

# “Visiting Himself on Me” – The Angel, the Witness and the Modern Subject of Enunciation in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*

**Kay Sulk**

## **Summary**

In the particular historical locale of South Africa's late apartheid, J.M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* (1990) assumes a narrative position that, while fundamentally impeded by sociohistorical clusters, succeeds in articulating and subverting its own impediment. The essay seeks to account for the double bind of the novel's narrator, who finds herself simultaneously subjected to and outside of historical discourse, by designating the problem of postcolonial agency in the allegorical transition from the figure of the angel to that of the witness. To back up and elaborate on its claims, it reassesses modern subjectivity in light of the experience of racial and totalitarian violence. In this reassessment, it takes recourse to recent theories of cultural modernity by Homi K. Bhabha, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, which, however diverse, all rely on a concept of subjectivity based on acts of enunciation – not on what is said but on language taking place. The ultimate aim of the essay is to describe testimony, in a theoretical rather than in an empirical sense, as an ethical category of modern processes of subjectification.

## **Opsomming**

In die spesifieke historiese lokaliteit van Suid-Afrika se eertydse apartheid, neem J.M. Coetzee se roman *Age of Iron* (1990), 'n narratiewe posisie in wat, waar dit fundamenteel geïnterpreteer word deur sosio-historiese groeperings, dit daarin slaag om sy eie impedimente te artikuleer en omver te gooi. Hierdie artikel poog om die dubbele verknorsing van die roman se verteller te verklaar, wat haarself terselfdertyd onderwerp aan en buite die historiese diskoers bevind, deur die probleem van postkoloniale bemiddeling in die allegoriese oorgang van die figuur van die engel tot dié van die getuie uit te wys. Om op hierdie aansprake uit te brei en dit te rugsteun, word moderne subjektiwiteit in die lig van die ervaring van rasse- en totalitêre geweld hertakseer. In hierdie hertaksering maak die artikel gebruik van resente teorieë van kulturele moderniteit van Homi K. Bhabha, Michel Foucault en Giorgio Agamben, wat, alhoewel uiteenlopend, almal bou op 'n konsep van subjektiwiteit wat gebaseer is op uitsprake – nie op wat gesê word nie, maar op taal wat plaasvind. Die uiteindelige doel van die essay is om getuie te beskryf, in 'n teoretiese eerder as 'n empiriese sin, as 'n etiese kategorie van moderne prosesse van subjektivering.

## Introduction

The dubiously angelic vagrant Vercueil in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* comes as an uninvited visitor to the home of Elizabeth Curren, a dedicated scholar of the classics, dying of cancer. "[V]isiting himself on me" (Coetzee 1990: 4),<sup>1</sup> as she describes his appearance, he is her angel of death, her heraldic messenger *angelus*, a Hermes of sorts – yet, one who might not deliver the letter. For this is the task that Mrs Curren entrusts to this most unlikely fellow: to post, after her final breath, the painstaking notes about her dying days, written to her beloved daughter, who has left behind spiteful South Africa for the strange shores of an American exile. In that Vercueil allows address without compelling delivery – a genuinely contingent possibility – he bears witness to Elizabeth Curren's demise, as much as she, throughout her private ordeal, bears witness to the atrocious states-of-emergency of late apartheid.

While Elizabeth Curren struggles for and with the Western classics to gain a perspective on her despairing situation, Vercueil appears as the presumably coloured derelict of an equally anachronistic social order. Or so it seems. Is Coetzee's "age of iron" a regression to premodern times, its momentum a mere backward projection? Or does the novel stage a different temporal structure, a retroactive effect of signification that informs all modern cultural production? I would like to take up the novel's allegorical transition from the figure of the angel to that of the witness to accommodate two notions: the way in which Homi Bhabha sees "modernity [as being] about the historical construction of a specific position of historical enunciation and address [that] privileges those who 'bear witness', those who are subjected" (Bhabha 1994: 243); and the way Giorgio Agamben sees testimony as the ethical locus of enunciation within modern processes of subjectification (cf Agamben 1999: 137ff). What both Bhabha and Agamben dare us to think is whether the radical experience of racial and totalitarian violence does not force one to reassess the modern project. In the context of my paper – for to reassess modernity might be somewhat beyond the scope of what I can offer – this would mean to slightly shift the approach. Any insistence on a master/slave relation (Hegel) or mirror stage (Lacan) complies to a concept of subjectivity built on the split between consciousness, always double and determined by the Other, and cognition. This is, no doubt, the common and quintessential formulation of modern epistemology. What I would like to do, instead, is to slide modernity towards the ethics of a different kind of disjuncture: the one between subjectivity and the act of giving testimony.

Along the course of my argument, I will have to come to terms with the critique Bhabha offers of Michel Foucault's "complicity with the logic of the 'contemporaneous' of Western modernity" (Bhabha 1994: 248). What, nevertheless, promises to make this discussion possible and, indeed, quite valid, is

that both Bhabha and Foucault (at least in the reading Agamben offers) base their interrogation of modernity on the “subject of enunciation”. This critical nexus should allow me to negotiate race and literature within modern (nominal and subversive) cultural practices. In my conception of an enunciatory disruption, I will not attempt to realign Foucault and Bhabha through Agamben, for theirs are different projects. In fact, I will hardly be able to give a minute depiction of either one, for both are highly intricate projects. What I will attempt to unveil by reading Coetzee with Agamben is a quality of both Coetzee’s and Foucault’s thought maybe too easily neglected: to lay the ground for a subject of desubjectification.

### **A Classic for the Ages**

Written during the years 1986-1989, *Age of Iron* prompts us to read it as an allegory of the “interregnum”. Nadine Gordimer has keyed the term, adopting it from Antonio Gramsci, to designate the social upheaval of late apartheid. With Elizabeth Curren, something is dying and the new cannot be born. In her “old-fashioned ways”, a critical agenda and a liberal antagonism to the regime seem themselves moribund. The Gordimer allusion proves aptly suited when considering, as does Teresa Dovey convincingly (Dovey 1997: 47ff), that the Nobel Prize Laureate might have stood model for Coetzee’s protagonist, her change from a social-liberal to a more radical stance as well as her sheer refusal to depart from more orthodox narrative traditions. Derek Attridge brings to the point the most pertinent of common critical assumptions, namely that “Mrs Curren stands for the whole Western inheritance, its ethical and political language rendered suspect even as it forms itself into telling moral apothegms” (Attridge 1994a: 252). This poses two interrelated questions: in how far is Elizabeth Curren in a position to articulate this discrepancy, and what mode of articulation links her individual condition and fate to that of late apartheid society?

To label the confessional mode Elizabeth Curren engages in an allegory, would presuppose a simultaneous linkage and breakage of its analogy, here individual and collective fate, death and the silenced other in South African discourse. As always in Coetzee’s novels, the allegorical reflection in all its irony is inherent to the narration itself: Elizabeth Curren’s insights into the nature of her demise are articulate, yet her passion is never so utterly unleashed on her own condition as to render her pithy remarks pitiless on the “real victims”. And as always in Coetzee, the symbolic utterances are precisely a cause for suspicion. Although she refers to herself as voiceless, it seems sanctioned that what she does not reveal, her daughter and we (the legitimate and the illegitimate reader), even if to different effects, will never know. But

there is, of course, a “certain specificity” (my rhetorical self-debauching, here, is intended) to her confessional lines. Through the quasi-epistolary character, hers is a plea more direct, in the double sense of both directed and immediate. Not least through the allusions to classic texts from Hesiod to Marcus Aurelius designating the age of iron, hers is a concern to speak from a contested site, on which Coetzee has commented quite resolutely.

Elizabeth Curren brings to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment that resound around her two kinds of authority: the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics. Both these authorities are denied and even derided in her world: the first because hers is a private death, the second because it speaks from long ago and far away.

So the contest is staged, not only in the dramatic construction of the novel but also within Elizabeth’s – what shall I say? – soul, a contest about having a say. To me as a writer, as the writer in this case, the outcome of this contest – what is to count as classic in South Africa – is irrelevant. What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position. So even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced.

(Coetzee 1992: 250)

Coetzee’s interrogative wager in the particular authority of the “classics” becomes apparent not only in his prior fictional revision of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* but, more analytically pursued, in his essay “What is a Classic?” published in 1991 subsequently to *Age of Iron*. His scrutiny in answering his self-posed question, “[w]hat does it mean in living terms to say that the classic is what survives?” (Coetzee 2001: 16), leads us to view Elizabeth Curren as neither authorised by the dying nor by the surviving. Hence, it does not quite suffice to say that “her narrative has to do with the process of relinquishing personal authority which is matched by an inverse accumulation of narrative authority” (Head 1997: 137), at least not if narrative authority is to imply a discursive mandate. Yet, it is true that her attempts to speak out on apartheid violence seem granted, if at all, only as governed by her own demise. The word “demise”, here, poignantly marks the ambiguity that resides in her narrative endeavour: from Latin “demittere”, simultaneously and inseparably connoting transfer of authority and individual or collective death. In his essay, Coetzee obviously means surviving the numerous tests of criticism and cultural appropriation. A problem much more easily brought to the test than what Elizabeth Curren’s words face here: surviving the signifying gap of the colonial situation, surviving the “hold up” that is Vercueil. This is why I will reconsider the question of Elizabeth Curren’s discursive authority only after I have, myself, addressed that particular character whose arrival she experiences herself so utterly passive and passionate to.

## Otherness and Traumatic Interlocution

Derek Attridge has very perceptively pointed towards the ethics of both Coetzee's writing in general and the relation between the *arrivant* and the direct address of the first person narrator in this particular novel, detecting the responsibility for the other of writing and reading neither solely in the realistic account nor in the allegorical image but in an act of “trusting the Other”, trusting the one you cannot trust (cf Attridge 1994b). He has also compared Vercueil to Melville's notorious scrivener from a dead letter office, *Bartleby*, but has insisted that otherness is much more encompassing in Coetzee's text, that “Mrs Curren's letter is itself, perhaps, a dead letter, gone astray before it even reaches the post office, and it is certainly a letter from the dead” (Attridge 1994a: 254). Attridge, however, tends to stitch up the ambivalence of address slightly too soon. He does make the well-argued point that otherness, once it is viewed ethically, is never a transcendental category, that “[i]t is, in each text, a singular process; otherness cannot be generalized – which would mean that it could be coded, carried away, replicated – but must be staged as uniqueness, as untranscendable contingency” (ibid.: 248). Yet, despite his explicit negation and the admitted categorisation that all literary criticism is prone to make, “the notion of ‘otherness’, in fact, is inevitably aligned with transcendental categories once it becomes”, might just seem too easy a hook, too sudden a generic codification through which the more general drift towards textual alienation and allegory is reassigned to “figures of alterity” (ibid: 251). In this, he tends to align himself with the more common reviews of Coetzee, which attempt – either in reverie or dismissal – to administer propositions, even if on the performative dimension, of his writing. What if Coetzee, who himself seldom gives in to propositions, were to be read quite indiscursively?

Still, the comparison of *Bartleby* to Vercueil is a challenging one; more than I will be able to develop. Vercueil does not comply to either side of the dividing line so common in Coetzee's criticism, in which the realistic and the allegorical textual functions form symmetrical oppositions. To assign Vercueil, whom Elizabeth Curren finds to speak a “language before language” (p. 8), merely the role of being a figure of alterity does not quite do justice to the specific place he holds in the text. Vercueil reveals, even if only at a few instances, a traumatic dimension even beyond the hermeneutics of his own reluctant and unreliable description of himself as a once-shipwrecked sailor who now cringes away from water. Towards the end of the novel, she imagines him through the photographic picture of his identity card as

a prisoner torn from the darkness of a cell, thrust into a room full of blinding lights, shoved against a wall, shouted at to stand still. His image raped from him, taken by force. He is like one of those half-mythical creatures that come

out in photographs only as blurs, vague forms disappearing into the undergrowth that could be man or beast or merely a bad spot on the emulsion: unproved, unattested. Or disappearing over the edge of the picture, leaving behind in the shutter trap an arm or a leg or the back of the head.

(Coetzee 1990: 193)

The violence, here, is ambiguously evoked: first by the force of law, then, in the severed limbs, not as literal representation but in the physical confines of the photograph and the verbal resonance of the prison cell and the “shutter trap” evoking an uncanny (*unheimlich*) threat of real incarceration and mutilation. The disappearing or absent image finds a correspondence in an earlier description of yet another hypothetical *mise-en-scène*, this time of a photograph that shows Elizabeth Curren as a two-year-old child in the blooming garden of the family home, devoid of the entire servant staff. Now, however, the force is inverted, with the outside, left-out components violating the photograph. Vercueil is and is not quite one of these ghosts, those absent/present nonfigures that “lean also against the edge of the rectangle [the photograph], bending it, bursting it in” (p. 111). In all appearances, he is surely one of the oppressed of apartheid society, the silenced presence of the discourse of segregation. Furthermore, for Elizabeth Curren, “he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. Otherwise what would this writing be but a kind of moaning, now high, now low? When I write about him I write about myself” (p. 9). Yet, in the logic of her address, he is both more and less than that: a threshold figure of traumatic interlocution equally heralding his own disappearance in the apartheid rubble and witnessing Elizabeth Curren’s impossibility to speak. He is her witness insofar as the witness can never be the true witness because he has survived, insofar as the actual witness is always only appointed by the potentially true witness.

## Dead Language

Vercueil’s name is, of course, as revealing as it is odd. Elizabeth Curren does not refer to him by name until after she has asked him to post her letters, when she introduces him to Florence stating that “I have never come across such a name before” (p. 37). We can only suspect whether she has not herself keyed the name, which conceals her moribund agenda against apartheid politics in an intertextual and interlinguistic frame of reference. It has repeatedly and convincingly been argued that Vercueil equally brings to mind the Roman poet Virgil as both historical author and Dante’s literary guide through the realm of the dead as it brings to mind two Afrikaans terms: “verskuil” meaning to

conceal or to mask, and “verkul” meaning “to cheat”. The (masked, transposed, displaced) citation of the classics is precisely what marks Elizabeth Curren in her double stance as narrator and protagonist. When she recites Virgil to Vercueil, and somewhat obscurely fosters the idea that Latin might be a language for him to remember things in, it is not Virgil’s wisdom that she offers but her displacing his wisdom – placing it as her testimony into the hands of Vercueil. Or as she interprets her citation: “It means if you don’t mail the letter to my daughter I will have a hundred years of misery”. The Latin passage “on the unquiet dead” quite obviously suggests that she herself represents the unquiet dead. However, the link of Virgil and the Latin to her “[g]iving voice to the dead” (p. 192) is yet more intricate. Virgil in his double apostrophic function as author and literary figure marks not only the transition from scholarly to vernacular language but also from a living to a dead language. In the latter, the dynamics between the normative dimension (the tendency of every living language to correspond to a grammatical norm) and the *anominal* dimension (its tendency to transform itself) ceases to be active. To a dead language it is impossible to assign a speaking subject who would bring together the normative and the *anominal* dimension and would thus be able to designate what can be said and what cannot be said (cf Agamben 1999: 159f). Now what appears in the allusion to Virgil is the remnant of a dead language, not quite a speaking subject but the resonance of its silent intervention. For Agamben, who in 1999 offered a critical commentary on testimony along an *Ethica more Auschwitz demonstrata*, the remnant of a dead language is precisely what takes the stage in the act of witnessing. My turn to Agamben, here, is to be accredited not only to the fact that both he and Elizabeth Curren are such thorough scholars of the classics but primarily in that, in addition, they both seek to ascertain an ethical modus of enunciation in the face of the rigid subjectifications of modern times.

[W]e may say that to bear witness is to place oneself in one’s own language in the position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living – in any case, outside both the archive and the *corpus* of what has already been said. It is not surprising that the witness’ gesture is also that of the poet, the *auctor* par excellence. Hölderlin’s statement that “what remains is what the poets found” (*Was bleibt, stiften die Dichter*) is not to be understood in the trivial sense that poets’ works are things that last and remain throughout time. Rather, it means that the poetic word is the one that is always situated in the position of a remnant and that can, therefore, bear witness. Poets – witnesses – found language as what remains, as what actually survives the possibility, or impossibility, of speaking.

(Agamben 1999: 161)

I find this remnant to determine *Age of Iron* in a twofold way, firstly in the allegorical image of the dead language come alive that grants Elizabeth Curren a highly disputable (prediscursive) platform, secondly as testimony to an actual impossibility of speaking in the face of and for the apartheid casualties. Her position in this double bind is highly volatile; a fact that finds not only its expression in her own demise but also in that, in the end, she will lead this language animation *ad absurdum* and, thus, “complete” its decidedly unteleological dialectic when she detects those mysterious, indecipherable or, rather, infelicitous anagrams in her medicine cabinet. “Borodino: an anagram for *Come back* in some language or other. Diconal: *I call*. Words vomited from the belly of the whale, misshapen, mysterious. Daughter” (p. 140).

In order to discuss Elizabeth Curren’s position in the pulpit, it will become helpful to resort to another distinction made by Agamben. Following Emile Benveniste, Agamben not only views subjectivity as purely linguistic, he also enhances on Benveniste’s idea of an aporetic semantics of enunciation – an aporia since the linguistic concept of enunciation is actually designed to isolate the nonsemantic taking place of language. Enunciation is language referring to itself – not as signification but as nothing other than the particular act equally within and outside of discourse (cf Agamben 1999: 137f). In its naked form, the subject of enunciation is not at the mercy of any form of subjugation in the discursive system – which, vice versa, also restrains the subject from taking a stance in it. In this mere potentiality of speech lies, thus, both a factual impossibility and a possibility of resistance. This potentiality to me is precisely what *Age of Iron* stages: how Elizabeth Curren, as narrator and protagonist, has to give up her discursive authority and position herself entirely as a subject of enunciation. It is also in this regard that the novel locates subjectivity in a transitional realm because there is a process of de-/subjectification at the heart of every speech act as the subject has to enounce itself and take place in language before it can signify.

### **Whose Modernity?**

How do these initial criteria of the subject of enunciation draw us towards modern and postcolonial agency? Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* is a perpetual inquiry into the time lag at the heart of enunciation that impedes the subject’s position in the chain of historical signifiers. Bhabha’s prime interrogative is to ask what happens in those moments off the records, in-between this chain. In his essay “‘Race’, Time and the Revision of Modernity”, Bhabha offers a definition of modernity in this regard:



Modernity, I suggest, is about the historical construction of a specific position of historical enunciation and address. It privileges those “who bear witness”, those who are “subjected”, or in the Fanonian sense ... historically displaced. It gives them a representative position through the spatial distance, or the *time lag* between the Great Event and its circulation as a historical sign of the “people” or an “epoch”, that constitutes the memory and the moral of the event *as a narrative*, a disposition to cultural communality, a form of social and psychic identification. The discursive address of modernity – its structure of authority – decentres the Great Event, and speaks from the moment of “imperceptibility”, the supplementary space “outside” or uncannily beside (*abseits*).

(Bhabha 1994: 243)

This signifying time lag has little to do with a temporal distancing of the interpretative act in the sense that this would guarantee objectivity or a cool-headed analytical mind. What Bhabha seeks (most urgently in his reading of Fanon) is a specific temporalisation of psychic and social spaces that makes the “enunciatory present of modernity disjunctive” (ibid: 239), a belatedness, neither anteriority nor posteriority, neither before nor after, but a temporal rift at the heart of signification. Sure enough, for Bhabha this signifying time lag is not a disavowal of difference but the very modus of hybrid differentiation. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity has frequently been reduced to a syncretistic model of organising pluralistic identities. This has been mostly due to an emphasis on only one singular aspect of hybridity: The multiplicity of cultural forms of articulation is surely important in that the openness of sign systems is what accounts for hybrid social clusters. Yet, these are nevertheless prone to be adopted into pedagogical strategies if we reduce this performative openness to the outside and do not regard it as inherent to every form of cultural articulation – as directed towards the inside of difference. This is as enabling as problematic, for we cannot hope to describe cultural practices without the processes of differentiation, yet have to refrain from relying on a divisional concept of in- and exclusion. Hence, even if Bhabha is trying “to develop [the signifying time lag] as a structure for the representation of subaltern and postcolonial agency” (ibid: 237f), this agency as an inherent surplus of modernity cannot be attributed to singular subjects.

Yet, Foucault’s lack of identifying postcolonial agency is the prime argument of Bhabha’s rebuttal of his parallel conceptualisation of modernity. In the same essay, Bhabha offers a critique of the “ethnocentric limitations” of Foucault’s “spatial sign of modernity” asking: “What if the ‘distance’ that constitutes the meaning of the Revolution as sign, the *signifying lag* between event and enunciation, stretches not across the Place de la Bastille or the rue des Blancs-Monteaux, but spans the temporal difference of the colonial space?” (ibid: 244). What bothers Bhabha is that despite all of Foucault’s

detailed commentary on modern structures of power and subjugation there is no elaborate analysis of colonialism, no detailed recognition of race as the factor that constitutes the overdetermination of the modern parameters class and gender. Bhabha finds in those few instances where Foucault does mention race only regressive implications, a backlash, so to speak, of the symbolics of blood within the analytics of sexuality – that, or even, a mere disavowal (cf *ibid*: 252; Bhabha 1992: 461).

Bhabha's critique, however, will only uphold as long as we view Foucault as a mere historian of utterances and not as the archaeologist of *énoncés* (cf Foucault 1974). There is, to be sure, an acute terminological divergence in Bhabha's notion of enunciation insofar as he shortcuts the relation between *énoncé* and *énonciation* by having the former designate what is said, as utterance, sentence or proposition, and the latter its parallel but entirely distinct performative dimension (cf Bhabha 1994: 36). However, in Foucault – hence Agamben – the *énoncé* becomes precisely the object or rather sign of scrutiny (despite the fact that enunciation has no definable object in the strict sense and neither term, object and sign, does conclusively account for the particular character of the *énoncé*) since it projects the aforementioned aporetic semantics of enunciation and helps him to detect “meaning” outside the patterns of signification. I will further specify the kind of subjectivity this implies. Right now, it seems pertinent to decide if Bhabha's clear division of *énoncé* and enunciation might in fact be reduced to a not entirely disabling terminological divergence or must be taken, rather, as the expression of an irreconcilable disparity at the heart of Bhabha's and Foucault's projects respectively. I am inclined to assume the former. Bhabha's terminology does not discredit his critical endeavour because he, like Foucault, tries to circumvent regarding subjectivity in terms of a “pure” discourse. However, it hints at two things: 1. Bhabha's strategy to accept the common semiotic split between *énoncé* and enunciation and not to tackle, at this point, their relation on the more specific and even aporetic site of semantics; 2. Bhabha's tendency to accredit the cultural temporality of the signifying gap with resistance and agency, which he needs in order to back up his separation of the performative and the pedagogical, somewhat too quickly. In any case, it does discredit his critique of Foucault, for I believe that the assumption of a clear-cut division of *énoncé* and enunciation allows Bhabha to misconceive Foucault's notion of modernity.

If both Bhabha and Foucault rely on a subject of enunciation, even if to different effects, what at least Foucault, according to Agamben, misses or postpones to elaborate on are the ethical implications once enunciation is held to determine the processes of subjectification. It is in this sense that Agamben calls the witness the ethical subject of desubjectification.

In the relation between what is said and its taking place, it was possible to bracket the subject of enunciation, since speech had already taken place. But the relation between language and its existence, between *langue* and the archive, demands subjectivity as that which, in its very possibility of speech, bears witness to an impossibility of speech. This is why subjectivity appears as *witness*; this is why it can speak for those who cannot speak. Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech; it is moreover, an impossibility of speaking. These two movements cannot be identified either with a subject or with consciousness; yet they cannot be divided into two incommunicable substances. Their inseparable intimacy is testimony.

(Agamben 1999: 146)

Although one may very well expand historically upon the notion whether it is not precisely in the proceedings of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission only a few years later that Elizabeth Curren’s and Vercueil’s witnessing become belatedly contemporary, I would like to take another route to come back to Coetzee’s novel. For I will argue that the ethical implications of the subject of enunciation lie at the heart of his narrative endeavour. Despite the fact that the narrator fails to name the relation between colonial racism and modernism in *Age of Iron*, this very relation, nevertheless, forms the quintessential demand and restriction for the kind of platform its protagonist is able to offer. And even if Coetzee’s “survival of the classics” and Bhabha’s “survival of culture” (Bhabha 1994: 171) express quite distinct patterns of treating post-colonial agency, for which I cannot conclusively account here, it is in their common denominator that I would like to describe the way the novel offers its form of intervention. For it is in the act of witnessing not what is said but language taking place that the presumably coloured Vercueil marks the site of articulation that Elizabeth Curren adopts. More than the notion that at some point the two figures will have literally crossed each other’s paths, it seems legitimate to argue that it is the nexus of race as a specific historical locale of subjugation and the desubjectifying process of enunciation that Coetzee stages in their encounter. However, I do not want to end without having specified the terms under which the novel improvises on this sense of subjectivity yet a little more closely.

### **To Visit Oneself on Someone**

There is a particular grammatical construction that Elizabeth Curren employs or, rather, exploits to designate Vercueil’s arrival on his solemn sojourn at her house – which also serves as the title of my paper. Returning home from her physician, having received the message on the terminal state of her cancer –

indeed before even revealing the terrible news, “not good, but ... mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused”, which not only suggests the cliché that the sole message that will always find its true addressee is death, but which also indicates that in her text what is proper to oneself will have nothing to do with appropriation but solely with the impossibility of refusal – she acknowledges the perplexing coincidence of his arrival: “A visitor, visiting himself on me on this of all days” (p. 4). Rather than to speak with Attridge of a “slightly self-conscious literariness of the style” (Attridge 1994a: 251), which the passage in many regards projects, I would like to emphasise an aspect that has little to do with self-consciousness and only indirectly with literariness.

Semantically, the preposition “on” in “to visit something (up-)on someone”, of course, indicates something adversary rather than benevolent, a demonic spell or curse rather than a friendly guest. Beyond indicating infliction, it also invokes a change in the relation between its implied agent and patient, thus disrupting the congruence between its grammatical and its semantic aspects. The subject of the phrase “to visit on” becomes pure agent while in the other case its status was, relatively, more ambiguous, in that as visitor she/he would essentially have to be received. In any case, “to visit” or “to visit on” is not commonly designed to express reflexivity. If we did, we would equate or superimpose the sender (of the curse, wrath, etc.) and the thing or notion sent. Strangely enough, this is precisely what characterises Vercueil in *Age of Iron*. He appears at once worldly and supernatural. Hence, in this particular phrase the narrator has established the entire spectre of Vercueil’s figuration.

However, there is a further notion that cannot be resolved so easily. We can only understand “to visit” reflexively if we are to assume a clearly split agency, if we think the individual as simultaneously subject and object of his actions. Yet, at least in English, which knows no pure reflexivity,<sup>2</sup> the subject can never truly be both agent and patient without any a priori division. Thus, this simultaneity in “to visit oneself” can never diminish the cleft between the two notions, since the English language does not seem to be able to truly designate what Agamben finds in Spinoza’s “concept of immanent cause”, which Spinoza in turn finds in his mother tongue, the Sephardic language Ladino. To pinpoint the specific problematic of this notion more conclusively – a notion in which not only the grammatical categories active and passive, subject and object, transitive and intransitive but furthermore the concepts of agent and patient, cause and effect, potentiality and actuality, ability and act lose their clear differentiation – Spinoza designs the striking syntagm “se visitantem constituere”, to constitute or show oneself as visiting. Through this notion, Agamben is able to establish his concept of “passivity, as the form of subjectivity”, which

is thus constitutively fractured into a purely receptive pole ... and an actively passive pole (the witness), but in such a way that this fracture never leaves itself, fully separating the two poles. On the contrary, it always has the form of an *intimacy*, of being consigned to a passivity, to a making oneself passive in which the two terms are both distinct and inseparable.

(Agamben 1999: 111)

What seems difficult in adapting this model to the novel is that we cannot clearly attribute either pole to one singular figure, Mrs Curren and Vercueil respectively. Yet, through this particular theorem we understand why at the centre of this notion of subjectivity lies not the tragic pathos of alienation but a more thorough abrogation of “pure” (or purely discursive) subjectivity, shame. Shame is, of course, also Elizabeth Curren’s primary response to apartheid’s violent oppression. It is a feeling of unqualified or, rather, undirected guilt that, however, does not assume the structure of “guilt in innocence” (*unschuldig schuldig*) of the classic hero. Agamben speaks of a “shameful experience of desubjectification, of a full and unrestrained impossibility of responsibility that involves every act of speech” (Agamben 1993: 113). Nevertheless, following Agamben, we are to understand this notion as a possibility – or, rather, a potentiality in that it opens up access to an impossibility of speaking which thus “has, in an unknown way, come to speech” (ibid: 117). In Elizabeth Curren, this shame of desubjectification and the shame for the political atrocities of South Africa’s late apartheid seem to coincide as she takes recourse to that same potentiality of speech that can no longer be transmitted by either the purely hermeneutic or allegorical categories of the *angelus* but precisely by what Agamben calls testimony.

## Notes

1. Where not indicated otherwise, all further page references in the text are to this novel.
2. The only exception known to me is “to perjure oneself”. In German, for example, pure reflexivity is possible via genitive and dative verbal constructions, and thus either transitively and intransitively constructed: e.g. “sich verhalten” (to conduct oneself), “sich anmaßen” (to arrogate something to oneself).

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio  
1999 *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone.

- Attridge, Derek
- 1994a Literary Form and the Demand of Politics: Otherness in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. In: Levine, George (ed.) *Aesthetics and Ideology*: New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 243-263.
  - 1994b Trusting the Other: Ethics and Politics in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93(1): 59-82.
- Bhabha, Homi K.
- 1992 Postcolonial Criticism. In: Greenblatt, Stephan & Gunn, Giles (eds) *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
  - 1994 *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Coetzee, J.M.
- 1990 *Age of Iron*. New York: Penguin.
  - 1992 *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
  - 2001 What Is a Classic? (1991). In: *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999*. New York: Viking.
- Dovey, Teresa
- 1997 A Late Bourgeois Tomb: J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and White South African Writing in the Nineteen-Eighties. In: Wright, Derek (ed.) *Contemporary African Fiction*. Bayreuth: Breitingen.
- Foucault, Michel
- 1974 *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Head, Dominic
- 1997 *J.M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parry, Benita
- 1998 Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee. In: Attridge, Derek & Jolly, Rosemary (eds) *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.