

# Writing as Exploration and Revelation: Experiencing the Environment, Whether Local or Global, as Envisioned by Different Role-players in J.M. Coetzee's Latest Novels\*

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## **Summary**

Coetzee has become famous for his ability to channel any social or political commentary he might intimate through the medium of writing, perhaps more specifically, through the art of story-telling. In this paper, I intend having a closer look at one aspect of his writing – his choice of characters who, one would presume, are supposed to act as spokespersons for the authorial voice. Although the postmodernist novel, *Foe* (1986), was labelled by some critics as merely a frivolous, if clever and well-written, flaunting of poststructuralist theories masking his lack of social responsibility, the representation of Friday (Crusoe's companion on the island) anticipates his channelling of penetrating sociopolitical commentary through a character seemingly at a disadvantage and therefore in need of "upliftment". In *Age of Iron* (1990) the social outcast is embodied in a derelict living on the street, as well as by rebelling black youths taking part in the struggle. Helplessness and ineffectuality are at the same time acted out by the firstperson narrator in this novel, an old middle-class, well-educated and affluent woman in the last stages of a debilitating terminal disease. The stark reality of "living" with age and illness is continued in *The Master of Petersburg* (1997), where the identity of the narrator, a fictionalisation of Dostoyevsky trying to come to terms with the unnatural and untimely death of a son, invites a comparison of different countries and landscapes (as it does in *Foe*), shaping the identity of the characters. Contrasting with all the "helpless" or "pitiable" characters in the former novels, who all shared the characteristic of being "right" on a deeper level and therefore occupying the moral high ground despite being at odds with their environment, the narrator in *Disgrace* (1999) is ineffectual because of his immorality. And it is through this character, "speaking" all the sins of political incorrectness, from sexual abuse to condescending racism, that Coetzee channels his uncompromising reading of the current South African sociopolitical situation. In all these novels, then, the characters, narrators as well as marginalised figures, enact different views of "culture, literature and man" in a localised space nevertheless ultimately, even if by implication only, subject to the levelling effects of globalisation.

## Opsomming

Coetzee het bekend geword vir sy vermoë om enige sosiale of politieke kommentaar wat hy te kenne wil gee, te kanaliseer deur die skryfmedium, miskien meer spesifiek deur die vertelkuns. In hierdie artikel beoog ek om een aspek van sy werk onder die loep te neem – sy keuse van karakters, wat, so sou aangeneem kon word, veronderstel is om die outeurstem te verteenwoordig. Alhoewel die postmodernistiese roman *Foe* (1986) deur sommige kritici bestempel word as slegs 'n ligsinnige, alhoewel vernuftige en goedgeskrewe vertoon van poststrukturalistiese teorieë wat sy gebrek aan sosiale verantwoordelikheid verbloem, antisipeer die voorstelling van Friday (Crusoe se kameraad op die eiland) Coetzee se kanalisering van deurdringende sosiaal-politieke kommentaar deur 'n karakter wat oënskynlik in 'n benadeelde posisie is en "opheffing" benodig. In *Age of Iron* (1990) word die sosiale uitgeworpene vergestalt in 'n hawelose wat op straat woon, sowel as in swart jeugdige wat aan die "struggle" deelneem. Hulpeloosheid en oneffektiwiteit word terselfdertyd uitgebeeld deur die eerstepersoonsverteller in hierdie roman – 'n bejaarde, geleerde, gegoede middelklas vrou in die laaste fase van 'n aftakelende terminale siekte. Die naakte werklikheid van "leef" met ouderdom en siekte word voortgesit in *The Master of Petersburg* (1977), waar die identiteit van die verteller, 'n fiksionalisasie van Dostoyevsky wat poog om in sy seun se onnatuurlike en ontydige dood te berus, tot 'n vergelyking van verskillende lande en landskappe lei (soos in *Foe*), wat die identiteit van die karakters vorm. In kontras met al die hulpelose, of bejammerenswaardige karakters in die vroeë romans, wat almal die karakteristiek van "reg" wees op 'n dieper vlak deel, en daarom dié morele beginsel toe-eien ten spyte van hulle haaksheid met die omgewing, is die verteller in *Disgrace* (1999) oneffektief vanweë sy immoraliteit. En dit is deur hierdie karakter, wat al die oortredings van politieke onjuistheid, van seksuele misbruik tot neerhalende rassisme "uitspreek", dat Coetzee sy ongekompliseerde interpretasie van die huidige Suid-Afrikaanse sosio-politieke situasie kanaliseer. In al hierdie romans, dus, vertolk die karakters, vertellers en ook die gemarginaliseerde figure verskillende sienings van kultuur, literatuur en die mens in 'n gelokaliseerde ruimte, wat nogtans uiteindelik, al is dit slegs by implikasie, onderhewig is aan die gelykmakende gevolge van globalisasie.

## 1 Introduction

Coetzee has become famous for his ability to channel any social or political commentary he might intimate through the medium of writing, perhaps more specifically, through the art of story-telling. Contrary to many of his detractors who would have liked to have seen a more direct condemnation of an indefensible and universally condemned political system in South Africa before the change to democratic rule in 1994, Coetzee continued to defend a position where, as his first-person narrator puts it in *Age of Iron* (1990: 75), the writer of necessity has to resort to "devious discourse". In his analysis of Coetzee's position regarding the "politics of writing" in his first six novels, Attwell (1993: 1) justifies this stance by arguing that these novels "constitute a form of postmodern metafiction that declines the cult of the merely relativist and artful", in that Coetzee "seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a particular historical locale, that of

contemporary South Africa". I share this assessment of Coetzee's writing and I shall argue, in this paper, that in his latest novels, be it by "devious means", he offers penetrating social commentary in an uncompromising analysis of cultural, social and political tensions prevalent in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the monumental changes which climaxed in the substitution of a white minority for a black majority government in South Africa in 1994.

When one considers Coetzee's latest novels, two different focused areas are apparent: reflection on issues underlying writing in general in *Foe* (1986) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) on the one hand, as opposed to a more explicit contemplation of current sociopolitical issues in *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Disgrace* (1999) on the other. These different emphases are already suggested in the titles – whereas *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg* invite a comparison with a universal story (being shipwrecked on a desert island as in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) and a "master" amongst great authors (Dostoyevsky) acknowledged in the canon of world literature respectively, *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* both refer to particular conditions pertaining to the current sociopolitical South African landscape. Yet despite the different landscapes depicted in these texts, apparent "direct" sociopolitical commentary in the novels having a South African setting cannot be separated from reflection on the conditions of writing prevalent in *all* the above-mentioned texts as the two narrative strategies are not mutually exclusive, but indeed intertwined and interdependent to the extent of becoming almost indistinguishable as separate entities. Accordingly, in the ensuing comparative reading of these novels, I shall trace some continuing themes and strategies in the four texts, showing to what extent Coetzee's assessment of a particular sociopolitical situation is channelled through spokespersons (writers, narrators, focalisers or characters) who coerce the reader into considering the nature and relevance of writing and story-telling in different contexts and circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

When attempting to come to terms with Coetzee's reading of his environment, then, the reader has to engage in a constant assessment and reassessment of distinguishable, yet interdependent, narrative strategies which would appear to fluctuate between the positions of general reflection on writing and storytelling on the one hand, and contemplation of sociopolitical realities relating to a specific time and place on the other. Philosophical reflection on universal issues, complemented by more direct social commentary, is presented in terms of personal relationships, at times implying the author, J.M. Coetzee himself, in the novels under discussion. In *Foe* the contemporary author, possibly Coetzee,<sup>2</sup> is even introduced in the last segment of the text, thereby retrospectively establishing a link with the agents of writing and fiction in the previous segments of the text: the historical author, Foe; the female narrator, Susan Barton; and the main characters in the story of the island, Cruso, the shipwrecked hero; and Friday, the captured savage acting as both slave and companion to Cruso.

In this text, as in the successive novels, there are two sets of characters: the mediating agents of writing (authors, narrators and focalisers) creating the story or stories and the actors or characters being manipulated to fulfil particular functions in the fictional universe. In the different layers in which the original story of the shipwrecked hero is enveloped in *Foe*, the focalising and writing agents, though they may also enter the fictional world in the guise of actors, distinguish themselves from the actors per se in that they occupy the elevated position of being able to comment on the role of these actors within the stories they are trying to compose. In the novels published from 1990 to 1999 this function is continued by the narrator-focalisers in their double actantial roles of mediating agents and participating actors in the story. The relationship between mediating agents of writing and actors in the fictional universe is no longer represented as a coincidental metafictional reflection on the nature and relevance of writing and story-telling, but rather the problems of writing in different settings are expressed in terms of personal relationships within the context of “family”: mother and daughter in *Age of Iron* (1990), father and son in *Master of Petersburg* (1994) and father and daughter in *Disgrace* (1999).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, social or political commentary or the tensions within a particular situation are also expressed in terms of personal relationships. So, for example, the “People’s Vengeance” is equated with the “Vengeance of the Sons” in the context of revolution in the Russia of 1869 as depicted in *The Master of Petersburg*.

Given the fact that it is through such personal or personalised relationships that Coetzee channels the reflection on the relevance of writing, which simultaneously constitutes the “devious discourse” whereby commentary on the current South African situation is offered, I shall in this paper focus on both the typification and the individualisation of literary character in the abovementioned texts.<sup>4</sup>

## **2 Continuation of Friday’s Role as Outcast and Freedom Fighter in *Age of Iron***

The outcome of the extensive metafictional reflection on the writing process, extending over three sections of *Foe*, culminates in the insight that the slave, Friday, is central to writing and, in fact, that Friday’s story is the only story worth telling. The manner in which Friday’s different roles are developed throughout the text, remains pivotal to an understanding of both Coetzee’s reflection on writing or the art of story-telling and his channelling of penetrating social commentary through different spokespersons in his latest novels. It follows that answers to questions such as “To whom is the actantial role of Friday assigned?” or, “Who is telling his story to whom and for what reason?” are relevant to an understanding of Coetzee’s engagement with the worlds of which he writes. Indeed, as will become clear in the ensuing

analysis, the key to Coetzee's assessment of his environment, and all the forces shaping it, be they individual, social or political, lies in an understanding of the above-mentioned questions in their various manifestations in the novels following on the explicitly metafictional text, *Foe*.

The narrator in *Foe* reflects on the substance of stories, stressing the artificial constructedness of tales of adventure in the lament, "Alas, will the day ever arrive when we can make a story without strange circumstances?" (Coetzee 1986: 67). In *Age of Iron*, however, the substance of stories would appear to highlight the ugly reality of personal and communal suffering resulting from the cultivation of violence situated within a specific time and space instead of the romanticised "truth" of "strange circumstances" related in classic travellers' tales of adventure. Despite the apparent thematic difference, the interdependence between the texts can be traced in terms of central actantial roles in the two novels, focusing particularly on the extent to which different aspects of the role of Friday, who matures in *Foe* from mute and mutilated slave to a possible source of writing, are continued in the roles of Elizabeth Curren (story-teller), Vercueil (outcast and companion) and Bheki and his friends (freedom fighters) in *Age of Iron*.<sup>5</sup>

In Coetzee's writing, the reader has to consider not only the different functions of narrative mediating agents and characters, but often also the way in which the same spokesperson or character may embody a number of roles transgressing designated functions. For this reason Margolin's (1990) redefinition of traditional typologies, in which both literary and social or psychological considerations are incorporated, may serve as a convenient point of departure for analysing Coetzee's depiction of narrators or characters and for tracing the continuation of actantial roles and functions in the novels under discussion. According to Margolin the boundary line between literary stereotypes and life-world models is dynamic and often blurred, "as patterns constantly wander both ways, especially in the mass media, where actual individuals are often seen in literary terms and vice versa" (1990: 464). Accordingly, he offers the following definition of "type":

Where "type" indicates a[n] LC (ie "literary character") who embodies either a recurrent literary pattern/stereotype or a social or psychological model occurring in a society's encyclopedia and supposed to represent in an exhaustive manner a property syndrome that is widespread in human society. Examples for the former are the clown, the fool, the sentimental lover or suffering artist. For the second, the bored suburban housewife, retarded child, fanatic revolutionary, or greedy stockbroker.

(Margolin 1990: 464)

When comparing the texts *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990) it is useful to keep in mind the different content and settings of the novels. The first constitutes a sustained contemplation of writing by means of a

recontextualisation of Daniel Defoe's eighteenth-century tale of Robinson Crusoe shipwrecked on a distant island and with only the black slave, Friday, for company. The second, however, tells the story of Elizabeth Curren's terminal illness and death with only the derelict Vercueil as a comfort of sorts; it also records her observation of the violence and its results in the political and social upheaval which was prevalent in Cape Town during the late 1980s.

Two aspects of the depiction of Friday in *Foe* are relevant to an understanding of the continuation of Friday's actantial role in *Age of Iron*: the process of equalisation between Susan Barton and Friday, which underpins his transition from submissive slave to silent companion; and the impossibility of communicating with the mute Friday, which not only makes him susceptible to narrative manipulation, but which also highlights the limitations inherent in writing. These different aspects result in Friday's actantial role being enacted by different representatives in *Age of Iron*: the social outcast, Vercueil, fulfils the role of companion to the narrator, while representatives of the black community signify different aspects of Friday's role as suppressed slave: the exploited workers, the victimised poor and the militant youths exemplifying the "new generation". There is also a sense in which Friday's body, as a site for future narrative exploration, is continued in the focus on both the terminal illness of the first-person narrator and the numerous deaths of especially black youths recorded in the novel.

The fact that the role of companion to a mediating agent of narrative is filled by the comparable actantial roles of outcast (Friday in *Foe*) and derelict (Vercueil in *Age of Iron*) exemplifies a favourite narrative strategy employed by Coetzee, namely that of subjecting the narrative agent (narrator or writer) to a levelling process whereby he or she has to accept a representative from a lower class as a companion in a personal relationship. In a reversal of established social roles, such a levelling process normally results in the narrative agent gradually maturing towards an understanding and appreciation of different sets of values. In *Foe* the relationship between the female narrator, Susan Barton, and the savage or slave, Friday, is marked by a levelling process which culminates in their shared actantial role of gypsies roaming the English countryside as filthy outcasts of society. Surprisingly, this results in a reevaluation of one of the supposed strongholds of civilisation, namely cleanliness. Similarly, in *Age of Iron*, the narrator, Elizabeth Curren, as the ailing representative of a privileged white class, has to shed a distaste for uncleanness in her relationship with the "smelly vagrant", Vercueil, whom she eventually comes to accept as a companion, and through whose eyes she is led to discover the meaning of real suffering and the spirit of genuine caring. And it is only once she succeeds in overcoming her distaste of the physically unclean and disabled Vercueil with his crooked fingers, dirty fingernails, smelly feet and unclean underwear, that she is able to perceive him in his actantial roles as angel, messenger and even (caring) lover. He qualifies for this role of accompanying her on her last journey towards death

as Elizabeth Curren eventually realises, precisely because the helplessness and humiliation of the terminally ill can be equated with the helplessness and suffering of the outcast:

There is something degrading about the way it all ends – degrading not only to us but to the idea we have of ourselves, of humankind. *People living in dark bedrooms, in their own mess, helpless. People lying in hedges in the rain. You will not understand this, yet. Vercueil will.*

(Coetzee 1990: 128; my italics)

The derelict Vercueil's actantial role of companion is, however, not exhausted by the function of an angel sent to accompany Elizabeth Curren during the last stages of her illness; it also comprises the function of lover central to his mediating function for the process of writing itself. This mediating function consists not only of his role as chosen messenger for delivering the letters to her daughter after her death, but also extends to his role as listener, as the narrator eventually realises that without having first spoken to him, it would have been impossible to have written at all:

He watches but does not judge. Always a faint haze of alcohol about him. Alcohol, that softens, preserves. *Mollificans*. That helps us to forgive. He drinks and makes allowances. His life all allowances. He, Mr V, to whom I speak. Speak and then write. Speak in order to write. While to the rising generation, who do not drink, I cannot speak, can only lecture. Their hands clean, their fingernails clean. The new puritans, holding to the rule, holding up the rule. Abhorring alcohol, that softens the rule, dissolves iron. Suspicious of all that is idle, yielding, roundabout. Suspicious of *devious discourse*, like this.

(Coetzee 1990: 75; my italics)

If the depiction of the equalising process in the relationship between the narrator and the derelict sent to fulfil the roles of angel, messenger and lover suggests that sociopolitical commentary is by definition devious and that it can only be understood in terms of what it entails to be destitute, idle and poor, then the more obvious continuation of Friday's role in the representatives of the black community offers a much more direct commentary of the South African situation in the late 1980s.

Here it is important to consider the implications of Friday's characterisation in terms of mutilation, slavery, loss and worship. The actantial role of submissive slave dramatises an ability to serve unselfishly and with devotion, regardless of its relevance to the labour. In *Foe* this labour consists in helping Cruso by carrying stones with which to build his terraces. In *Age of Iron* the inequalities between whites and blacks are defined in terms of the tasks they have to carry out on a daily basis as described in the following scene:

I thought of all the men across the breadth of South Africa who, while I sat gazing out of the window, were killing chickens, moving earth, barrowful upon barrowful; of all the women sorting oranges, sewing buttonholes. Who would ever count them, the spadefuls, the oranges, the buttonholes, the chickens? A universe of labour, a universe of counting: like sitting in front of a clock all day, killing the seconds as they emerged, counting one's life away.

(Coetzee 1990: 41)

It should be clear that the social commentary on a system which favours unfair labour practices, is unambiguously depicted in the continuation of Friday's actantial role as a slave, because it draws attention to the plight of a whole class of people imprisoned by monotonous and never-ending tasks.

If the continuation of Friday's role as slave serves as a strategy whereby sociopolitical commentary regarding labour practices may be relayed, then his double mutilation (mute and castrated) may be read as an indication that Bheki and John, as the militant representatives of the "new generation", would remain uncommunicative and distant in their encounters with the elderly narrator, and therefore outside the scope of her story.<sup>6</sup> This explains why Coetzee, despite the fact that he does not flinch from addressing the horror of the deaths of countless youths in township violence, nevertheless refrains from speaking on their behalf, or trying to tell their stories.

True to his reputation as a story-teller par excellence, the varied continuation of Friday's role suggests that sociopolitical commentary will of necessity remain "devious". This is so because the mediating function of writing is situated in a narrative agent who is unacceptable to the representatives of the black community. As the companion forced upon her during her last journey, Vercueil is deliberately differentiated from more obvious substitutes for Friday – he is not black, and therefore clearly not part of the "struggle" depicted by the militant youths. He is thus on the other side of the divide separating the stories of suffering and death as these are depicted, respectively, in the narrator's highly individual experience of her own impending death, and the countless deaths, mostly reflected as statistics only, in the black townships.

The nature of the "devious discourse" through which social commentary is relayed, becomes even more explicit in a comparison of the roles of the female narrators in the two novels. The elaborate dramatisation of feminist reappraisals of classic tales in *Foe* provides Coetzee with an opportunity to demonstrate the intensely private, subjective and essentially limited and limiting quality of writing in *Age of Iron*. In the latter novel the elderly female narrator records the circumstances of the last stages of her terminal illness, together with the intervening outside "deaths" impinging on her privacy, in a diary addressed to an absent daughter. After having witnessed the corpses of Bheki and his friends whose deaths had been caused by township violence and police brutality, the responsibility of the narrator-focaliser is expressed as follows:



I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the story-teller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here in these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain.

(Coetzee 1990: 95)

However, it is a responsibility that can only be expressed in her “own words”, as the narrator states in a dialogue with a black intellectual when asked to express an opinion on the violence. This defence is simultaneously a refusal to speak on behalf of the victims of political violence. Taken on its own, the reluctance to offer an opinion about the causes of the communal suffering might be interpreted as insensitivity or indifference to the plight of the countless victims of political violence in the black townships. However, read against the elaborate exploration of the possibilities and limitations of writing in *Foe*, it becomes clear that Elizabeth Curren’s position is informed by humility rather than indifference. This position of humility contrasts sharply with the pretensions of the feminist narrator in *Foe*: one could say that whereas the female focaliser and feminist narrator in *Foe* vainly attempts to write a “true” account of the “story of the island”, and, even more pretentiously, in the process also tries to give voice to Friday, by contrast the elderly dying narrator in the later novel does not wish to record anything but her own private suffering, but in the process unwittingly becomes a reliable recorder of the terrible “truth” which underpins the horrific events comprising the stories of countless “Fridays” in *Age of Iron*.

### **3 Continuation of Friday’s Role in the Mediating Agents of Writing and Revolution in The Master of Petersburg**

Although Coetzee chose a Russian context for his next novel, thus again situating his text, as he did with *Foe*, beyond the borders of South Africa, and although the “age of iron” is replaced by “an age of acting, an age of disguise” (Coetzee 1994: 195), there are important ways in which the story and stories of both *Foe* and *Age of Iron* are continued and developed in *The Master of Petersburg*. Whereas *Age of Iron* deals with ways and means whereby the elderly dying female narrator, Elizabeth Curren, can ensure that the account of her “private struggle” with death in the form of a diary will reach her daughter after her death, in *The Master of Petersburg* the primary story deals with the elderly male narrator’s quest to secure the “private papers” of his deceased stepson, which he considers to be the inheritance to which he is entitled as it represents his son’s “word to me” (Coetzee 1994: 136). And whereas the conclusion to *Foe* suggests that the dead body of Friday might yield a new story, in *The Master of Petersburg* the primary story is woven around the father’s desperate attempts to recapture some contact with his son

by, for example, prostrating himself on his grave, donning his white suit and retracing his last steps amongst his revolutionary friends while staying on as a lodger in the same room which Pavel had rented before his sudden and mysterious demise. As in *Age of Iron*, private grief becomes entangled with and ultimately redefined by outside events, so that what should have been a story of interiority, a contracted world “within his breast” (Coetzee 1994: 22), despite itself, is shaped into a vehicle whereby commentary on the imminent replacement of the old order by means of revolutionary change for the sake of “the people” in the Russia of the nineteenth century, could be relayed. The extent to which the private cause becomes, against its own inclinations, a vehicle for political propaganda, becomes clear to the narrator when he realises that his son’s death was only a pretext to lure him to Petersburg to assist the revolutionary cause by issuing a statement endorsing the alternative view of how Pavel had reportedly been killed by the police:

A trap, a devilish trap. He is not, after all, a figure from the wings inconveniently intruding into a quarrel between his stepson and Sergei Nechaev the anarchist. Pavel’s death was merely the bait to lure him from Dresden to Petersburg. He has been the quarry all the time. He has been lured out of hiding, and now Nechaev has pounced and has him by the throat.

(Coetzee 1994: 203)

Upon finally reading Pavel’s papers and endeavouring to rewrite his story, he nevertheless realises his responsibility as a writer destined to record events relating to a specific time and place:

I am not here in Russia in this time of ours to live a life free of pain. I am required to live – what shall I call it? – a Russian life: a life inside Russia, or with Russia inside me, and whatever Russia means. It is not a fate I can evade.

(Coetzee 1994: 221)

The manner in which private grief is arrested by outside events manifests itself most clearly, in this novel, by the way in which Pavel’s so-called “private papers” are viewed by different characters: while the father looks on them as a cherished inheritance which is and should remain essentially private, the police officer, Maximov, scrutinises not only the letters and the diary, but even the story for traces of information about Pavel’s assumed association with Nechaev, the leader of a revolutionary movement. In a passage reminiscent of similar occasions in *Age of Iron* where Elizabeth Curren resents the intrusion of strangers in her house, the police officer, Maximov, ironically refers to the obligation to respect and defend the right of the deceased “to a certain decent privacy”; and the prospect “that after our decease a stranger will come sniffing through our possessions, opening drawers, breaking seals, reading intimate letters” would be painful (Coetzee 1994: 39). However, he poses the question of whether or not a story ought to

be considered a private matter, hinting at more sinister uses to which fictional writing could possibly be put.

It should be clear that Maximov and Dostoyevsky as readers of Pavel's papers, exemplify the two functions to which the papers could be put: scrutiny with a view to recovering hidden references of a revolutionary nature by the police officer, as opposed to reading with the intention of cannibalising his son's story by rewriting it into his own story by the "master" author. Clearly, then, where the father's mission is to reclaim his son's papers, Maximov's questions concern the reasons for and the circumstances of Pavel's death, be it suicide or murder. Similarly, where the revolutionary, Nechaev's, intention is to reveal Pavel's role in the "people's" struggle for equality and freedom, the father, while desperately trying to hold on to the illusion of a loving son, suddenly realises that his son's resentment against his marriage to a woman of his son's generation can be interpreted as a private contest underlying revolution:

Not the People's Vengeance but the Vengeance of the Sons: is that what underlies revolution – fathers envying their sons their women, sons scheming to rob their fathers' cashboxes?

(Coetzee 1994: 108)

When considering the interdependence of writing and death, more particularly the intricate link between writing and a dead body, it becomes quite clear that Pavel in *The Master of Petersburg* is an obvious substitute for Friday in *Foe*. Towards the end of the text the responsibility of writing in this regard is defined as follows:

The task left to me: to gather the board, put together the scattered parts. Poet, lyre-player, enchanter, lord of resurrection, that is what I am called to be. And the truth? Stiff shoulders humped over the writing-table, and the ache of a heart slow to move. A tortoise heart.

(Coetzee 1994: 153)

However, Friday's role is not only continued in Pavel as an object of writing, but it also becomes apparent from the various substitutes doubling for Pavel in the text, so that he eventually represents diverging actantial roles ranging from prodigal son and beggar to revolutionary and writer. These different actantial roles ascribed to Pavel reveal the complexity of the relationship between father and stepson, since attempts to reclaim the memory of his son entail coming to terms with different identities and role reversals in the course of the text. This complex relationship also concerns, in the final instance, the function of writing and the role of the "master" in reconstructing the story from the "private papers" left behind by Pavel.

If Pavel is an obvious substitute for Friday, it is interesting that Pavel himself, or the memory of what used to be Pavel, is echoed in a number of

characters who all, one way or the other, claim the father's understanding and empathy: Matryona, the child (extended to the three hungry children in the basement); Nechaev, the revolutionary; Ivanov, the beggar; and even the abandoned dog<sup>7</sup> to whose call he heeds one night when listening for Pavel's voice. This merging of identities is complicated by the fact that the father tries in vain to identify completely with Pavel, trying to imagine, for example, Pavel's last moments, and seeking to grasp "the moment before extinction when the blood still courses, the heart still beats" (Coetzee 1994: 53). One of the reasons why he latches on to Pavel's landlady is because he sees her as a "conductress of souls" (Coetzee 1994: 139) through whom he would be able to reach his son, suggesting that she might fulfil the role of accompanying angel assigned to the derelict, Vercueil, in *Age of Iron*.

Attempts to recapture the image of his son are, however, continually being frustrated, in that he is confronted again and again with any number of living substitutes for his dead son. Through the assessing gaze of the male narrator, the reader is first introduced to Matryona, the landlady's young daughter, presumably representing the innocence of childhood, yet unleashing powerful desires in the narrator. Dominating the story to a large extent, because the private mission to secure Pavel's papers becomes an investigation into the traces of insurrection and revolution, is the figure of Nechaev, initially typified by the narrator as "a conspirator and an insurrectionist ... who stands first and foremost for the violent overthrow of all the institutions of society in the name of a principle of equality – equal happiness for all or, if not that, then equal misery for all" (Coetzee 1994: 35-36). It would appear that the equalisation process which, in both *Foe* and *Age of Iron* is expressed in terms of personal relationships between the female narrator, Susan Barton, and the savage Friday on the one hand and the female narrator, Elizabeth Curren, and the derelict, Vercueil on the other, is here popularised, in that it pertinently involves *classes* of people rather than individuals. Contrasting with the "people" representing the suppressed, for example, are the classes of people to be executed following the revolution, including "the entire higher judiciary and all officers of the police and officials of the Third Section of the rank of captain and higher" (Coetzee 1994: 36).

Despite his furious denial to the investigating police officer that Pavel could in any way have been associated with Nechaev, the narrator, in the role of the mourning father, finds that when he wishes to conjure up Pavel's face that it is replaced instead by that "of a young man with heavy brows and a sparse beard and a thin, tight mouth .... His skin is cratered with scars that stand out livid in the cold. 'Go away!' he says, trying to dismiss the image. But it will not go. 'Pavel!' he whispers, conjuring his son in vain" (Coetzee 1994: 49). This happens several times when he deliberately tries to conjure up the face of his son, only to find that it has taken the form "not of Pavel but of the other one, Sergei Nechaev" (Coetzee 1994: 60). So persistent is this vision that it even invades his memory of the seven-year-old Pavel running about in the

snow, and standing to one side, a “troll, a misshapen little creature, red-haired, red-bearded, no taller than a child of three or four”, which, he realises, is an image of “Nechaev again, Nechaev grown small, Nechaev in Siberia haunting the beginnings of his son! What does the vision mean?” (Coetzee 1994: 143). What it signifies, apparently, is Nechaev’s complete usurpation of Pavel’s role, so that in their final journey to the cellar, where the narrator is called upon to put his writing at the service of “the people”, Nechaev is confident that they will not attract the attention of the police, since “...who is going to look twice at a couple like us, father and son out for a walk?” (Coetzee 1994: 175). The final step in this process of Nechaev replacing his son, is achieved when the narrator identifies with Nechaev, embracing him in the same way as he had embraced the mound of earth marking his son’s grave:

He takes a step forward and with what seems to him the strength of a giant folds Nechaev to his breast. Embracing the boy, trapping his arms at his sides, breathing in the sour smell of his carbuncular flesh, sobbing, laughing, he kisses him on the left cheek and on the right. Hip to hip, breast to breast, he stands locked against him.

(Coetzee 1994: 190)

Thus in this text, Friday’s role is dominated by that of the revolutionary other who is described, in some detail, in a pamphlet recalled by the narrator, as a being devoid of all individuality and totally absorbed by his role as revolutionary:

The revolutionary is a doomed man .... He has no interests, no feelings, no attachments, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed in a single and total passion: revolution. In the depths of his being he has cut all links with the civil order, with law and morality. He continues to exist in society only in order to destroy it.

(Coetzee 1994: 60-61)

In tandem with the strategy of channelling social commentary through personal relationships, the nature of revolution itself is explained as consisting of more than fathers and sons at war with each other:

Revolution is the end of everything old, including fathers and sons. It is the end of successions and dynasties. And it keeps renewing itself, if it is true revolution. With each generation the old revolution is overturned and history starts again.

(Coetzee 1994: 189)

Notably, part of the overturning, according to Nechaev, will consist in a reversal of roles, where “the peasants will be the teachers and the professors will be the students” (Coetzee 1994: 189). However, Nechaev himself is subsequently perceived by the narrator as an imposter as soon as he realises the significance of his disguise by which he seeks to model himself on a

wrathful Christ in his claim of speaking on behalf of the people: “Even the costume is right: not a dress but a robe. An imitator; a pretender, a blasphemer” (Coetzee 1994: 103). Nevertheless, Nechaev claims for himself the ability of heroic acting – a quality that the male narrator’s counterpart in *Age of Iron* had to confess to as lacking in her life devoted to being a “good” person, while the times required heroism of the kind that Nechaev contrasts with the so-called revolutionaries of a previous generation:

Perhaps you used once to know, but now all you can do is mumble and shake your head and cry. That is soft. We aren’t soft, we aren’t crying, and we aren’t wasting our time on clever talk. There are things that can be talked about and things that can’t, that just have to be done. We don’t talk, we don’t cry, we don’t endlessly think *on the one hand* and *on the other hand*, we just *do!*

(Coetzee 1994: 104)

The necessity to act is extended to the oppressed, since “people who are suffering don’t need to talk, they need to act” (Coetzee 1994: 199), consequently the task of the revolutionary, and by extension the author who puts his writing at the disposal of the revolution, is “to make them act”:

If we can provoke them to act, the battle is half won. They may be smashed, there may be new repression, but that will just create more suffering and more outrage and more desire for action. That’s how things work. Besides, if some are suffering, what justice is there till all are suffering?

(Coetzee 1994: 200)

Thus the levelling process has developed from identification with poverty, to coercing everyone into suffering. This introduces a destructive element into the condition of being suppressed, which is also revealed in Nechaev’s reading of the cannibalistic thoughts harboured by the starving children in the basement, as well as Matryona’s role in aiding the Finnish girl to commit suicide, showing how innocence is corrupted by the revolutionary cause.

Similarly, the actantial role of beggar is tainted by Ivanov’s deceitfulness of a beggar doubling as police spy. Like Nechaev, the tramp Ivanov also serves as a substitute for his dead son, dogging his steps and eventually eliciting some caring when he gives him shelter and allows him to sleep in his son’s bed. And like Vercueil, in belonging to the class of derelicts, he is not viewed in a positive light by young revolutionaries, so that it becomes quite clear that he is to be distinguished from the “people”, who, in the eyes of Nechaev constitute “peasants and workers”, but not “rootless persons” (Coetzee 1994: 121). Nechaev’s rejection of Ivanoff sheds light on Vercueil’s rejection by Bheki and his friends in *Age of Iron*, in that the inherent untrustworthiness of the “rootless person” is exposed:

The people are made up of peasants and workers. Ivanov had no ties with the people: he wasn't even recruited from them. He was an absolutely rootless person, and a drunkard too, easy prey, easily turned against the people.

(Coetzee 1994: 121)

The function of watcher or police spy is a new aspect introduced into the role of derelict or vagabond, so that after his death the police officer when interrogating the narrator, questions Ivanof's label as beggar:

"But he was not what he seemed to be, was he?"

"Do you mean a beggar?"

"He was not a beggar, was he?"

(Coetzee 1994: 145)

Even so, Ivanov, together with an abandoned dog, represents "that least thing" which has to be properly negotiated before Pavel can be reached. In the following passage it is suggested that beggarmen and abandoned dogs could also be substitutes for his son:

*It is not my son, it is just a dog*, he protests. *What is it to me?* Yet even as he protests he knows the answer: Pavel will not be saved till he has freed the dog and brought it into his bed, brought *the least thing*, the beggarmen and the beggarwomen too, and much else he does not yet know of: and even then there will be no certainty.

(Coetzee 1994: 82)

In his encounter with Ivanov, the beggar giving off "a smell of putrid fish", he thinks of him as a prodigal son that has to be "embraced, welcomed into the home, feasted" (Coetzee 1994: 84). And although, in Ivanov's questioning of the circumstances of his son's death, he should have become aware of the man's role as a "watcher" sent to spy on him by the police, and consequently murdered by Nechaev or one of his gang, he is quite explicitly equated with Vercueil, Elizabeth Curren's companion in *Age of Iron*, in his role as angel:

... why should it be his task to see Ivanov? Even if, in the present charade, Ivanov is the one playing the part of God's angel – an angel only by virtue of being no angel at all – why should it be his role to seek out the angel?

(Coetzee 1994: 92)

It should be clear that, as is the case in *Age of Iron*, different aspects of Friday's role are continued in a number of actors in *The Master of Petersburg*. It remains to consider the reversal of the roles of master and slave in *Foe*, where Friday towards the end of the novel usurps the role of author in donning Foe's robe, sitting at his desk and becoming the author of his own story. The narrative voice in *The Master of Petersburg* is assigned to the famous Russian author, Dostoyevsky. The authority of the writing is, however, undercut by

his roles as an imposter assuming another identity when trying to reclaim Pavel's papers and an ageing person plagued by improper desires and susceptible to epileptic attacks, reminiscent of a fall into eternal darkness and death. Even so, the title of the text is evoked when Anna Sergejevna, in her role of mediator between him and his dead son, stresses the power of writing:

"You are an artist, a master," she says. "It is for you, not for me, to bring him back to life."

*Master*. It is a word he associates with metal – with the tempering of swords, the casting of bells. A master blacksmith, a foundry-master. *Master of life*: strange term. But he is prepared to reflect on it. He will give a home to any word, no matter how strange, no matter how stray, if there is a chance it is an anagram for Pavel.

(Coetzee 1994: 141)

What strikes the reader here, is not only the equation between writing and craftsmanship, but also the analogy between the actantial roles of master and slave in *Foe*. As is the case in a continuous switching of identities throughout the text, the source of "mastery" is questioned in the narrator's encounters with Nechaev, in that he is unsure as to "whether he is playing with Nechaev or Nechaev with him" (Coetzee 1994: 190).

The ending of the novel would suggest, however, that mastery consists in the ability to recreate a story as a calculated act of *betrayal*. This startling revelation of what it entails to carry the burden of writing can be traced by means of the personal relationships the male narrator entertains in the course of the novel. As in the previous novels, the actantial role of lover is evoked as a calculated means of achieving a particular goal. The landlady, Anna Sergejevna, becomes his lover because the narrator believes that she is the medium through which he will be able to reach out to his son, enabling him to pass "into darkness and into the waters where his son floats among the other drowned" (Coetzee 1994: 58). This relationship between "those old enough to recognise in their lovemaking the first foretaste of death" (Coetzee 1994: 63); he a "cracked instrument" and she "not a young woman; not an innocent surrendering herself" (Coetzee 1994: 55) also has an ulterior motive, however, in that it functions to redirect his unseemly desire for her daughter, who is viewed by both the mother and the narrator as an innocent child.

Thinking about the "intimate smells" of the mother, for example, he immediately has to ask himself whether they are passed on from mother to daughter and whether "[l]oving the mother, one is destined to long for the daughter too?" (Coetzee 1994: 128). Despite the fact that his desire for the child never materialises into something concrete, it nevertheless introduces an element of shame into personal relationships, associating sexual desire of a certain kind with violation and violence, which nevertheless has to be accommodated in his writing:



He is aware, even as it unfolds, that this is a passage he will not forget and may even one day rework into his writing. A certain shame passes over him, but it is superficial and transitory. First in his writing and now in his life, shame seems to have lost its power, its place taken by a blank and amoral passivity that shrinks from no extreme.

(Coetzee 1994: 24)

Shame and betrayal underlie not only the act of writing itself, but also its possible use as a political instrument. So, for example, Pavel's death and the narrator's loss could be functional in aiding the cause of the revolution:

We must use his death to light a flame. He would agree with me. He would urge you to put your anger to good use.

(Coetzee 1994: 179)

Committed writing, in Nechaev's terms, therefore entails not only reporting, but also action, as becomes clear in his challenge to the narrator: "Isn't it time you tried to *share* the existence of the oppressed instead of sitting at home and writing about them and counting your money?" (Coetzee 1994: 186).

But also the quest for obtaining his son's private papers, presumably to immortalise him by telling his story, is exposed as an inescapable act of betrayal, because the "poetry" that could have brought back his son, has turned into an act, which signifies:

No longer a matter of listening for the lost child calling from the dark stream, no longer a matter of being faithful to Pavel when all have given him up. Not a matter of fidelity at all. On the contrary, a matter of betrayal – betrayal of love first of all, and then of Pavel and the mother and child and everyone else. *Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use, to be gripped to him and fall with him.

(Coetzee 1994: 235)

And it is this revelation of writing as betrayal and perversion which paves the way for the exploration of *disgrace* in Coetzee's latest novel.

#### **4 Culmination of Friday's Role in *Disgrace* – Reading the Current South African Cultural, Social and Political Landscape**

Published in 1999, Coetzee's most recent novel, *Disgrace*, continues to explore important trends in the three texts preceding it, but differs from its predecessors by being the first novel published *after* 1994, the watershed year in the history of South African politics, which witnessed the transition from white minority rule to a "democratically" elected and predominantly black

government. This means, of course, that the reader is confronted with the immediate *results* of the change of power, which, surprisingly did not necessitate a revolution, but could be settled by means of negotiations between the then government and the representatives of formerly banned political parties. Nevertheless, given the lengthy “struggle” against the former apartheid regime, the exploration of revolutionary change in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) could hardly have constituted a more appropriate preparation for a reading of the individual, social and political impact of the changes instituted in South Africa after 1994. As in the previous novels, social commentary is relayed through personal relationships characterised by role reversals, which in turn may presuppose some kind of levelling process. What distinguishes the latest novel from its immediate predecessors, however, is the fact that improper behaviour and the transgression of moral and social codes are justified by the narrator by lodging an appeal to the “rights of desire”; and what sets apart the violent rape of his daughter by three black men, is its explanation in terms of a “rightful” vengeance executed against white people with a view to bringing about equality for all. Thus Lucy, in an argument with her father, tries to rationalise the incident in terms of a redress of past and present inequalities: “They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves” (Coetzee 1999: 158).

The narrator, a middle-aged lecturer conscious of his physical decline and diminished attractiveness for the opposite sex, deliberately engages in shameful behaviour by sexually harassing a female student in his class. This leads to shame and disgrace which eventually result, when the university authorities are informed of his illicit relationship with a minor, in his dismissal from the university and his subsequent move to the country, where his daughter, cast in the role of rural frontier’s woman, provides him with shelter in her home. Although the complaint lodged against David Lurie is one of sexual harassment, the fact that the student sleeps in his daughter’s bed while at his house, coupled with the difference of over thirty years in age, suggests that the sexual transgression against her should be viewed as one of abuse rather than harassment. It would appear that the improper desire the elderly narrator of *The Master of Petersburg* harbours for the daughter of his landlady, and which is imagined by him as a violation of the innocent, is enacted by his counterpart in *Disgrace* in the actual abuse of a young female student intimating his daughter, thereby signalling the more serious offence of violence against a child. Again, as is the case in the previous novels, individual or private experience is redefined by the ugly reality of general criminal behaviour, when the narrator’s transgression is mirrored by the brutal rape of his daughter by three black men.

These central incidents in the novel provide Coetzee with an opportunity to relay commentary on particular conditions pertaining to a transformed

society. As a prelude to his fall from grace, the narrator has the chance to describe his dissatisfaction with the effects of the state-instituted transformation of tertiary institutions, which resulted in the “Cape Town University College” being rechristened the “Cape Technical University” and which necessitated a change in his role as an academic from “professor of modern languages” to “adjunct professor of communications”. That this is typical of the grand plans designed by the new rulers, becomes clear when he refers to the closing down of Classics and Modern Languages “as part of the great rationalization” (Coetzee 1999: 3), and when he describes his discomfort with feeling increasingly “out of place” in “this transformed and, to his mind, *emasculated* institution of learning” (Coetzee 1999: 4, my italics). More serious than a diminishing of academic offerings is the apparent breakdown of moral values and social codes and the resultant tolerance of criminality in the current South African situation – while sexual harassment in the white community is properly judged and punished by the university authorities, violent rape signalling the pent-up hate and consequential vengeance of representatives of the formerly disadvantaged black community against representatives of the previously privileged white community, is apparently explainable in terms of a redistribution of wealth and accepted as incidental to the high levels of crime currently characterising the South African society. Thus, one can say that the private incidence of transgressive behaviour by the elderly narrator is sharply brought into context by the rape of his daughter by young representatives of the black community, of which one is described as being “merely a boy”.

As in the previous novels, the actantial role of lover is evoked in the narrator’s relationships with a number of female characters, ranging from a prostitute, to a student thirty years his junior, to a middle-aged and exceedingly unattractive person in charge of a welfare clinic for animals. While the first and second typify a selfish indulgence of desire, the third exemplifies a relationship where a levelling process is indicated. It is a process that requires both an awareness of the humiliation brought about by age and an acknowledgement of the redeeming qualities of a physically repulsive companion. Both the switching of partners and the allowances he is forced to make are, as in the previous novel, intimately linked to the mortifying limitations accompanying old age. Contemplating his obsessive sexual behaviour after the termination of his regular encounters with Soraya, the prostitute, he realises that

[h]e ought to give up, retire from the game. At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most graceful of solutions, but then ageing is not a graceful business. A clearing of the decks, at least, so that one can turn one’s mind to the proper business of the old: preparing to die.

(Coetzee 1999: 9)

From mildly embarrassing encounters of mutual consent, he progresses, in his switching of partners, to a deliberate exploitation of his position as lecturer, to first seduce and then coerce Melanie, his student, to subject herself to an act described as “[n]ot rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Coetzee 1999: 25). It is after this encounter that Melanie comes to his house of her own free will and is put up in his daughter’s room, resulting in a confusion of roles, as the narrator wonders whether he should view her as mistress or daughter, depending on what she is trying to be and what she is offering him.

His subsequent fall from grace, following the trial by the university authorities, is explained in terms of a violation of privacy: “Private life is public business” (Coetzee 1999: 66), suggesting that despite the violation of trust, he might in some way have become a victim of circumstances. The last relationship, described as encounters executed “without passion but without distaste either” (Coetzee 1999: 150), because Bev Shaw’s physical unattractiveness is stressed, requires a levelling process, whereby he has to overcome his dislike of her appearance to realise that she is fulfilling the role of angel because by escorting the animals that have to be put down, she provides a comforting presence during their last conscious moments: “To each, in what will be its last minutes, Bev gives her fullest attention, stroking it, talking to it, easing its passage”; while “he is the one who holds the dog still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim” (Coetzee 1999: 142). This signals his acceptance of the role of dog-man, formerly fulfilled by Petrus on Lucy’s farm, before the dogs were shot during the rape incident. The preoccupation with dogs also signals a shift from a scrutiny of human bodies (Friday, Bheki and his friends, Pavel) to a focusing on the carcasses of animals. The final role of the narrator, therefore, is one where “[h]e saves the honour of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded” (Coetzee 1999: 146). Despite this negative perception of what he has become, his concern for the abandoned dogs explains precisely what it means to care for “that least thing”, exemplified by the imprisoned dog and all the “beggarmen and beggarwomen” in *The Master of Petersburg*.

Any positive outcome an equalisation process could have had, is destroyed by the devastating effect of the central scene in the novel: the rape of his daughter Lucy by three black men and the subsequent reversal of roles signalling the irreversible changes in the lives of the main role-players. It is significant that the rape scene, in particular, is described as being exemplary of the current South African society:

It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. Count yourself lucky to be a prisoner in the car at this moment, speeding away, or at the bottom of a donga with a bullet in your head. Count Lucy lucky too. Above all Lucy.

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go around, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them.

(Coetzee 1999: 98)

As a result of this incident, Lucy is forced to accept the protection of Petrus, the labourer who used to look after the dogs, but has since become a co-owner of the smallholding. This results in a reversal of the former master-slave relationship, in that Lucy becomes a tenant on Petrus's property; whereas Petrus advances from labourer to owner, where he can be "his own master" (Coetzee 1999: 114). More significantly, because of Lucy's pregnancy caused by the rape, Petrus usurps the role of substitute father for

[t]he gang of three. Three fathers in one. Rapists rather than robbers, Lucy called them – rapists cum taxgatherers roaming the area, attacking women, indulging their violent pleasures .... And now, lo and behold *the child!* Already he is calling it *the child* when it is no more than a worm in his daughter's womb. What kind of child can seed like this give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine?

(Coetzee 1999: 199)

This entails, of course, that David Lurie has to give up his imagined role of father and protector and is reduced to living quarters, at the back of the Animal Welfare Surgery, comparable to that of a homeless person with only the dogs destined "for the needle" as company. In these conditions he takes on his role as companion to the dogs, regarding it his duty to undertake the last journey himself and to dispose of their bodies in the cremation oven.

It should be clear that the culmination of Friday's role as evidenced in the reversal of roles brought about by incidents of abuse across the divide of age, gender or race, in Coetzee's latest novel offers devastating critique on the current South African situation. The actions by the "rapists cum taxcollectors" show that the formerly suppressed have turned into criminal oppressors "indulging their violent desires" and turning Lucy's story into their own and spreading it throughout the area. It is, in fact, due to their propagation and practice of violent crime that different role reversals are brought about. Any positive outcome of Petrus's transition from labourer and dog-man to owner and protector is undermined by the violent means whereby it was obtained. And any possible outcome of Lucy's acceptance of her new role as tenant on Petrus's property, is negated by the simple reality that she has no other choice if she wishes to avoid becoming just another casualty of criminal activities.

Even the redeeming factors of a state of humility, usually the outcome of an equalisation process, are undercut by the fact that human beggars have been replaced by abandoned dogs and that the self-assigned helper, the narrator, is powerless to rescue even one dog. The failure to do so, is significant because the mutilated dog, in its response to its caretaker's playing on the banjo, has taken over the role of mediating agent of creative expression, be it by means of language or music, suggesting that its destruction coincides with the end of writing:

He crosses the surgery. "Was that the last?" asks Bev Shaw.  
"One more."  
He opens the cage door. "Come," he says, bends, opens his arms.  
The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears.  
He does nothing to stop it. "Come."  
Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw.  
"Are you giving him up?"  
"Yes, I am giving him up."

(Coetzee 1999: 220)

In conclusion one may add that the complexity of Coetzee's reading of the current cultural, social and political landscape is, of course, linked to the fact that the narrator, who is responsible both for the rendering of the events and their interpretation, has himself been disgraced by transgressive and socially unacceptable behaviour. It seems as if, at the end of this novel, Coetzee has arrived at the conclusion that nothing is sacred; and that even acts of a seeming unselfish nature are subject to betrayal.

\* This article is an extended and revised version of a paper read at a symposium on Literature and Humanity in the Context of Globalisation held in Beijing, China, in August 2001.

## Notes

1. I have argued elsewhere (in Gräbe 1989) that the method of representing commentary in the form of a story or stories, extends also to a dramatised reflection on contemporary theoretical discourses such as feminism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction, while at the same time indulging in a constant reflection on the nature of narrativity. See Attwell's (1993: 3) definition of Coetzee's writing as representing a kind of "situational metafiction", underpinning the sustained analysis of "the relationship between *reflexivity* and *historicity*", intimating the cultural and political discourses of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.
2. Personal indications are usually not direct, but permeate the texts as fully integrated elements of a story. At the beginning of *Age of Iron* the dedication of

the novel includes initials and dates, possibly referring to the deaths of his parents and his own son, who died at the age of twenty-three as the result of a fall from a balcony. A reader aware of this tragedy, will inevitably think of *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) as the author's way of trying to come to terms with the untimely death of his own son. Similarly, a reader familiar with the autobiographical memoir *Boyhood*, published in 1997, will recognise the echoes of the father in *The Master of Petersburg* getting angry with Pavel "for something as trivial as sleeping late" (1994: 142) in the autobiographical description of the little boy forcing his mother to write notes that he was ill and could not go to school, because he found it difficult to get up in the morning.

3. I am not taking into account, here, the autobiographical text, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), although, as already noted above, one is tempted, given the autobiographical traces in the fictional texts and the fictionalisation of autobiography in *Boyhood*, to analyse the relationship between "reality" and "imagination" in a comparison with texts presented as different manifestations of "story-telling".
4. In defining the spokespersons and characters in Coetzee's texts in terms of their functionality as novelistic types capable of embodying different actantial roles, I rely on both the notions of actor and actant developed in structuralist narratology and on studies on the phenomenon of literary character in general. With regard to mediating narrative agents, I shall refer to the distinction between the functions of writing, telling and observing as these have been outlined and debated in narratological studies since Genette's (1980 and 1988) systematisation and reformulation of narrative theory and practice.
5. See my comparison (Gräbe 1993) of the two texts for a more detailed discussion of these issues. The difference of what is being contemplated in the two novels is also apparent from a comparison of their segmentation into four numbered sections – in the former the intricate staircased structure favours constant contemplation on the artificiality inherent in story-telling in that the "actual" adventure of Cruso and Friday shipwrecked on a desert island is seen from different perspectives in the ensuing segments dramatising the stories of the female narrator, Susan Barton; the "authentic" author, Foe; and, finally, the "actual" author, Coetzee. By contrast, the segmentation in *Age of Iron* shows how the "actual" story of the dying narrator, in the first and last segments of the novel, frames the terrible outside events dominating the middle sections, whereby the effects of violence in a volatile political society increasingly interrupt the narrator's story of a "private" struggle with illness and death.
6. David Attwell (1993: 108) notes that Friday's contextualisation is clearly rendered in his mutilation and lack of speech, since this seems to be Coetzee's "unique and uniquely South African" contribution to the "tradition of Robinsonades spawned by Defoe".

7. My colleague, Marianne de Jong, suggested that animals, such as the dog(s) in *Disgrace*, ought perhaps to be viewed as actors capable of fulfilling actantial roles in Coetzee's writing.

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