

The Reception of J.M. Coetzee in Russia

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Summary

The reception of Coetzee's work in Russia should be interesting for a number of reasons, not least, because of Coetzee's own interest in Russian literature. The article points at a certain analogy that is detectable in the works of J.M. Coetzee and Russian classics. The affinity, which exists on various levels including the created universe as well as a certain philosophical outlook of characters, not only attests to the South African writer's literary erudition but also points at his particular interest in Russian literary exploits, which opens the range of possibilities for further comparative study. In the second part of the article, the author surveys briefly a number of reviews which appeared in Russia concurrently with the publication of Russian translations of Coetzee's work. As it appears, Russian critics are not aware of Coetzee's essays on topics related to Russian literature, as these are not available in Russian as yet. They also seldom note intertextual links between his writing and Russian literature, and if they do, it is done in a cursory manner. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the reviews surveyed in this article, Coetzee's creative works are well known and appreciated by Russian critics and the reading public alike. In order to illustrate areas of interest on which Russian reviewers hinge their evaluation of Coetzee's novels as well as an overall tonality of their reviews, a brief summary of the more discerning reviews, usually solicited by the Russian publishers, is given in English,¹ with particular emphasis on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Disgrace* and *The Master of Petersburg*.

Opsomming

Daar is 'n paar redes waarom die wyse waarop Coetzee se werk in Rusland ontvang word, interessant is, veral as ons Coetzee se eie belangstelling in Russiese letterkunde in gedagte hou. Hierdie artikel wys op 'n bepaalde analogie tussen Coetzee se werk en klassieke Russiese werke. Daar is affiniteit op verskeie vlakke, insluitende die vlak van die geskape wêreld en 'n bepaalde filosofiese beskouing van karakters. Dit is 'n teken van die Suid-Afrikaanse skrywer se uitgebreide kennis van die letterkunde en sy besondere belangstelling in die hoogtepunte van die Russiese letterkunde. Die moontlikhede vir vergelykende studie wat hieruit voortspuit, is legio. In die tweede gedeelte van die artikel ondersoek die navorser kortliks 'n aantal Russiese resensies van die Russiese vertalings van Coetzee se werk. Russiese kritici is blykbaar onbewus van Coetzee se essays oor onderwerpe wat met Russiese letterkunde verband hou omdat hierdie essays nog nie in Russies beskikbaar is nie. Die kritici sien voorts nie die intertekstuele skakels tussen Coetzee se werk en die Russiese letterkunde raak nie, maar selfs al sien hulle dit raak, skenk hulle nie veel aandag daaraan nie. Die resensies in hierdie artikel toon nietemin dat Coetzee se skeppende werk goed aan Russiese kritici en die Russiese

1. All translations from Russian are mine.

leserspubliek bekend is, en dat dit aansien geniet. Russiese resesente baseer hul evaluerings van Coetzee se romans en die oorkoepelende toonaard van hul resensies op bepaalde aspekte van Coetzee se werk. Ter illustrasie hiervan word kort Engelse opsommings² van die meer oordeelkundige resensies (wat gewoonlik deur die Russiese uitgewers aangevra word) by die artikel ingesluit. Die klem val veral op *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Disgrace* en *The Master of Petersburg*.

J.M. Coetzee's interest in Russia, its history and culture, is explicit enough to merit research into its extent and significance. The South African author demonstrates this interest in both critical and creative writing. In his scholarship, Coetzee devoted essays to Russian nineteenth-century classic writers such as Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and also paid attention to his contemporaries such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Josif Brodsky.³ In Coetzee's creative writing, Dostoevsky is accorded prominence through *The Master of Petersburg*, which, in addition to other interpretations, could also be read as a continuation of his polemic engagement with Dostoevsky's biographer, Joseph Frank.⁴ In Coetzee's other works, overt references to Russia or Russian literature are less conspicuous, although telling by their consistency. For instance, in the novel *Youth* we encounter the name of Tolstoy on several occasions. Further investigation may show whether there is more to this reference, since Tolstoy himself is the author of an autobiographical trilogy: *Childhood* (1852), *Adolescence* (1854), and *Youth* (1857), than Coetzee's way of underscoring his protagonist's perpetual interest in Russian affairs and his expressed sympathy with what he perceives to be a "fair communist system" enjoyed by Russians.

In Coetzee's earlier novel, *Age of Iron*, the Russian literary analogies are more palpable and wider in their comparative context, although only Tolstoy is named. He is the author read by the novel's chief character, Mrs Curren: "Spent the day in bed. No energy, no appetite. Read Tolstoy – not

2. Die outeur het die resensies uit Russies vertaal.

3. Essays appear in Coetzee (1992, 2001). In the case of Brodsky, the admiration was reciprocal. During the symposium celebrating the anniversary of the Nobel Prize in 1991, Brodsky noted that Coetzee's creative works spell "great days for South African literature" (Brodsky in Edelshtein 2004).

4. Among other issues, *Master of Petersburg* deals also with Coetzee's objection to certain inferences Frank makes on Dostoevsky's character: "Frank refrains from asking the properly Dostoevskian question: If the devil in Dostoevsky was not his own, if he was not responsible for it, who was?" (Coetzee 2001: 118). His essay "Dostoevsky, the Miraculous Years" was originally published in 1995, *Master of Petersburg* in 1994.

the famous cancer story, which I know all too well, but the story of the angel who takes up residence with the shoemaker” (Coetzee 1991: 13). This seemingly casual remark gains importance as the narrative progresses; it throws light on the mindset of the protagonist and, at the same time, one could consider it indicative of the genesis of Coetzee’s novel. The “famous cancer story” is “Death of Ivan Iliich” written by Tolstoy in 1886. The interesting aspect of this short story is not the illness itself (Tolstoy does not identify it as cancer) but the fact that it forces Ivan Iliich to reassess his life only to find that he might have wasted it on egoistic endeavours to please himself. Thus, the dying woman’s reference to Tolstoy is an important lead in understanding her own life-story, underscoring her realisation that she, too, may have lost her chance to live a worthy life both as a mother and as a member of society. This realisation, which hits her in a way similar to the one presented by Tolstoy, may be seen as a motivation for her sudden desire to comprehend the import of her own life (hence her long narrative letters to her daughter, with many rhetorical questions) as well as to redress her social egoism (hence her trip to the township, her interest in the youth apprehended by the police, and her aborted protest in the form of setting herself alight). The second part of Mrs Curren’s sentence alludes to Tolstoy’s earlier work, “Where There is Love There is God” (1885). Tolstoy’s story is about the search for the deeper meaning of life. It conveys a moral philosophy that God lives in humans and by showing love and empathy to those in need, who may be God’s angels, one not only attains consolation in misery and suffering but, ultimately, fulfils the main purpose of being on this earth. In the context of this story we understand better Mrs Curren’s yearning for an “own angel to bring home and succour” (Coetzee 1991: 13). Despite her despondent belief that “the suburbs [are] deserted by angels”, Tolstoy’s idea of the need to show unqualified mercy before redemption can be granted is enacted in her own life – Vercueil becomes such an unlikely angel in her own life. In this sense, *Age of Iron* merges the two stories of the Russian classic writer into one seamless whole while both the desperation of Ivan Illich facing death and the shoemaker’s search for the good in another person are conflated in the character of Elizabeth Curren.

But it is not only Tolstoy who is referred to in *Age of Iron*. Recalling her deceased brother Paul, Elizabeth Curren remembers a letter that he addressed to her “in borrowed words ... My sister life” (Coetzee 1991: 101-102). The expression is “borrowed” indeed from the title poem in a poetic narrative entitled “My Sister – Life” by Boris Pasternak. The events, brought back by a photograph, happened in 1918, approximately the year when Pasternak’s work, inspired by the revolutionary upheaval of 1917, began to take shape. Mrs Curren’s recollection of the letter brings back

recollections of her life as it was then, innocent and carefree. Her brother's reference to Pasternak's poem – which is said to be characterised by the “exuberant celebration of life”⁵ – evokes the siblings' own anticipation of a happy future. However, Mrs Curren does not dwell on happy memories but focuses rather on what her adult life has become. In this respect, a bridge emerges towards another Russian-Soviet context, for the morbidly grotesque *Age of Iron* is about dying and loneliness and, above all, about the oppressive external world surrounding the dying woman. The cancer that took possession of her body runs parallel to that devouring her country. The reality of both afflictions – unwelcome and disturbing – creeps in and takes possession of her life without asking permission or apologising for the turmoil it creates, quite like *Cancer Ward*, a well-known novel by the Russian Nobel Prize laureate, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. Both these novels have intellectuals who are dying of cancer as their respective main characters.⁶ Furthermore, both narratives enforce the comparison with the “cancerous” political situation in the countries in which their characters live. Both authors expose the effect of physical illness on the individual, and parallel it to the effect of the shameful practices of the respective political systems – communism in Russia and apartheid in South Africa. It is reasonable to contemplate that Coetzee was familiar with Solzhenitsyn's novel, written in 1968, which appeared in English translation in 1970, and that the analogy is intended. One may also assume that he was contemplating the “Soviet experience” while portraying escalating unrest in South Africa. The question of what would happen if the transformation in South Africa followed the route of the bloody Russian revolution of 1917 was a pertinent one for people like Mrs Curren.⁷ The brewing political

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5. “My Sister – Life” by Pasternak is aptly discussed in O'Connor (1988: 3).
 6. In this context, the reference to Pasternak's early poem gains further significance because his own life illustrates the fate of intellectuals in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the fact that the chief characters in both novels are members of the intelligentsia is important. Coetzee makes sure that his heroine's social status is defined in those very terms by emphasising her ability to move freely within the wider intellectual universe of antiquity or Russian history (her visions of the battle at Borodino, p. 126) for these characteristics add further emphasis to her social status as a member of the intelligentsia, the class which was in the Soviet system regarded as suspicious if not hostile to the working class. (For this reason the term “working intelligentsia” was coined to accommodate teachers and medical doctors alike.) As a result of this attitude Kostoglotov, the chief character in *Cancer Ward*, spends most of his life in the labour camp.
 7. A similar point is made by Doktorova (2004) who refers to both *Disgrace* and

turmoil that Coetzee portrays in *Age of Iron* predicts a strong possibility of such a turn of events. Is it not this notion that transpires from Mrs Curren's reference to Thucydides in her address directed to the black youth?

“Thucydides wrote of people who made rules and followed them. Going by rule they killed entire classes of enemies without exception. Most of those who died felt, I am sure, that a terrible mistake was being made, that whatever the rule was, it could not be meant for them. ‘I!’ – was their last word as their throats were cut. A word of protest: I, the exception.”

(Coetzee 1991: 73)

The quotation from the ancient philosopher raises the eternal issue of the individual versus society, the question – which Solzhenitsyn's novel also tackles – that assumed farcical tonality in the Soviet Union. The Soviet regime made good of the collective ultimate goal. In a sinister twist, the abstract notion of the good of humanity as a whole replaced the rights of individual citizens to lead dignified lives. Moreover, in the system that claimed to grant to all, some were more equal than others, because of ideologisation of interhuman relations, in addition to corruption and cronyism. This paradox is apparent even in the treatment available to cancer patients; only death is an ideal equaliser. In the South Africa portrayed in Coetzee's novel too, the rights of only some individuals are respected while the rights of others are ruthlessly trampled upon. Mrs Curren acknowledges the inhumanity of this situation only when confronted with the deadly disease. In the process of re-evaluating her own life she develops sympathy for the suffering of others and gathers courage to challenge the oppressive system. In her case, the irony is that it all is too late and too little, for being a sickly old woman, she cannot have any significant impact on the turn of events.

It may be premature to draw conclusions about the nature of this and other apparent similarities, or to speculate whether they are in any way premeditated on Coetzee's part. Nevertheless, some of them are striking, and further examination carries a promise of revealing conclusions. For instance, one can note a certain analogy between his novel *Life & Times of*

Coetzee's interview (the only reference given is 1996) in which he is quoted saying that “people live on a volcano without realising it. They see that the world around them changes and wish it could change even faster. What they do not understand is that changes can sweep them away, as well as their children.” Reading *Disgrace* as a novel in which, in her opinion, Coetzee expresses his fear about the future of white intelligentsia, Doktorova notes an analogy with Russian experience: “How many times this history repeated itself. Let's take Russia and these members of the intelligentsia who welcomed the revolution. And where did it take them? At best, abroad.”

Michael K and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.⁸ Even at first glance, the titles of the respective books look similar. Further comparison is encouraged if one considers that Ivan is a war veteran imprisoned in a Siberian labour camp while Michael, apart from being intermittently put in various camps, finds himself in self-imposed exile on a farm in the Karoo. Both characters are exposed to harsh climatic conditions, not conducive to human habitation, which further emphasise their alienation from the “normal” world. The similarity is extended to the characters’ respective professions – Ivan is a builder, Michael a gardener – both finding pride and comfort in their simple daily drudgery regardless of who benefits from its fruits. Even later, when Michael is confined to a labour camp, he does not long so much for physical freedom but for being able to tend his plants again. Likewise, Ivan is doing his best on the camp’s building site despite the horrific conditions of hunger combined with the extreme cold. These simple occupations of building and tending vegetable gardens allow both characters a degree of comfort and inner freedom as well as maintaining self-respect and human dignity under wholly dehumanising circumstances. In both cases, the respective authors pay considerable attention to describing the passion, the pride, and the profound sense of purpose with which Ivan and Michael carry on with their daily chores. Furthermore, the title characters in both works are simple people, wronged by faceless authoritarian establishments; they are individuals who, although named, remain anonymous in a crowd of powerless masses terrorised by an omnipotent State. Neither Michael nor Ivan is specifically targeted by this State in its relentless and rather cynical pursuit of self-serving goals; they both are faceless and incidental casualties of its indiscriminate terror. By analogy, even though the reference to time is made by both authors, their characters may be viewed as archetypal carriers of basic human values who, in the process, attain *a*historical dimension. For this reason both works may be seen to have as much immediate as universal and *a*temporal significance.

Admittedly, the examples of possible analogies given here are incidental, but even such a random outline of similarities suggests that further investigation may yield interesting results as it has the potential to enrich the interpretation and understanding of Coetzee’s writing. Russian readers and scholars alike are well equipped to explore it from this very perspective but,

8. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn appeared in 1962. Its first English language translation by Ralph Parker appeared in 1963 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin). By its frighteningly oppressive universe it also resembles the dystopian story *New Robinsons* by Liudmila Petrushevskaia (Novye Robinsony, 1988). If taken as such, *Life & Times of Michael K*, too, may be examined from the point of view of its anti-utopian character.

as it appears, only a few comparative contexts are suggested thus far in Russia. Of those few, we may select the one by Larisa Doktorova (1999) who links Chekhov's play, *Cherry Orchard*, with the overall tonality and thematic significance of Coetzee's novels, *Disgrace* in particular. She identifies "a number of *sjuzhet* lines: the luckless life of the professor, the complicated life of his daughter. We may add to this a not particularly cosy "neighbourhood", as well as the social and political changes that *Disgrace* portrays to be similar to those depicted in Chekhov's play, although, in her view, the *Disgrace* variant "is more terrifying". With pessimism she notes:

The country undergoes change, but not for the better. It was difficult and bad; it will be bad and difficult. The image of society, as the author presents it, is utterly hopeless. It happens everywhere, and always; redoing the world is accompanied by cataclysms, not only physical but also psychological. And in this sense *Disgrace*⁹ is a classical novel.

(Doktorova 1999: 4)

Occasionally we come across comments made in *passim* about the possible likeness of Coetzee and a contemporary Russian writer. For example, Iliin (2003), the Russian translator of *The Master of Petersburg* and *Disgrace*, recognises the similarity between "the universe as well as the mental state of characters" in the works of the South African writer and Iurii Trifonov. One would like Iliin to be more specific if his hint is to be taken further, especially since Trifonov (1925-1981) authored many novels while the literary merit of some remains controversial. Some scholars believe that he was an opportunist, towing the Party line obligingly when it suited him. His literary debut, *The Students*, is a plain and predictable novel enforcing the literary doctrine of socialist realism. Others see him as a prominent representative of the 1960s generation and a humanist, whose novels (amongst others his best-known novel *House on the Embankment*) contain many allusions to the abuses of the Soviet system.

Another contemporary context, in a similar cursory fashion, is pointed out by Olshanskii (2001) who contrasts Coetzee's *Disgrace*, in his view an "ingenious, despairing book", with Russian Booker laureate Mikhail Shishkin's novel, *Capture of Ismail (Vzятие Измаила)*, noting aptly the chief difference in the position of respective characters towards the pitfalls of

9. Doktorova's article preceded the Russian publication of *Disgrace* which took place only two years later. This explains why she translates its title as "Pozor" which, accidentally, is a preferred lexical equivalent, but it implies moral judgement and as such is more emotionally suggestive. The eventual translation as *Beschestie* meaning "dishonour" introduces more philosophical overtones and, in the end, seems to be a better choice.

existence. He says that Shishkin's characters are imbued with a hysterical desire to hide, to run away, "whereas the hero of *Disgrace* meets inevitable abominations with cold dignity". For Olshanskii, Coetzee's novel is full of such "ice-cold impassivity", which he finds as much in the behaviour of its protagonist as in the language and the style of its narrative.

Many Russian commentators readily acknowledge Coetzee's profound understanding of Dostoevsky but even here they stop short of contributing seminal tips for further research. Thus, except the few remarks made so far, Coetzee's impressive erudition with respect to Russian literature as well as affinity with the Russian literary oeuvre, whether intended or not, remains largely unrecognised. It is only to be hoped that the rapidly growing interest in J.M. Coetzee's literary output will produce, in Russia, a more studious assessment of his writing, especially, in respect of the impact his fascination with Russian authors might have on the overall tonality and quality of his work. As it transpires from the survey of comments considered in this article, at this stage this interest seems to be superficial in that its main focus is on the sensational quality of Coetzee's writing, occasionally at the expense of its true merit.

In order to understand the Russian reading market, it might be relevant to mention that in the past it was subjected to rigid scrutiny by the State censorship (*Gosizdat*). Despite this, many masterpieces of Western literature were translated and published by the official State publishing houses. The exception was made for works that were classified ideologically harmful or artistically "too avant-garde" for the Russian reader as, for instance, was the case with Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹⁰ But even the works that were forbidden, sooner or later found their way to the more discerning readers via the *tamizdat* (Russian translations published abroad) or other unofficial or underground publishing initiatives. Nevertheless, it was this atmosphere of restriction that made Russian readers and critics alike particularly alert to new interesting publications, especially if they had already attained a degree of fame abroad. J.M. Coetzee fits this profile extremely well. Russian commentators not only mention his white South African origin and his reclusive lifestyle, but first and foremost his unprecedented achievement of receiving the Booker Prize twice which Russian commentators never fail to mention. There are some 1600 Internet sites in Russian that respond to the search for J.M. Coetzee.¹¹ As a rule, most of the reviews found there contain cursory

10. Fragments of the novel were published by *Inostrannaia literatura* in the 1930s but the whole novel appeared in the Russian translation only in the 1990s.

11. Speaking of electronic media, one should note that various sites use each other's information, thus the actual volume of original material is less than one would expect. With it comes another peculiarity of the Russian Internet sites:

biographical notes (e.g. Deinichenko 2003).¹² Reviews and comments with reference to Coetzee are designed for the information service as well as the Internet sites that are maintained by publishers, electronic journals, book clubs, and libraries.¹³ Brief critical commentaries on Coetzee appear also in printed version, in prestigious literary journals and newspapers (e.g. *Novyi mir*, *Znamia*, *Literaturnaia gazeta*).

Coetzee's presence on the Russian book market began in 1989 with the publication of a volume containing three of his novels: *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Foe*, translated respectively as *V ozhidanii varvarov* (translated by A. Mikhaleva), *Zhizn i vremia Mikhaela*

their customary neglect of copyright issues sometimes takes an extreme form as is the case in not acknowledging extensive quotations from the 2002 article by Apollon Davidson whose name may be familiar to some South African scholars owing to his long-standing scholarly interest in African history and politics. Even though Davidson's comments on Coetzee's writing were copyrighted in 2001, they are replicated by Aleksei Tugarinov of *Kievian News* (cf. Davidson 2001 and Tugarinov 2002). Because of certain intriguing assumptions put forth by both authors their articles will be considered in the section devoted to *Disgrace*.

12. There is a considerable variance in the usage of Coetzee's first names, with the surname being transliterated rather uniformly as Kutzee. According to the rules of the Russian language and the requirements of the Cyrillic alphabet, rather than transliterating foreign names, one transcribes them phonetically as close to their original pronunciation as possible. In this article Coetzee's name will be given as it originally appears in English, with the understanding that its most frequent Russian transcription is Kutzee. There is also confusion in respect of the author's initials, because using initials is uncommon in Russia. Coetzee's initials are therefore subjected to a *sui generis* correction. Thus, the surname is usually preceded by a combination of Joseph, John, Maxwell, Mari, Michael, with the last allowing certain commentators to draw conclusions about the apparent autobiographical [sic] link between the author and the protagonist of his novel, *Michael K* (cf. Novikova 2004). One may also encounter the situation where the same piece of information features interchangeably John and Joseph, including the initials J.M. (cf. Ozon 2005).
13. There are also semipolitical discussion forums, like the *Forum of the Democratic Union* (2004) where the name of J.M. Coetzee pops up in a question sent by a reader: "Dear Valeria Ilichna, what do you think about works by J. Coetzee? In my view, he explores the issues of Freedom and Dignity ..." to which the designated respondent, Valeria Ilichna Novodvorskaia, replies: "I have not read the esteemed J. Coetzee. But if you think that he explores the issues of freedom and dignity, not only in the context of the struggle with apartheid, I will try to find him."

K (translated by I. Arkhangelskaia & Yu Zhukova), and *Mister Fo* (the translator not named). It is difficult to establish the publisher of this particular edition. One commentator notes that the volume was published by “some specialised ‘African’ almanac, but because of the chaos on the journal-book market” during *perestroika*, it went largely unnoticed (Edelshtein 2004). Davidson is more specific, pointing out that the volume was published by the State-owned and well-established publishing house “Khudozhestvennaia literature” in one hundred thousand copies, which is impressive even by Russian standards.¹⁴ Both versions are difficult to verify at this stage. Nevertheless, in 2001 two more novels were published: *The Master of Petersburg*, translated as *Osen’ v Peterburge* [Autumn in Petersburg] and *Disgrace*, translated as *Beschestie* (cf. Note 7). Both novels were published in Moscow by “Inostrannaia literatura” [Foreign Literature Publishers]¹⁵ in its series “Illuminator” and both in what appears to be a masterful translation by Sergei Borisovich Iliin.

The Nobel Prize precipitated the hurried publication of Coetzee’s works with the reprint of 1989 translations appearing in bookstores less than two months after the Nobel Committee’s verdict was made public (Edelshtein 2004). Russian readers tend to follow the announcements of major literary awards, which are taken as an indicator of merit, the Nobel Prize especially, since there are at least six Russian authors who have been awarded this prestigious honour. As soon as the news about the new Nobel laureate was announced to Russian readers on 2 October 2003 (bbcrussian.com), Coetzee became known as the author whose novels are characterised by “well-thought composition, rich dialogues and analytical mastery”. Russian audiences learnt that the Academy commended the South African author for being a “caustic sceptic, merciless in his critical exposure of the cruel rationalism and artificial morality of Western civilisation”. Thus, Coetzee, whose “felicitous” presence on the Russian market is enhanced by the sensation that his novel *Disgrace* has caused, is accepted as a “perfect choice” for the Nobel Prize (Babintseva 2003). The acclaim was almost unanimous, except for a few occasional blunders, such as the one attributed to a well-known, successful writer, Tatiana Tolstaia, who responded to the news of the 2003 Nobel Prize with a caustic remark: “... about yet another

14. For instance, *Disgrace* (St Petersburg: Amphora, 2004) had an edition of ten thousand copies (Knizhnyi klub 36.6).

15. *Inostrannaia literatura* or “Inostranka”, the latter being its informal equivalent, refers to both the title of the popular monthly journal and its own publishing house. Usually, publication in the journal *Inostrannaia literatura* is the most reliable way for foreign writers to appear on the Russian reading market. This is followed by a book publication by the publishing house of the journal.

splash of political correctness. ‘He got it because he is black’” (Konstantinova [2004]). With this exception, Russian critics believe that Coetzee is the first Nobel laureate – “in a long time” – in whose case there was no political motivation (Melnikova 2003) for the human aspect of his work that predetermined the Nobel Committee’s decision.¹⁶ It is said that “the theme of the Force and the Victim that organises all Coetzee’s novels, his Force being always impersonal, and his Victim being always humane”, fits “ideally” with benchmarks defined for the Nobel Prize (Stepanov 2003). Coetzee’s characters are seen as similar to principal characters created by Russian Nobel Prize winners, such as Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, Solzhenitsyn’s *Ivan Denisovich*, Sholokhov’s *Grigorii Melekhov*, and a lyrical hero in Brodsky’s poetry. In contrast to this almost unilateral appreciation for the Nobel Prize Committee’s decision, less interest and even less applause are expressed in respect of Coetzee’s speech on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize, which appeared in Russian translation by Iliin only in 2004 (Kutzee 2004). The speech, which is identified as a “fragment from his forthcoming book”¹⁷ by Zalesova-Doktorova (2004), summarises well, in her view, Coetzee’s artistic credo based on his conviction that there are only a few archetypal situations conditioning human life and that different generations of writers have the right to revisit them and rewrite them from their own point of view and in their own way. Thus, since then the Nobel Prize translators have been spending sleepless nights “Russianising the newly born literary classic before the end of the year is over”, to use Stepanov’s expression (2003) availing to Russian readers most of Coetzee’s works, including *Elizabeth Costello* as well as his earlier novels such as *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Age of Iron* (translated literally as *Sumerechnye zemli, V serdtse strany*, and *Zheleznyi vek*).

16. Stepanov’s (2003) comment illustrates the general sentiment:

Many think of the Nobel Prize that it is a political game. But then there is a question: what political topicality is there in awarding it today to the South African writer? Apartheid has nothing to do with it: firstly, because it ceased to exist ten years ago already; secondly, because of *Disgrace*, the leadership of the ANC had enough brains to accuse Coetzee at one stage of racism; thirdly, because [the prize] had already been given to [a South African] Nadine Gordimer. The Swedish Academy must have had other criteria in mind.

(Stepanov 2003)

17. She has in mind *Foe*, which was first published in 1986. What she erroneously predicts as “forthcoming” must be its Russian translation, which appeared in the course of 2003.

The marketability of Coetzee's novels is enhanced by the visual presentation of the Russian editions of his books, which frequently rely on the image of a woman in distress.¹⁸ To generate wider appeal, advertorials and reviews contain terse summaries of the plot of a given novel, highlighting sensational plot elements, presumably to draw a wider clientele. A few titles of various annotations provide a good illustration of this point: "Dostoevsky from Cape Town" is one such title (Martynienko 2003). "Amoralka v Keiptaune", meaning an "amoral" event in Cape Town – this is how *Disgrace* is announced by Miroshkin ([2004]), while another piece appears under the title "South African Passions" (Tugarinov 2002); yet another is entitled "Chestnoe *Beschestie*" [Honest *Disgrace*] (Babibtseva 2003). Gleb Shuliakov (2001) entitled his short review "Thirtieth Love of Coetzee" (by analogy with the title of a recent novel by Vladimir Sorokin).¹⁹ "From Prison to Prison" is the title of a short article devoted to *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K* (cf. Kopylova 2004). Only a few critics attempt a more detailed analysis of an advertised novel. Occasionally, the discussion of Coetzee's books prompts remarks on political changes in the present-day South Africa. However, there are few if any references to the scholarship on Coetzee, South African and international alike, most obviously because, as pointed out earlier, the reviews considered in this article are of an advertorial nature, written with the general public in mind, their primary objective being to attract readers. On the other hand, the language barrier and limited access Russian scholars have to Western journals, too, may play a role. Nevertheless, even the material available electronically gives an impression of an enthusiastic, albeit somewhat one-sided, reception of J.M. Coetzee's writing in Russia. While less attention is given to theoretical issues or his creative technique, such aspects of Coetzee's writing as its universal appeal, his profound concern for the "little man", his search for unqualified freedom of expression, as well as his courage to tackle difficult and politically sensitive issues are often mentioned as the most laudable characteristics of this great writer. Coetzee is seen as

18. For instance, an edition of *Elizabeth Costello* has a hard cover bearing an image of an angel-like female with butterfly wings, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (*Knizhnaia vitrina* 2004) has on its cover a female figure leaning against some ragged wall, naked and in a foetal position. Although attractive, and depicting a degree of distress, the illustration tells the reader little about the content of the volume, which also contains *Life & Times of Michael K*.

19. *Thirtieth Love of Marina* (*Tridtsataia liubov Mariny* 1995). The analogy is telling in that Sorokin, who is the first Russian to receive the Booker Prize (1996), gained notoriety for his penchant for obscenity.

one of only a few authors in today's world who dare to develop radically new ideas and disturb the [established] foundations – not to harm, not out of spite, but because it is impossible to think otherwise if the world is to progress.

(Infomania.ru [2004])

To sum up, more often than not, Russian critics dote on Coetzee; the tonality of their comments is sympathetic to the protagonists of his works, their overall reading of Coetzee's novels betrays certain shared life experiences but direct references to these are seldom explicit. The following overview, focusing on the Russian commentators' opinions in respect of Coetzee's four major novels, should illustrate this.

Thus, promoting *Waiting for the Barbarians* to the readers of *Knizhnaia vitrina* (2003), its unnamed reviewer stresses the profound nature of the novel which has a power to “transport [them] into the worlds similar to those of Kafka and Beckett”. The content of the novel is characterised in terms of its symbolic significance where

the Empire, the colonel, the Magistrate, the “barbarians”, are all symbols of themselves. The Empire is abstract and infinite. Even the most visualised scenes, such as the one when the judge washes the girl, maimed by the people of the Empire, are symbolic

(*Knizhnaia vitrina* 2003)

Conrad, Kafka and Beckett are the names which define Coetzee's creativity for Liza Novikova (2004), in whose view *Waiting for the Barbarians* presents a peculiar travel into the Conrad-like “heart of darkness” where even the insignificant commiseration with the oppressed on his part ends in the downfall of the main character. On the other hand, she sees *Life & Times of Michael K* permeated with the “Beckett-like surreality and absurdity”. In Michael she sees “the fate of a Dostoevskian little man in South African circumstances”. In her opinion, this makes Coetzee a typical Russian writer and explains “why he did not thunder in Russia when his books appeared in 1989” – because “he was received as one of our own writers”. Her view of Coetzee as a “Russian” writer is corroborated by others and Stepanov explains how the “foreign” is customised in this case:

In the portrayal of an alien world, the readers look for the semblance of their own world, and if this portrayal is accurate, they will always find it. Then the alien [world] becomes one's own. The success of *Disgrace* is not coincidental, and there is no doubt that Coetzee can become Russia's “own” writer.

(Stepanov 2003)

It is difficult to establish to what degree the reception of *Waiting for the Barbarians* was influenced by the publisher's decision to publish it in one volume together with *Life & Times of Michael K*. Nevertheless, the intrinsic unity of the two novels is pointed out. The *Knizhnaia vitrina* (2003) reviewer notes that in both novels the empire is juxtaposed with an innocent human being whose needs are minimal: "For instance, a hot pie. Or a return to the 'womb', where he can hide ...". In conclusion, the review states that this "'minimalism' does not prevent Coetzee's novels becoming almost manifestos".²⁰ The inner unity of the two novels is noted also by Kopylova (2004). Even though she takes cognisance of the universe in the respective novels being structured differently, she explains it in terms of them being "simply ... in different stages of entropy". The critic extends this apparent similarity between the two novels to their protagonists: they both are in some way disadvantaged: one is an old man and the other has a birth defect; they both are on the run from the terror of the State, even though their escape is subjected to different turns of events.

It transpires from Kopylova's review that her native historical and social contexts play an important role in her interpretation of Coetzee's novels. For her they portray the tension between the individual and the State. Thus, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, her focus is on the magistrate's realisation that "the presence of the state, which he knows so well and for which he sacrificed himself, is as unbearable as it is inescapable in one's life and in one's death". For her, his

entire behaviour shows that a human being becomes human not by labour, not by the ability to control fire, not by the ability to read and write but, first of all, thanks to the ability to bury the dead, and not to multiply their numbers.

(Kopylova 2004)

In her reading of the novel, Kopylova (2004) highlights the human capacity for empathy with fellow humans and unqualified respect for the life of another being as the characteristics that distinguish humans from other beings.²¹ This intrinsic humanity of Coetzee's protagonists, that is, their capacity for empathy, makes them particularly vulnerable in confrontation

20. The context of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Solzhenitsyn begs to be brought in here as it replicates the same paradigm: Empire versus an innocent human being, but the Russian critic fails to make this point. While the analogies with Dostoevsky are readily indicated, any reference to recent history is tellingly absent.

21. Even if unintentionally, Kopylova's point applies also to *Age of Iron* and its interpretation in the context of Tolstoy's stories, as suggested earlier.

with the terror inflicted by totalitarian regimes: “[W]hen the State violence is losing its orderly character and predictability, the State transforms – and not those who are outside, but those who are inside its borders become barbarians” (Kopylova 2004). Subsequently, she identifies the world of Michael K as “corroded by barbarity and war to the point of being unrecognisable even to us [Russians], who from childhood grew up accustomed to bad news”. Mostly, however, personal overtones are implicit, discernible only in the selection of issues that are debated in her review. Thus, it is the reference to the power of the State over a defenceless individual. In her life experience, the State security equals the omnipotent KGB, the chief “apparatus of State violence” in the Soviet Union, to use her words, which put many of her compatriots on a “road from one prison to another”. It is difficult to say, however, how much of this realisation springs from her sympathy with Michael who “can exist side by side with, but can never be subjected to rule, imposition, coercion” (Kopylova 2004), for she refrains from drawing any specific parallels. Instead, she turns her reasoning to more general interpretative possibilities for Coetzee’s novel:

[T]he majority of people voluntarily, without even noticing, allow themselves to be incarcerated in all sorts of “camps” and “prisons”: for the clever, for the rich, for the hard-working, for the unemployed

(Kopylova 2004)

Her conclusion, again, sounds personal, even if we agree that it is inspired by Coetzee’s novels:

No, this is not yet another “People, watch out!”. Joseph Coetzee implies something else: “People, be free!”. For, it seems, freedom is not a gift, not a state, not a political order, but a personal goal, which is – paradoxically! – achieved in the process of consistent re-evaluation of one’s own views, opinions, wishes and thoughts.

(Kopylova 2004)

One may note that Kopylova’s conclusions derived from her reading of Coetzee somewhat go against Russian cultural and historical tradition, which is rooted in Orthodox Christianity, Tsarist despotism and Soviet authoritarianism. Freethinking and individualism were and – as seems to be the case – still are seldom encouraged, while debate or criticism is best done in a familiar circle of initiates. As a Russian saying goes, dirty laundry is done in private. One may also note that allusions to the Russian milieu, like the one made by Kopylova, are infrequent, made in *passim*, and usually left without any decisive comment. The explanation as to why the Russian critics stop short of being more specific about the relevance of Coetzee’s

writing to Russians is not straightforward, for the reasons may vary from being dictated by the generic requirement of the reviews to political or personal agendas of the reviewers. It is best to wait, then, until more substantial scholarship on Coetzee emerges in Russia and more intertextual and intercultural comments are made.

Unquestionably, the novel that elicited the widest critical response from Russian readers is *Disgrace*, translated by Iliin. Reviews in the press and literary journals followed soon after the book reached the shelves. One may note that the Nobel Prize was anticipated for the South African author: “After reading it, one must note that its author deserves not only the Booker – the Nobel Prize must be given to him, the sooner, the better” (Olshanskii 2001).

Usually the content of the novel is summarised in three sentences, like in the following summary featured on the site of Knizhnyi klub 36.6:

The topic of the book is as always in Coetzee’s writing twisted and dizzy. A 52-year-old professor of Cape Town University is accused of soliciting sexual favours from a student; his daughter is subjected to rape by aboriginal Africans. The professor writes an opera about Byron and the great poet’s Italian lover with whom the main character identifies.

Life [is] chaotic and terrifying, and only art has the power to resolve conflicts and problems.

(Olshanskii 2001)

The above quotation illustrates the point made earlier about the terse and sensationalist nature of advertorials. Thus sex, rape, illicit love, are implied as the key focus areas of Coetzee’s novel while the final conjecture that art has the capacity to bring order to the chaos of life is left to the reader to prove.

Although it is natural that different commentators are drawn to different aspects of *Disgrace*, one theme seems to dominate the Russian critics’ response to the novel. As a rule, it arouses pessimistic thoughts; it is seen as an “excellent and at the same time hopeless novel”, as a reviewer of *NaStoiashchaia literatura* ([2005]) states, pointing out that the world emerging from the novel is

repugnant – and the only possibility for it to remain bearable is [for people] to kill in themselves all that is alive: thoughts, feelings, aspirations. One can get on with this world only when one submits to it: when one is afraid to take a step to the side or to raise the hand even if one is not asked. Openness, courage are penalised. The choice between life and existence is predetermined. Otherwise one must expect privation, one must expect disgrace, one way or another life will be not cheerful. Because cheerfulness is an illusion, justice is a category that belongs in books. And if in your veins flows hot blood, and if

in your chest beats a passionate heart, it means that it will be you who will have to pay for the sins of all humanity.

(*NaStoiashchaia literatura* [2005])

There are attempts at making readers aware of the novel's relevance in Russia. Kuznetsov (2004), who considers *Disgrace* merely a "readable" novel, for instance, is drawn to David Lurie. He compares the inquest into his relationship with a student to the former Soviet-era practice of submitting personal lives to public scrutiny by various Party and Workers Union committees in the State's relentless drive to watch over the morals of Soviet citizens. With only a few exceptions the publication of *Disgrace* is hailed as *the* event of the year (Kalashnikova 2002a) and the main achievement of literature in translation (Olshanskii 2001). One way or another, it is apparent that the interest in Coetzee's *Disgrace* in Russia is substantial and comes from various quarters.²² According to the *Inostrannaia literatura* survey, it was rated third best novel (after Arturo Perez and Michel Houellebecq) in the years 2000-2001. It is somewhat surprising, thus, that this furore is not accompanied by more consequential reviews of the novel. Nevertheless, some points of interest are made, even though they are dispersed in a variety of reviews. For instance, one of the earlier commentaries of *Disgrace* comes from Shuliakov (2001), who makes certain comparative suggestions in respect of Nabokov's *Lolita* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Another point of interest is his explication of the novel's title. Shuliakov's idea of Lurie being a double of Nabokov's chief character, Humbert Humbert, striking though it may be, is left unsubstantiated²³ and as such it seems to be ill conceived – after all,

22. It has even been listed in the website of "Dark Mood Literature" ([2005]) with a comment that "as a whole, the book attempts to transmit the spiritual experience of a human being who is losing the past, the future, hopes, and dreams – all, except oneself".

23. It seems that the analogy with Nabokov's *Lolita* is suggested by a choice of cover in the Russian version of *Disgrace* (Inostranka BSG Press, 2001). One of the earlier English publications of *Lolita* (by Vintage International) has a black and white cover photograph of a girl's legs in ankle socks and shoes. The same publisher also produced a CD recording of *Lolita* by Jeremy Irons with the same cover. The Inostranka publication features a girl, shown from the waist down, with her skirt lifted up, her legs in stockings with garters, and school shoes on her feet. In the background the upper body of a stately figure of an older man is visible. By contrast Amphora Publishers' (2004) choice of cover is rather odd. It features a girl, lying on an empty road as if just having been thrown out of a speeding vehicle, with her hands in the air and her skirt thrown over her face.

Lurie has a sexual encounter with a young woman who is in a consensual age limit, while the middle-aged Humbert Humbert is obsessed with a minor, his 12-year-old stepdaughter. Furthermore, Lurie's affair with his female student is not the central plot-binding event in Coetzee's novel (but is its point of departure) whereas Humbert Humbert's pursuit of Lolita is. Finding no significant insight on the proposed analogy between *Disgrace* and *Lolita*, we must accept Shuliakov's implication as yet another way of titillating the curiosity of the prospective readers.

The second analogy, to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, is more seminal even though Shuliakov's conclusions dissipate in the ironic jargon of his review. The main thesis of his argument is that "the entire novel by the white South African" may be reduced to the unfolding of "Dostoevsky's motto 'submit, proud human being, and toil in the field of humanity'". The analogy with Dostoevsky leads the reviewer to the meaning of the novel's title, which he explicates in the following words:

But most disgusting in this truthful, alas!, story is not the Sonia-like obtuse submissiveness of the professor's daughter. The most loathsome is [the fact] that daddy (the very same Raskolnikov) also "submits" and begins sullenly to plough "the field".

And it is, strictly, in this that the "disgrace" (or, more precisely, the spiritual and hormonal castration) lies according to Coetzee. That is why, roughly, the novel is a joyless history of trampling down, knocking out, hounding out of our life the type of "a living human being" for whom the true sense of "honour" is not in the "fear of death" but in the "desire to live" – in all its manifestations, so to speak. This novel resembles Kanningem's texts by its desperate air of contemporaneity and of a certain general feeling of utter hopelessness: of the life that remains less and less, and literature that is no longer needed.

(Shuliakov 2001)

For Shuliakov, as well as for many other Russian reviewers, *Disgrace* is a pessimistic and "shocking" novel, to quote Apollon Davidson, who uses Coetzee's novel as a pretext for a lengthy essay "What is This? Is it a Warning to the World?" (2001), in which he tackles xenophobic attitudes in the modern world, including Russia.

Davidson is a Russian specialist on Africa and has the benefit of being better familiar with South African reality than most Russian critics since he spent many years as a researcher at the University of Cape Town during the 1980s and 1990s. He refers to the University's well-known progressive stand for which, according to Davidson, it was named "Kremlin on the Hill" by the apartheid functionaries. He also admits personal acquaintance with J. M. Coetzee. After sharing his knowledge of the areas and places where the action of *Disgrace* takes place, Davidson makes his point by juxtaposing

Russian and South African transitions. In his view, the change of power, in both countries, is only the starting point of the prolonged period of profound changes in the social and economic fabric of society. He regards *Disgrace* as a work in which Russians, also a multinational and multiracial society,²⁴ can read about the consequences of unresolved racial tensions. According to Davidson, Coetzee's novel illustrates the deception created by the initial nonviolent transition of power in South Africa, which took place mostly because of the statesmanship of Nelson Mandela. Davidson believes in the likelihood of the current conciliation turning into a bloody conflict as a result of various groups giving prominence to their racial, ethnic or national interests at the expense of peaceful coexistence. In his opinion, experience shows that this is a historical necessity. In his reference to the novel, he focuses only on the rape episode and quotes from *Disgrace* passages that allow him to conclude that Lucy's submissive reaction to the rape is tantamount to her acceptance of her violation as the "inescapable reality" of the post-apartheid era. He agrees with her that it is the price she must pay if she wants to stay on the farm. He sees her attitude as the only way forward for South African Whites and White Europeans, for that matter, in their dealings with the non-European population which flooded European cities after the fall of colonial empires. Her behaviour is for him a pointer to the process of redeeming the sins of the colonial past – a historical necessity if any degree of understanding between the oppressed and the oppressors is to be achieved. If Coetzee "chose to portray the extreme situation" (that is, Lucy's rape), in order "to shake the readers and force them to "think seriously about issues which for some or other reason they are trying to avoid" (Davidson 2001), so be it, we read in conclusion to Davidson's deliberations.

Davidson's essay propelled further discussion and at least two commentators responded to it. One of them is Aleksei Tugarinov (2002) who in his piece "South African Passions" summarises extensive fragments from Davidson's essay, especially those painting a pessimistic prognosis for South Africa. His subtitle is symptomatically sensational and fear-mongering: "In the new novel by the fighter against apartheid three blacks rape the daughter of a white professor". The difference between the two articles is that by drawing the pessimistic scenario for South Africa, Davidson justifies the relevance of Coetzee's writing for Russia, making certain daring, controversial points, while Tugarinov's conclusion takes no note of conflicts, extreme nationalism and racial hatred, evident in the post-Soviet Russia. On the contrary *Disgrace* puts his mind at ease:

24. Historically, Russia always consisted of ethnic Russians as well as of people of other national and ethnic origins.

We, Slavs, carry no responsibility whatsoever for what was going on for centuries in Africa. We had no colonies there, we were not involved in slave trade, did not chase the Hereros into the Kalahari sentencing tens of thousands to death from starvation.²⁵ We were free from this all – free from the burden of mastership and of the burden of slavery. But the rest of the Whites will have to think – the descendants of a master who surrendered his rights voluntarily might find themselves as disgraced as Lucy in Coetzee’s novel

(Tugarinov 2002)

By washing Russia’s hands of colonial history in Africa, Tugarinov not only misrepresents Davidson’s argument but also declines to acknowledge Russia’s as well as the Soviet Union’s colonial interventions in other parts of the world, namely Asia and Central Europe, some of which are still unresolved. Current dramatic conflict with Chechnya drives this point home, but less conspicuous examples are provided daily by the news bulletins.

Another response to Davidson comes from Kostyrko (2002) who hinges his argumentation on Davidson’s notion of coexistence and understanding. He agrees with Davidson on most issues, but is apprehensive about the lack of clarity in Davidson’s argument. Thus, he feels the need for specifying the terms of “understanding” that Davidson is talking about, especially when people with various pasts and various cultural and intellectual backgrounds seek mutual understanding. He rejects Davidson’s idea of equalising to the lowest denominator, replacing it with notions of self-respect and respect for one’s value system:

Should we fall on all fours as the heroine of Coetzee’s novel did, in order to talk as equals with various xenophobes – “patriots” of all sorts – or should we retain the dignity of culture which “white civilisation” accumulated, and rather look for partners with whom we can talk on our level?

(Kostyrko 2002)

Developing his idea further, he interprets Coetzee’s portrayal of Lucy not as a case to emulate but as an illustration of how *not* to behave:

In my view, the conformity of the South African writer’s heroine to the new order of things, and the very form of her interpretation of what “mutual understanding” is – is the act of disgrace [committed by] a European. The

25. Davidson refers to this historical event with the intention to illustrate the double moral standards of the colonisers who in the European context were civil, polite and kind while in dealings on the African continent they frequently showed their ruthless and cruel side.

disgrace, in this case, equals the voluntary renunciation of their heritage by the descendants of European culture.

(Kostyrko 2002)

One would like to know what the term “heritage” means in this context, for the malice of rape itself has no cultural, national or ethnic codification; it is an act of violence committed against another human being. Nevertheless, it transpires from Kostyrko’s appraisal of Lucy’s behaviour after the rape that, in his opinion, Coetzee condemns her for surrendering her pride and her identity, while the price she is prepared to pay for staying on the farm is too high.²⁶ The question whether Coetzee chose Lucy as a representation of disgrace or, as Davidson suggests, as an example to emulate, is inconsequential here, but the ensuing discussion confirms the provocative nature of Coetzee’s novel.

Kostyrko also contests Davidson’s preoccupation with such concepts as nation or ethnic group. He argues that in the modern world people have to live together; continuous demographic migration over a number of centuries renders such concepts as national or ethnic purity null and void. In Kostyrko’s opinion, individual rights should be given prominence over the issues of national significance: “[T]he nation is not a termite hill, not a flock; the nation consists of individualities and not of wrecked, obedient performers of someone else’s will. First – a worthy human being, and only later – a worthy nation. In this lies the dignity of a person and of a nation” (Kostyrko 2002).

That *Disgrace* provoked a serious debate should be seen as a sign of its true, although not strictly literary, resonance in Russia. As the preceding summary shows, it prompted one commentator to call for striving towards understanding between various nations and stirred his national conscience. It left another one unmoved, self-satisfied at best, in his misguided belief that “mastership” has only one, racial face. In yet another commentator it awakened ideas about the coexistence of individual people, of building understanding grounded not in condescending acceptance of mediocrity and malevolence but in self-respect and respect for the rights of others.

26. Kostyrko’s appraisal of Lucy’s behaviour makes one realise how similar her stance is to the one taken by Ivan Denisovich in Solzhenitsyn’s novella. He, too, is an innocent man who chooses not to rebel against or challenge the regime. His acceptance of the Gulag routine as well as his daily obedience and dutiful work in inhumane conditions, however, is not interpreted as a disgrace but simply as a manifestation of his dignity. In the context of Kostyrko’s challenge to Lucy, this uniform interpretation of Ivan Denisovich begs to be challenged or, at least, the ambivalence of his attitude needs to be acknowledged.

The critical reverberation caused by the ambivalent and disturbing *Disgrace* revived interest in Coetzee's other works in Russia, including *The Master of Petersburg*, which remained "unnoticed by the readers" when first published in 1999 (Questionnaire 2002). The novel, which appeals to the Russian readers' imagination more than any other book (Roshchina 2004), is "imbued with Russian spirit to the extent that it makes one think that Coetzee has come across a time-machine which affords him the privilege of peering at nineteenth-century Russia" (Zavalnaia 2004). Apart from strictly literary considerations, Russians are drawn to *The Master of Petersburg* to see how a famous South African writer perceives their culture and how well he knows St Petersburg. It seems that in their view he has passed the test with distinction. As Olga Martynienko (2003) notes, although there is no trace in his biography that he ever visited the city, his knowledge of its "Dostoevskian" atmosphere and its topography "[is conveyed] with meticulous and even trying exactitude".

The Russian title of the novel is "Autumn in Petersburg". Sergei Iliin, who translated this novel into Russian, considers his translation to be one of his more notable achievements and defends his decision to change the title by saying that, for semantic reasons,²⁷ "a neutral variant seemed more appropriate; after all, the action takes place in autumn" (Kalashnikova 2002). Nonetheless, presumably for identification purposes, the cover of the Russian copy is bilingual while the illustration on the cover seems to capture well the novel's time and place of action as well as its atmosphere.²⁸

One can assume that the comparison of the original with the translation will one day become a subject of study. This is what Iliin has to say about his approach:

Once I made an experiment with *Autumn in Petersburg* by Coetzee. The journal *Foreign Literature* asked me to brush up on conversations in the novel "à la Dostoevski" a little. You may say, I refreshed in my mind all that Dostoevsky had written until and including *The Devils* [also translated as *The Possessed*] –the novel ends when Dostoevsky begins [to work] on *The Devils*. To write like he does – impossible, but I did try to imitate him. Later, I read

27. The Russian equivalent of "master" is *master* synonymous with *khoziain*, that is "owner", "proprietor". Iliin rightly considers these meanings misleading in the context of Coetzee's novel.

28. It shows a corner in a dark room with a large painting of a couple clad in period dress and a large travel trunk against the wall. There is a whitish sheet thrown over the top of this trunk, draped in a way which evokes the image of the pedestal at the base of the granite sculpture of Peter the Great – The Bronze Horseman monument, which is one of the better-known landmarks in St Petersburg.

the review on the Internet: “It is striking how the author penetrates the style of Dostoevsky ...”. I assure you, there was no penetration on Coetzee’s part whatsoever: chopped phrases, all in the present tense.

(Iliin 2003)

There is no place to debate here whether, or to what extent, Coetzee intended to imitate Dostoevsky’s style and what he might have had in mind when engaging in this particular literary intercourse with the Russian classic. Nevertheless, whether it is because of what is considered to be a masterful translation or for some other reason, Russian commentators maintain that Coetzee knows Dostoevsky very well, sometimes better than many Russian readers do. True, some scrupulous critics point out certain errors, but they find them acceptable if not vital in the fictional universe of Coetzee’s novel:

Sometimes Coetzee errs in respect of details, but he is extraordinarily tactful when it comes to space. With an astonishing taste he recreates the inner rhythm of another – Petersburg’s – life; he perceives its vapid tonality, its tragic concealed meaning. The spirit of the “Dostoevskian and devilish” Petersburg hovers over the stage. [He portrays] the episodes of “descending into hell” – into the old cellars, which are inhabited by prostitutes and hungry children (and which at the same time hide a secret printing-press, ready to excrete aspersion). These crossings into the depths of Petersburg slums are done in the manner of the Russian city novel. Possibly, this “effect of presence” is enhanced by language as if borrowed from Russian prose: one would like to believe that this is not only due to a diligent translation.

(Volgin 1999)

The main “error”, however, is Coetzee’s departures from “historical truth”, for, historically speaking, the stepson outlived Dostoevsky by 19 years.²⁹ This is too obvious an “error”, especially for a writer of Coetzee’s calibre, to make without an important reason. To understand this reason is to find a key to understanding the novel. Khramtsev (2002) is one of those who maintain that the strategy of discord between the historical and literary truths in Coetzee’s novel is fully substantiated within the novel’s fictional universe. In his view, Coetzee invented a plot in which Dostoevsky’s true biography is of no significance, [for] Coetzee depicts, or tries to depict, psychological processes. The key to this conflation of historical truth with literary invention is Dostoevsky’s illness (epilepsy) and its mind-altering nature. In Khramtsev’s view, this applies specifically to Coetzee’s Dostoevsky’s “delirious idea to fuse with the spirit of Isaev [Pavel], to fulfil

29. The real Pavel Aleksandrovich Isaev died a natural death in 1900 when he was 54 years old. In his life he did not distinguish himself in any particular way.

his will". He speculates that the altering effect of epilepsy on one's psyche motivates "shifting the idea of fusion with the son's spirit to the sphere of sexuality, and his [fictional Dostoevsky's] attraction to Matriona". The support for this interpretation Khramtsev finds in Coetzee's placing Dostoevsky's most candid sexual encounter with Matriona immediately after having suffered a particularly strong epileptic fit.

A similar opinion transpires from a brief review by Danilkin:

Wittingly manipulating characters, which belong to someone else, Coetzee is painting vividly this hell in Dostoevsky's soul, from which *The Devils* jumped; in his head this man has not a jar full of spiders – he has entire chests swarming with insects. An unattractive, bony, bearded man writhes in epileptic fits, occupies himself with making love to his landlady, crawls around the room dressed in his dead stepson's clothes. If it is a detective story,³⁰ then it is a Petersburgian detective story – about the suffering of the soul that the writer is forced to torture for the sake of a literary wage. Coetzee's Dostoevsky – the amoral Father God who, with the help of his novels, sends into the world innumerable martyrs whom he enjoys and painfully detests observing. Coetzee understands perfectly that it was Dostoevsky who turned Petersburg into a sadomasochistic Disneyland, into a factory where the "Russian soul" is made. That is why the adventures of FMD [Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky] in his own literary space are, if you like, even amusing: "Autumn of a Madman" with the subtitle "Problems of Dostoevsky's Ethics".

(Danilkin [2005])

The critic recognises devilish characteristics in Coetzee's Dostoevsky (the amoral Father God) as if referring to Coetzee's question put to Frank (cf. Note 3). Furthermore, both Khramtsev and Danilkin justify Coetzee's reasons for painting such a controversial image of Dostoevsky by linking his novel with the Russian classic's most disturbing work, *The Devils*. This points directly at "Stavrogin's Confession", the novel's final chapter, which Dostoevsky was advised by his publisher to leave out. In Coetzee's Western criticism this idea is not new (cf., for instance, de Jong 1995). Nevertheless, in Russia, Danilkin, and Khramtsev especially, are among the first who have put forth a suggestion that "in his novel, Coetzee ponders over at least one theory in respect of the idea for 'Stavrogin's Confession' or perhaps the idea for the entire novel *The Devils*" (Khramtsev 2002).

The Infomania.ru ([2004]) reviewer states that it was *The Master of Petersburg* which earned the Nobel [sic] for its author and that this novel

30. ... which Danilkin (2001) believes it is, calling the novel "retrodetective". Another reviewer calls the novel a "historical detective story" (Infomania.ru [2004]).

decisively “turned Coetzee into the Dostoevsky of the Black Continent”, whose main concerns are “suffering and misfortunes of little people, ‘humiliated and insulted’, regardless of nationality”. Not all critics, however, approach Coetzee in this way – as an embodiment of someone who may be called a modern Dostoevsky. They rather insist on seeing *The Master of Petersburg* on its own terms. The same goes for the chief character of the novel and as soon as “the readers get immersed in the dull cheerless atmosphere of autumnal Petersburg ... the ‘devilish’ whirl of characters, and the progress of the criminal intrigue, they tend to forget that the chief character in this novel is Dostoevsky” (Volgin 1999).

The survey for this article was prompted by Coetzee’s apparent interest in Russian culture and history, evidence of which we find in his scholarly as well as creative work. Instances of certain correspondence between his works and Russian literature were noted and briefly explicated with the intention to show the potential for further comparative study as well as to illustrate in what way such an approach can enrich the interpretation of Coetzee’s writing. The research was also encouraged by a vast number of annotations relating to Coetzee in the Russian media, indicative of the favourable reception of his works among the Russian readers. In order to assess the degree and nature of his popularity, some of these reviews and comments were scrutinised while attention was paid to the utterances that contained reference to Coetzee’s art in general, as well as to some of his major works, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Disgrace*, and *The Master of Petersburg*. In addition to this, suggestions of possible relevance of his writing in Russia were traced with zeal. Unfortunately, these were not many. This can be explained by the fact that despite the claimed “Russianness” of Coetzee, his presence in Russia has a relatively short history and his writing is not yet fully absorbed in the consciousness of Russian readers. It also is seldom seen as a filter which would encourage them to look at their own history as well as their present in a different, perhaps more critical, contesting light. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Russian critics acknowledge Coetzee’s lack of optimism and accept his tendency to create in his works a consistently grim universe as a reflection of being faithful to his artistic conscience, as a manifestation of his civic as well as artistic courage.³¹ In the perception of his Russian readers, Coetzee is undoubtedly one of the most prominent modern writers, whose art has a universal appeal in that “he attempts to find not so much the plot as [he tries] to find a global metaphor for describing the surrounding world” (Bavilskii in Shuliakov 2002).

31. Similar are Coetzee’s own criteria of greatness in a writer whom he prizes for being “faithful only to the inner voice of his artistic conscience, and in that sense above politics” (reference to Ivan Turgenev; cf. Coetzee 2001: 225).

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