, better said, before we entered the camp we were nothing more – than

*homines ludentes*. With that we lost a good deal of arrogance, of metaphysical conceit, but also quite a bit of our naïve joy in the intellect that we falsely imagined was the sense of life.

(Améry [1966]1980: 20)

Perhaps it is something of this “naïve joy in the intellect” that Lucy recognises in Lurie, and from which she distances herself. She balks at reporting her rape to the police, and further, she holds, it would be self-defeating to try to explain why to her father. From Lucy’s perspective, Lurie, in his relentless entreaties for an explanation from her, puts her on “trial”, demands that she “justify [her]self”, and in the process, he perpetuates a violation of her right *not to be called to account*. Lurie himself, however, almost immediately seeks a rationale for the incident and constructs theories about the day of horror on the farm – he purposely “hold[s] to the theory and the comforts of the theory”; he analyses the incident, and Lucy’s response to it, in terms of narrative “abstractions”,<sup>12</sup> he comes up with “reading[s]” (Coetzee 1999: 133, 98, 112, 118). “‘It was history speaking through them’, he says to Lucy, ‘[a] history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps’” (Coetzee 1999: 156). But for Lucy, “[t]hat doesn’t make it easier” – all the words in the world have no bearing on the “shock [that] simply doesn’t go away”; for Lucy, Lurie’s readings inevitably constitute “misreading[s]” (Coetzee 1999: 156, 112), and his incessant interrogations culminate in Lucy’s response: “‘I can’t talk any more, David, I just can’t’, she says, speaking softly, rapidly, as though afraid the words will dry up. ‘I know I am not being clear. I wish I could explain but I can’t.’” (Coetzee 1999: 155).

Yet Lurie himself senses the paradox of translating the exorbitant trauma of that day into ordinary language. On the way home from the hospital, Bill Shaw comments to Lurie: “‘A shocking business .... Atrocious .... It’s like being in a war all over again’” (Coetzee 1999: 102). Lurie’s thoughts are telling: “‘He does not bother to reply .... *War, atrocity*: every word with which one tries to wrap up this day, the day swallows down in its black throat” (Coetzee 1999: 102). That night, and the next morning, the words and ditty of a familiar nursery rhyme torment Lurie’s thoughts – *Oh dear, what can the matter be?/ Two old ladies locked in the lavatory/ They were there from Monday to Saturday/ Nobody knew they were there*. “‘A chant from his childhood”, Lurie reflects, “‘come back to point a jeering finger’” (Coetzee 1999: 109): the traumatic events of the day surface in Lurie’s consciousness in the language of sing-song cultural clichés. The intellect, in language ruts like these, loses its capacity to transcend (see Améry [1966] 1980: 7). It is in this context that I think one can empathise with Lucy’s

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12. Améry again: “[E]ven in direct experience everyday reality is nothing but codified abstraction. Only in rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality” (Améry [1966]1980: 26).

*resistance* to telling, explaining, and – by implication – superficially ordering her terrible experience into a coherent narrative open to public reading.<sup>13</sup> This brings me back to Jean Améry. “To reach out beyond concrete reality with words”, he writes,

became before our very eyes a game that was not only worthless and an impermissible luxury but also mocking and evil. Hourly, the physical world delivered proof that its insufferableness could be coped with only through means inherent in that world. In other words: nowhere else in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere else was reality so real. In no other place did the attempt to transcend it prove so hopeless and so shoddy.

(Améry [1966]1980: 19)

Jean Améry was born in Vienna in 1912, as Hans Mayer. He worked for the resistance in Belgium, survived arrest and torture by the Gestapo in the vault of Fort Breendonk, and spent time in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. It would take twenty years before Améry spoke publicly about his experiences. “I cannot say that during the time I was silent I had forgotten or ‘repressed’ the twelve years of German fate, or of my own,” writes Améry in 1966, in the preface to the first edition (written in German) of *At the Mind’s Limits* (Améry [1966] 1980: xiii). “For two decades I had been in search of the time that was impossible to lose, but it had been difficult to talk about it” (Améry [1966] 1980: xiii quoted in Sebald 2003: 154).

In his essay on Améry, W.G. Sebald cites this passage, and comments on it in ways that link it to central preoccupations of my article. Sebald writes that “[t]he paradox of searching for a time which, to the author’s own distress, cannot in the last resort be forgotten entails the quest for a form of language in which experiences paralysing the power of articulation could be expressed” (Sebald 2003: 154).

If the enormity of an event paralyses the power of articulation, rendering the language that is inherited and shared “shoddy” and “hopeless” (to recall Améry’s own terms), then any attempt at just expression *demand*s a break with what has been deemed sayable in the language before. Yet, if articulation itself is paralysed by what remains unsaid, then, at the very least, a linguistic breaking point can be registered, giving intimations of the

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13. In a slightly different context, in relation to her discussion of translation, Zoë Wicomb justly observes: “[A]cts of violation of the human body – necklacing or rape – cannot with any measure of decency be cast as texts” (Wicomb 2002: 217). At the same time, however, Wicomb reads Lucy’s response to her rape along different lines to the one I am developing here. “Lucy will not acknowledge the rape,” writes Wicomb, “will not speak about it, and will not report it to the police: behaviour which could be read in terms of Freud’s statement: ‘a failure of translation, that is what is known as repression’” (Wicomb 2002: 221).

attempt to shift a discursive limit, of the attempt to alter the field of linguistic response. In Coetzee (as in Améry), it is in the *unprecedented* instance<sup>14</sup> of confrontation, or of suffering or of an attempt at communication, that the discourse self-reflexively turns in on the linguistic mechanism placed under the strain of its own enquiry. I am thinking (I mention just a few examples here) of the colonial encounters in *Dusklands*,<sup>15</sup> of the scene of the magistrate's torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Coetzee [1980]2000: 128-133), of Mrs Curren's attempts to reach Florence, who lives in Guguletu, by telephone (Coetzee 1998: 147-149, 173-174),<sup>16</sup> and of David Lurie's sustained interest in exploring extralinguistic ways of communicating with other sentient beings.

The focus of my discussion now is a sequence of events from *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where extremes of physical experience erupt into enquiries

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14. My own language here pulls against what I want to say: "unprecedented" is precisely "of an unexampled kind" (*OED*) – but an "instance" implies an "illustrative example" of a general assertion, or argument or truth (*OED*). The phrase, "unprecedented instance", thus paradoxically enacts the problem under discussion.

15. For example, the discussion of European, Bushman and frontiersman taxonomies; the fanciful etymology of "the appellation *Hottentot*"; the section, "Sojourn in the land of the Great Namaqua":

I spoke slowly, as befitted the opening of negotiations with possibly unfriendly powers ... I was unsure whether my Hottentot, picked up at my nurse's knee and overburdened with imperative constructions, was compatible with theirs: might I not, for example, precipitate hostilities with one of those innocent toneshift puns [!nop<sup>4</sup>] "stone" for [!nop<sup>2</sup>] "peace", for which my countrymen were so mocked?

(Coetzee [1974]1982: 66, 113, 115-116)

A discussion of these encounters would require an essay of its own.

16. The word, "Thabanchu" occurs to Mrs Curren, who, at the time, is in terrible pain, and suffering from the side effects of her sedative medication as she slips in and out of consciousness. "Thaba Nchu" (as David Attwell (2009: 73) points out in his contribution in this volume) is the name of the Wesleyan mission station in the Free State Province of South Africa, but to Mrs Curren, who is about to phone Mr Thabane, the word appears as a confusing linguistic puzzle: "Nine letters, anagram for what?" (Coetzee [1990]1998: 173). Understandably, the history of the mission station does not explicitly surface in Mrs Curren's utterance of "Thabanchu" at this particular moment, yet Attwell goes so far as to suggest that "so well known and so literary is the name in South African letters that it seems reasonable to suggest that it [the history of Thaba Nchu] is being *disavowed*" (final emphasis mine). However, I would argue that it is precisely Coetzee's mention of the name of the mission station that offers occasion for that history to be recalled and told, as Attwell in fact does.

about the limit of language. The enquiry presses into isolated words, cleaving them in ways that expose semantic faultlines and intensify scepticism about what can meaningfully be said. To be more precise: the appreciation of meaning in language depends on the recognition of past usage, of what has been said before. What happens, then, in the attempt to articulate what could not be anticipated, when an event has made such an extreme and unprecedented physical demand that the worn paths of language offer no *meaningful* ground for discursive abstraction? (see Améry [1966]1980: 25-26). The magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* faces Mandel, his torturer:

I look into his clear blue eyes, as clear as if there were crystal lenses slipped over his eyeballs. He looks back at me. I have no idea what he sees. Thinking of him, I have said the words *torture ... torturer* to myself, but they are strange words, and the more I repeat them the more strange they grow, till they lie like stones on my tongue.

(Coetzee [1980]2000: 129)

The image of staring at words, the analogy of words and stones – a recurrent and important motif in Coetzee from *Dusklands* onwards – reminds me of the writing of American earthworks artist, Robert Smithson. In “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects” (1968), he writes:

Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomfiting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle.

(Smithson [1968]1996: 107)

In Coetzee and in Améry it is the fragmentation of the language itself that has to become the focus of discussion, as the inconceivable reality of the event itself resists containment in the didactic and predictable ruts of the words that would speak about it. Both writers, in the realisation of the enormity of the event, bear witness to the *language* as it becomes fragmented, as words become void. I quote at some length, and juxtapose two passages – the first from *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

If I can hold my arms stiff, if I am acrobat enough to swing a foot up and hook it around the rope, I will be able to hang upside down and not be hurt: that is my last thought before they begin to hoist me. But I am as weak as a baby, my arms come up behind my back, and as my feet leave the ground I feel a terrible tearing in my shoulders as though whole sheets of muscle are giving way.

(Coetzee [1980]2000: 132)

The second passage is from Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*:

In the bunker there hung from the vaulted ceiling a chain that above ran into a roll. At its bottom end it bore a heavy, broadly curved iron hook. I was led to the instrument. The hook gripped into the shackle that held my hands together behind my back. Then I was raised with the chain until I hung about a metre above the floor. In such a position, or rather, when hanging this way, with your hands behind your back ... when you are already expending your utmost strength, when sweat has already appeared on your forehead and lips, and you are breathing in gasps, you will not answer any questions. Accomplices? Addresses? Meeting places? You hardly hear it. All your life is gathered in a single limited area of the body, the shoulder joints, and it does not react .... And now there was a crackling and splintering in my shoulders that my body has not forgotten until this hour. The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head. Torture, from Latin *torquere*, to twist. What visual instruction in etymology!

(Améry [1966]1980: 32-33 quoted in Sebald 2003: 156)

Sebald comments on this passage from Améry: "The phrase with which this curiously objective passage concludes, provocatively deviating almost into the ridiculous, shows that the composure, the *impassibilité* allowing Améry to recapitulate such extreme experiences has here reached breaking point .... He knows that he is operating on the borders of what language can convey" (Sebald 2003: 156). At the same time, the attempt at a just recollection of the event in discursive prose *demand*s the arrest of language – because any words used to describe the extreme, of which one cannot make sense, will, at best, be euphemistically figurative. "It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me," writes Améry.

One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling ... mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself.

(Améry [1966]1980: 33)

By now at least this much should be clear: the attempt to articulate the extreme precipitates writer and reader to the periphery of what can be said. If the language used is reciprocally recognised and shared, then whatever falls beyond that given language will not be expressed. But the attempt to voice that which is without precedent breaks in on the smooth historical sequence of linguistic utterances. The irruption caused by the not-yet-said has radical consequences: it disturbs the assumption that a meaningful

language, recognised and shared by addressor and addressee, is being spoken at all. I return to the scene of the magistrate's torture from *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

From my throat comes the first mournful dry bellow, like the pouring of gravel ... I bellow again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright .... Someone gives me a push and I begin to float back and forth in an arc a foot above the ground like a great old moth with its wings pinched together, roaring, shouting. "He is calling his barbarian friends", someone observes, "That is barbarian language you hear." There is laughter.

(Coetzee [1980]2000: 132-133)

The damaged body, without premeditation, roars its truth in a way that cannot be recapitulated with integrity in the organising patterns and structures of language. But this extralinguistic truth is aggressively suppressed by the Empire, through the act of supposedly ceding it a sense in the language of the derided other. Much later, the magistrate finds himself trapped in the ethically fraught negotiation between the potential reach and the limit of what he writes. Despite his intention to write "the annals of an imperial outpost", he writes instead: "No one who paid a visit to this oasis ... failed to be struck by the charm of life here .... This was paradise on earth." The magistrate is appalled:

For a long while I stare at the plea I have written. It would be disappointing to know that the poplar slips I have spent so much time on contain a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible as this.

"Perhaps by the end of winter", I think ... "I will abandon the locutions of a civil servant with literary ambitions and begin to tell the truth."

(Coetzee [1980]2000: 168-69)

If, following the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* now, "[t]he limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt*) (Wittgenstein [1921]1961: proposition number 5.6), it is not that there is nothing at all beyond the limit of language; instead, it is only that of which we can make linguistic sense that can be brought within its ambit. As Bernhard Weiss pointed out to me in conversation, "the contentious term here is 'bedeuten', which is usually translated as 'means' or 'denotes'. Obviously nothing stands outside the limits of my world, but something does stand outside the limits of my language, namely, nonsense". Wittgenstein spells this out in the preface to the *Tractatus*: it is only "in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense" (Wittgenstein [1921]1961: 3). We can make sense of the "charm of life" as the magistrate

puts it – it is much more amenable to being played out in patterns across the surface of narrative prose.<sup>17</sup>

## 5

It is hardly surprising that Coetzee, in his own writing, should explore the possibility of forms of communication that do not depend on language, and that extend beyond intersubjective human relations. A related question is the extent to which any mode of communication can transcend space and time. “[I]s there some non-vacuous sense in which I can say the spirit of Bach was speaking to me across the ages, across the seas, putting before me certain ideals?” Coetzee asks, in the essay, “What is a Classic?” (Coetzee 2001: 10). In this final section of my article I consider very briefly music in *Disgrace* and the photographs in *Slow Man* as modes of relating other than through language.

It is through the composition of his opera that David Lurie in *Disgrace* hopes to create a sound that cuts across all cultural divides,<sup>18</sup> that expresses something common to all forms of animal existence, both human and non-human. On the one hand it “would have been nice to be returned triumphant to society as the author of an eccentric little chamber opera”, but at best Lurie hopes “that somewhere from amidst the welter of sound there will dart up, like a bird, a single authentic note of immortal longing” (Coetzee 1999: 214). Teresa, in Lurie’s opera, may, in this sense, be “the last one left who can save him”. It is she who “has immortal longings, and sings her longings. She will not be dead” (Coetzee 1999: 209). This note of immortal longing is visceral in its effect, resonating a commonality of being in its sheer physicality; it certainly cannot be recapitulated in ordinary language: “A woman in love, wallowing in love; a cat on a roof, howling; complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat and voice thicken as the soul hurls its longings to the skies” (Coetzee 1999: 185). The single note, for a fleeting moment, seems on the brink of tapping into a unity of all physical existence: “When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa’s line, and the humming begins to swell with feeling (it is as though his larynx thickens: he can feel the hammer of blood in his throat), the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling” (Coetzee 1999: 215). In the physical cry of her longing, Teresa is “past honour” (p. 209), and dogs, too, know nothing of “honour and dishonour” (p. 146). Finally Lurie

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17. At the back of my mind is an image (used in a different context) in *Youth*: “Prose is like a flat, tranquil sheet of water on which one can tack about at one’s leisure, making patterns on the surface” (Coetzee 2002: 61).

18. I speak about this at greater length elsewhere (see Clarkson 2003).



comes to the realisation that “he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line. So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does its work! How strange! How fascinating!” (Coetzee 1999: 184-185).

This discussion of music in *Disgrace* reiterates the preoccupations I outlined at the very outset of this essay: insistently in Coetzee, art (and this includes the literary use of language) seems to be instantiated in the tension between the constraints of the medium in space and time, and a desire on the part of the artist to give intimations of transcending those limits. We see this in *Slow Man*, when Paul Rayment shows Marijana’s teenage son, Drago, his collection of Fauchery photographs. On his death, Rayment will donate to a library his collection – photographs of Australia’s goldrush in the 1850s: “It will become public property. Part of our historical record” (Coetzee 2005: 177). Without warning, Rayment finds himself close to tears, not because of the thought of his own death, but “more likely it is because of *our*. *Our record, yours and mine*. Because just possibly this image before them, this distribution of particles of silver that records the way the sunlight fell, one day in 1855 ... may, like a mystical charm – *I was here, I lived, I suffered* – have the power to bring them together” (Coetzee 2005: 177).

The two-dimensional paper card with its distribution of silver particles has an objective materiality in time and space – but the effect of the image is not reducible to static spatio-temporal co-ordinates. The photograph of the “long-dead Irishwomen” provokes an empathetic response across centuries, and will continue to reach out to an illimitable future; far-off continents are reeled in to a small scrap of paper as Rayment, the “boy from Lourdes” and Drago, “son of Dubrovnic” meet, with understanding, the gaze of two Irishwomen in Australia. Geography and time are refracted through silver particles and effect what South African artist and film-maker, William Kentridge, would call a “distant connectedness” (Kentridge 2001: 72).

The image, in the moment of its reception, thus reconfigures ordinary experiences of time and space, even if that moment, in turn, rests on the responsiveness to a shared idiom on the part of its viewers. And yet, it is surely when the medium of the artwork is at the breaking point of what it can convey, when the artist is forced to articulate that there is “too much truth for art to hold” (Coetzee 1992: 99), that the work exposes, and plays a creative part in shifting, the limit of what can be said.

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