

# Ambits of Moral Judgement: Of Pain, Empathy and Redemption in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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## Summary

This article explores the structure of empathy in *Age of Iron*, and argues that the novel exposes the horrors of oppression constructed solely on the idea of the victims' perceived difference to the self-appointed master race or class. Coetzee not only raises awareness of the dilemma of morally conscious individuals in our increasingly fractured and violent society; more particularly he sketches the problem of pain and the challenge it poses to the individual. While it is impossible for an individual to stop pain or suffering entirely, she can redeem herself from its Medusan face by a leap of empathy, and by keeping the memory of the oppressed alive. In this way she not only bears testimony for the victims, but also becomes one with them.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verken die struktuur van empatie in *Age of Iron*, en voer aan dat die roman die gruwels ontbloot van verdrukking wat plaasvind bloot omdat die slagoffers oënskynlik van die selfaangestelde heersersras of -klas verskil. Coetzee maak die leser nie net bewus van die dilemma van moreel bewuste individue in ons toenemend gebroke en gewelddadige samelewing nie; hy skets veral ook die probleem van pyn en die uitdaging wat dit aan die individu stel. Hoewel dit onmoontlik vir 'n individu is om pyn of lyding volkome te stop, kan sy haarself uit die Medusa-kloue bevry deur 'n empatie-sprong te waag en deur die herinneringe aan die onderdrukte lewend te hou. Op hierdie wyse getuig sy nie net namens die slagoffers nie, maar word sy een van hulle.

When some men suffer unjustly ... it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it.  
(J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*)

## Tragedy and the Human Condition

Writing about South African literature in the 1970s, J.M. Coetzee observes, in “Man’s Fate in the Novels of Alex La Guma”, that tragedy had been the favoured mode of literary expressions especially among white South Africans. Tragedy is typically that of “interracial love: a white man and a black woman or vice versa, fall foul of the law against miscegenation” (Coetzee 1992a: 346). The essay was published in 1974. That same year, he published his first novel, *Dusklands*, in which he confronts the American tragedy of the Vietnam War and the fate of individuals involved in it, thereby giving indications of the trajectory of his own intellectual and moral persuasions. With reference to the South African novel Coetzee writes: “[T]he tragic hero is a scapegoat who takes our punishment .... By his suffering we undergo a ritual expiation, and as we watch in sympathy our emotions are purged, as Aristotle noted, through the operation of pity and terror” (Coetzee 1992a: 346).

Coetzee employs Aristotelian understanding of tragedy to draw attention to the human condition in South Africa, the condition in which people are subjected to undeserved suffering and pain. He is generally concerned with the problem of human pain and complex moral judgements that arise from this. I take seriously the quote taken from Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, that “when some men suffer unjustly ... it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it” (Coetzee 1997: 152). Whom does Coetzee want to put to shame with, or, in his stories? The reader or the protagonists? What is the nature of that shame? How do those who witness this suffering overcome their shame? Lynne Tirrell has convincingly argued that “engaging in the practice of storytelling contributes to the development of the moral agency of both the teller and the reader or listener” (Tirrell 1990: 118). From Tirrell’s perspective, therefore, Coetzee seems to be interested in the moral world of his readers. While I acknowledge Tirrell’s argument, my discussion of *Age of Iron* will not adopt the moral trajectory she proposes. In other words, I am not interested in the reader’s moral nourishment per se; rather I am interested in the relationship between one character and another; who is in pain, and who is considered radically other. How does Character “x” react to the reality of character “y”, and what does it reveal about their world, “z”, and indirectly about our world. I argue, though, that the narrative structure and philosophy of *Age of Iron* conduce the novel to the world of empathy.

Coetzee, however, is no one to endorse an easy identification of readers and characters. In “Unsettling Stories: Disruptive Narrative Strategies in Marina Warner’s *Indigo* and *The Leto Bundle*”, Lisa Propst alerts us to the dangers of cheap empathy in literature: “In sharing the pain of people abused or enslaved, readers can fail to recognise the particularities of those people’s experiences or the limited forms of power those people wielded.



Writing that helps people put themselves in the shoes of others can paradoxically be divisive (Propst 2009: 221).

Indeed, as Molly Abel Travis argues, Coetzee engages in narrative distancing to prevent a “too easy an empathy with the protagonists” (Travis 2010: 231). This is true in *Disgrace* as it is also in Coetzee’s earlier novels, including *Age of Iron*. As a writer of high ethical consciousness, he creates a world and invites the reader to engage that world morally. A more nuanced understanding of empathy could, however, allow us a richer interpretation of Coetzee’s works in this regard.

Adam Smith argues that there are certain principles in human nature that make the fortune of others interesting, and that render their happiness necessary to us even though we derive nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. We experience sorrow through the sorrow of others. These identifications are achieved not automatically, but primarily by “conceiving what we ourselves should feel in that like situation”. To place ourselves in the situations of others, to conceive ourselves enduring the same pain requires a conscious effort of imagination. In some measure, we become “the same person with” the people, and even form some idea of their “sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them” (Smith 2002: 11-12). Martha Nussbaum updates this 18th-century idea of sympathy with her understanding of empathy, noting how impossible it is for one to become the same person with the sufferer of pain. Thus, for her, there must be a cognitive distance between person “x” and person “y”. Empathy “involves a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer” (Nussbaum 2001: 327). Thus she retains Smith’s idea of one conceiving of what one would feel in the position of the sufferer. “The empathetic person attempts to reconstruct the mental experience of another, and if she does this too crudely she will probably not get credit for empathy at all” (Nussbaum 2001: 328). What differentiates empathy from sympathy or pity lies in the quality of the reconstruction of the other’s pain, in understanding. In other words, sympathy does not need understanding to be effective. The phrase from the quote above, “when some men suffer unjustly”, underscores Coetzee’s privileging of understanding in empathy. It is important that we determine that the other’s suffering is undeserved before we feel the shame of their fate, otherwise we would not attain any moral maturity. A criminal who pays for his crime does not evoke the same emotional response as a victim of rape does. It is for this reason that Nussbaum emphasises, in her discussion of the relationship between empathy and compassion, that it is important that the sufferer of pain is proven innocent. The idea that the sufferer is innocent will be of immense relevance in our understanding of empathy in *Age of Iron*, especially in Mrs. Curren’s responses to different people’s experience of pain.



## South Africa and the Dearth of Empathy

Prior to the publication of *Age of Iron*, J.M. Coetzee had relied almost exclusively on allegory to portray the human condition, or the truth of South Africa. The change in style came with the South African war against black children in 1986, in which the violence unleashed against innocent populations reached its peak. According to Susan VanZanten Gallagher, it was the “final outrage of self-destruction of South Africa” (Gallagher 1991: 196). This incident, among other brutal forms of state repression, must have alerted Coetzee to the limits of allegory in the face of human suffering.

In his 1987 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, Coetzee acknowledged that, under the apartheid regime, his country was in bondage. It was a society of masters and slaves, one in which no one was free. The law of miscegenation was but one symptom of a more far-reaching Hegelian malady, a schizoid blend of fear and denial on the part of the masters, the white settlers. Like Hegel’s master, white settlers in South Africa only allowed themselves a one-dimensional recognition from the natives. There is, as Coetzee argues about the self-appointed master race of whites, a “denial of an unacknowledgeable desire to embrace Africa, embrace the body of Africa; and fear of being embraced in return by Africa” (Coetzee 1992b: 97).

Coetzee’s understanding of the tragedy of South Africa is similar to the rigid, colonialist, Manichaean world discussed by Abdul JanMohamed who claims that the colonial world operated through a Manichaean allegory that locked the native in an essentialist position of otherness relative to the settlers (JanMohamed 1986: 80). Coetzee sees the failure of love as the core of the “unfreedom” of the masters of South Africa. He writes: “To be blunt: their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent ... their excessive talk, about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed towards the land, that is, towards what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds, and animals and flowers” (Coetzee 1992b: 97).

What can an individual member of a privileged group or class do when faced with the massive abuse of human rights especially when those abuses are constructed on the perceived radical otherness of the other? What can the writer do? “South African literature,” according to Coetzee “is the kind you would expect people to write from prison”. It is a kind of literature that “reflects feelings of entrapment, entrapment in infinitudes” (Coetzee 1992b: 98). Coetzee suggests that South African literature of the time was largely self-centred; it was also a literature that revealed a yearning for freedom. In a particularly Sartrean turn, Coetzee asks: “What prevents the South African writer from ... writing his way out of a situation in which his art, no matter how well-intentioned, is ... too indirect to have any but the slightest and



most belated effect on the life of the community or the course of history?” (Coetzee 1992b: 98-99).

Given his preference for allegory, at least until *Age of Iron*, Coetzee would have been the first to admit that a novelist is likely to have little or no impact on history. Yet he seems to suggest that not to try to bear witness would be an outright moral betrayal. He writes in “Into the Dark Chamber”, that the dark, forbidden chamber created by politics is “the origin of novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state unwittingly creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation” (Coetzee 1992c: 364). Coetzee implies that the state excites the imagination of the novelist to expose an enveloped world or humanity; the artist recreates that world. Recreating a world has moral implications, the most obvious of which is the challenge of providing an alternative world where, in the words of David Attwell, “ethical consciousness is not hamstrung by interestedness” (Attwell 1992: 13). The challenge for the writer is, according to Coetzee, to not fall into the trap of playing “by the rules of the state”. The challenge is “how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms” (Coetzee 1992c: 364).

In his analysis of Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*, Coetzee himself makes clear the moral demands of the narrative of the Other. In an episode metonymic of South African brutality, Rosa watches a black man flog a donkey that will not move. Rosa is conflicted. She eventually flees South Africa. According to Coetzee, Rosa has made an empathic leap in which she put herself in the position of that helpless animal, and, she is anguished. What she, in her anguish “waits for is a time when humanity will be restored across the face of society, and therefore when all human acts, including the flogging of an animal, will be returned to the ambit of moral judgement” (Coetzee 1992c: 368).

I understand Coetzee’s use of “ambits of moral judgement” as the condition in which certain acts of human suffering put us to shame and directly threaten to dislodge the personal, communal or cosmic balance. Those acts must be subjected to the crucible of good and evil to which we, individually, have to say a yes or a no. Morality is ultimately about pain – how we and others avoid it, and conversely, how we increase pleasure and happiness. Other concerns – duty, justice, fairness, respect, love – are mere appendages to the central question of how we deal with human suffering.

## **Empathy: An Individual Response to Systemic Oppression**

*Age of Iron* is written as a long letter. In Cape Town, South Africa, Mrs. Elizabeth Curren, a classics professor, is dying of cancer. In a letter to her daughter, who lives in the United States, she recounts incidents that occur during her last days. Mr. Vercueil, a vagrant, appears on her property. She



witnesses the burning down of a black township, the bullet-riddled body of Bheki, the son of her housemaid, Florence, and the killing, on her own property, of Bheki's friend, John. The novel begins innocently with the description of a specific space the daughter knows, "an alley down the side of the garage .... Now it is a dead place, waste, without use" (Coetzee 1990: 3). It is there that Mrs. Curren finds a vagrant, Mr. Vercueil. In the same breath she must also inform her daughter of a critical change occurring in her own body; she received the news from her doctor of her cancer (p. 4).

In its power to fix the reader's attention on this transient world, the novel hints at the impending tragedy and the moral response it demands; the sad, evocative tone that recalls times well spent underscores the bond between mother and daughter, but most importantly it suggests emptiness and longing in the lonely speaker: "How I longed for you!" (p. 5). Mrs. Curren's longing for her daughter is the justification for her writing her daughter a letter which is rich in symbolic relevance. She wants to be where her daughter is as much as she wants her daughter to be where she herself is.

The allusion to a "waste" patch of land "without use" is not just a reference to the desolation of the land itself. Through that allusion and her longing, the speaker indirectly draws attention to her own body, her humanity. Her body stands as a symbol of wasteland that cries for attention. Mrs. Curren feels that she is in prison; she attempts to write her way out of that entrapment. Her letter is therefore a journey to the world beyond her, to the other. It is ironically a journey to herself as, indeed, all journeys (in literature) are. However, the road will necessarily go through the other. She will need the recognition of the other. This is not the typical Hegelian master/slave dialectic wherein the master needs the slave's recognition for his own self-identification, but then offers nothing in return. Mrs. Curren needs the other for self-discovery, for redemption, and this is achieved on terms dictated by a shared humanity, that is to say, she recognises the other. This other whom she needs is Mr. Vercueil, whom she "recognized from the streets: tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs" (p. 3). It is revealing how she describes Mr. Vercueil: "wasting", "wasted" human (p. 4). She uses the same adjective used for a patch of land, a space, where her daughter used to play as a child. It is richly symbolic that the discovery of Mr. Vercueil occurred on the same day that she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. We have therefore three entities wasting, wasted. Finitude meets mortality. An ex-classics professor and a vagrant provide us with an image of radical otherness. At the moment, though, their worlds appear intertwined by the strings of their condition.

Commenting on the meaning of the name Vercueil, Susan VanZanten Gallagher reminds us that the "Dutch stem *kuil* means 'hole in the ground', suggesting Mr. Vercueil's affinity with Dostoevski's underground man" (Gallagher 1991: 203). If *kuil* is a hole in the ground as Gallagher suggests, then Coetzee is also suggesting that Mr. Vercueil's presence reminds Mrs.



Curren of her closeness to the ultimate hole in the ground. It appears then that the pain of the diagnosis began to seep into Mrs. Curren's life in drops that would form a well of wisdom. The moment she learns she has cancer she realises that she is necessarily a dependent being, and realising that she needs others implies for her that others need her. It is the fact of being human.

Mrs. Curren's realisation of her vulnerability opens her eyes to the reality of others; she must enter into a meaningful dialogue with them if she is to realise herself fully. Perhaps it is the realisation of our fundamental vulnerability and dependence that totally negates our feelings of position of power on the one hand, and on the other, makes others less hostile to us. Mike Marais argues that the question raised in *Age of Iron* is primarily "how can that which is hostile to the other be made into a home?" (Marais 2009: 95). The question could just as easily have been: How can I open myself up to the radical otherness of the other? How can I put myself in the position of the other, regardless of how imprisoned I am in my body? Mrs. Curren is white and middle-class. She is of the group for whom the apartheid government's oppressive apparatuses claim to be working. She belongs to the master race in a typical postcolonial world. Her quest is to distance herself from her prison world to reach out to the world beyond, to those whom her government had been suppressing and oppressing, supposedly in her interest. She realises that she has been offered a "divine" opportunity provided by two events unfolding in the space of an hour: "the news, long dreaded, and the reconnaissance, this other annunciation. The first of the carrion birds, prompt, unerring" (Coetzee 1990: 5). Mr. Vercueil, this radical other, nonetheless, presents a rare opportunity for her to connect to the world, and she takes it. It is thanks to him that her daughter will read her letter. We have, therefore, a triangular relationship between the reader of the letter, the writer, and Mr. Vercueil. The rest of the story is a classic lesson in empathy that evolves in the interaction between the three. In a move that reads like an invitation to the reader to share a space with Mr. Vercueil, Mrs. Curren recognises that the "scavengers of Cape Town ... go bare and feel no cold", they "sleep outdoors ... starve and do not waste" (p. 5). As we hinted above, it is possible that she begins to notice these deprivations because she has realised her own form of deprivation, or imprisonment; she no longer lives in an ivory tower.

Mrs. Curren allows Vercueil to stay on her property, but she soon realises that this man needs more than just the privilege of staying on her property; he needs something for this "weather-beaten" body, for his face "with the puffiness around the eyes of an alcoholic" and so she asks: "Do you need something to eat?" This is one of the many strong empathic gestures that will emanate from her realisation of her new self. When she asks herself why she gives the man food, she realises that she does it because she is in the position to give. She is not herself an underprivileged person, or one who suffers the pain of oppression. "To be full enough to give and to give



from one's fullness: what deeper urge is there?" (p. 7). In reaching out to Vercueil, Mrs. Curren learns that the person who reaches out in empathy is the one who is the richer for it. Granted, that person is usually the one in a position of power, and the recipient of that gesture is, as Adam Smith has demonstrated, the sufferer. Mrs. Curren, however, raises the empathic gesture and its meaning to a new level, to a level in which the one that empathises realises her humanity. She has already recognised that the moment of epiphany in her life occurred when she returned from the doctor's with his diagnosis of her terminal condition and discovered Vercueil on her property. In that nanosecond, she saw herself in him; she realises that they share the same humanity. And so she writes: "[B]ecause he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written ... when I write about him I write about myself" (p. 9). This, to me, is the best example of empathy. The phrase, "he is and is not I" best explains what Nussbaum means by insisting that the empathetic person must always have the consciousness that he is not the sufferer. Yet it also underlines that very moment the empathic person reconstructs the experience of the sufferer, the moment he puts himself in the position of the other.

Kristen Renwick Monroe theorises that moral action is driven not only by ratiocination, duty, utilitarian calculus, or religion, but by identity. In interviews with individuals who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, she learned that the rescuers' actions were guided by an instinctive identification with the victims. Identification with the persecuted other, she argues, is a universal phenomenon; we act to protect others because we have a need to be treated as humans, and we begin to treat others accordingly. She concludes: "We must honor the humanity of others in order to claim it in ourselves" (Monroe 2001: 491-507). The type of identification described by Monroe, I think, can help explain Mrs. Curren's identification with Mr. Vercueil; she sees in the destitute a mirror image of herself, without herself being the victim; she embraces him in order "to be embraced" (p. 5).

Derek Attridge sees the ethical thrust of *Age of Iron* in Curren's ability to trust the absolute other. For him, it is not just a question of trusting Vercueil to take her letter to her daughter, "it is not just a matter of engaging someone to carry out a commission which can be checked on and then, if it turns out that the trust was misplaced, rectified; Mrs. Curren has to rely on another person to perform a task which, by its very nature, is unverifiable and unrectifiable" (Attridge 2004: 94).

Mr. Vercueil's mission of sending Mrs. Curren's letter is best understood as a trope in Mrs. Curren's empathic world. Mrs. Curren's letter is her attempt to touch the world, and be touched by it. In carrying the letter, Mr. Vercueil provides a necessary link to the larger world that Mrs. Curren must find in order to achieve complete redemption. He is the means through which she fulfils her longing for belonging; without him, the other, her redemption would be incomplete. She declares that she herself is the gift



that she wants to give to the world, and that gift is rendered “into words” and packed “into the page like sweets ... words out of my body” – words that the reader (her daughter?) can “unpack in her own time” (p. 9). Mrs. Curren’s description of herself as a gift to the world suggests that she is Coetzee’s ultimate answer to the masters of the world everywhere; those who create dark chambers. She urges these masters to unpack her, and in so doing “unpack” themselves.

We begin to unpack Mrs. Curren’s words and herself as she begins her journey with Vercueil’s help. The moment we begin to unpack her words, we engage in a journey. Indeed the ultimate gift she makes to the reader is her journey to meet the society’s other. The journey begins when Vercueil helps her jump-start her car. In return, she offers him a ride to Fish Hoek. Each has now come closer to the other; their drive becomes a metaphor for their common journey to encounter the many Vercueils in South Africa and in our hearts. For Derek Attridge, “Mrs. Curren’s response to the other in the form of Vercueil can be read as a kind of heightened staging of the very issue of otherness, a story that is continuous with the attempts by such ‘philosophical’ writers as Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida to find ways of engaging this issue” (Attridge 2004: 103).

Mike Marais also interprets Mrs. Curren’s relation to Mr. Vercueil in Levinasian paradigms. Mr. Vercueil’s entry into Mrs. Curren’s house, he argues, “connotes the opening-up of the self to the otherness of the other person, its infiltration of the self’s consciousness” (Marais 2009: 115). Marais further argues, using Levinas’s ethical standards, that Mrs. Curren is unable to transform Vercueil “because she cannot care enough. Only through caring sufficiently will she be able to respond to his particularity” (pp. 101-102). Eduard Jordaan’s provocative title, “A White South African Liberal as a Hostage to the Other: Reading J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* through Levinas”, suggests an agreement with Attridge and Marais’s readings. The readings are true to the degree that we take into account Levinas’s differentiation between totality and infinity and in his locating our understanding of the Other and our relation to him on the side of infinity. I think it is problematic to try to understand Mrs. Curren’s moral world through Levinas’s ethical paradigms as the second part of Marais’s idea suggests, especially given Levinas’s understanding of the face of the Other as that which “commands” my total responsibility, reducing me to its hostage (Levinas 1985: 87-88). Empathy, especially as defined by Nussbaum, would be much more critical of Levinas’s ethics.

Mrs. Curren’s thoughts, and indeed her life, do not support Levinas’s idea of the face of the Other as “commanding us unconditionally” even while acceding to his principle of recognition, care, love of the other. I agree with Eduard Jordaan’s insightful Levinasian claim that “Curren moves from a Heideggerian concern with her own death ... towards a Levinasian prioritizing of the Other’s life over her own” (Jordaan 2005: 22). The awareness of her own death has opened Mrs. Curren’s eyes to the mortality of others,



yet this does not mean that she suddenly begins to prioritise the Other's life over hers. I believe that she simply becomes aware that she and others share the same humanity, or in her words, same "wasting", "wasted" patch of land, a place where empathy becomes a nexus point. Like Coetzee himself, Mrs. Curren would be wary of authoring or authorising another person's life, and this is why she always interrogates her epistemic and moral stand. Being aware of another's humanity implies a willingness to help that person on the terms dictated neither by the other nor by me, but by the parameters of our common humanity. Mrs. Curren does not help Mr. Vercueil more than he helps her. The empathy which issued from her relative position of power – she's a landowner – eventually connects both and erases the different power positions both have occupied.

The difference between Levinas's total surrender to the Other and empathy is that empathy is not instinctive; it does not command because it encourages understanding; it is indeed intellectual, for, according to Nussbaum, it is an imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the other as long as he is a sufferer. In Mrs. Curren's deliberative approach to her life, we see a good example of one person's richly empathic encounter with the other. According to Rachel Ann Walsh, *Age of Iron* does not demonstrate Levinas's phenomenological model of ethical responsibility"; it rather "troubles its abstractions". The novel "suggests that my exposure to the other as my neighbour is irrevocably determined by the epistemic ground I occupy (Walsh 2010: 169).

Walsh's observation is pertinent given Mrs. Curren's awareness of the limits of her epistemic world. Mrs. Curren is to be admired for constantly questioning her own assumptions in her quest to know a world outside her own. However, the more she experiences the world whose existence she has been unaware of, the more she connects with that world, perhaps not in the typical Levinasian manner, but in the Aristotelian manner of paying attention to the performance of actors of life and being moved by people's experience of pain. In Aristotle's understanding of tragedy, to which empathy owes its roots, the audience relates with heroes specifically because their deeds are admirable. It is thanks to the same power of judgement that the audience shuns villains. It is in the strength of my critical awareness of heroes and villains, or good and bad, that "I, located as I am in a discursive context, can determine who deserves or does not deserve my sympathy". It is in this regard that we can understand Mrs. Curren's difficulties with her moral judgement of her world.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Curren describes the "arrogant, combative" way John, Bheki's friend, looked at her (Coetzee 1990: 47). She declares bluntly: "I did not like him. I do not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any

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1. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for helping me to think through this aspect of my argument.



trace of feeling for him .... This boy is not like Bheki. He has no charm” (p. 78).

Why is Mrs. Curren’s response to John different from her response to Vercueil and Bheki? The answer may be that John is an embodiment of violence; he does not suffer as Vercueil does. She indicates her unwillingness to empathise because of John’s villainous streaks. Mrs. Curren’s reactions are perfectly in order given that empathy does not force us to accept a world that we do not like. Indeed, if the sufferer of evil deserves his pain, then we are not expected to empathise with him. But does John deserve his pain? This is the question Mrs. Curren will answer as she continually interrogates her epistemic world.

### **Pain and the Challenge of Being Human**

There are two outstanding situations in the novel that directly force Mrs. Curren to re-examine her hitherto moribund moral world. One is in her compound where Bheki and his friend, John, beat Mr. Vercueil. The other is her visit to Guguletu. In the first, Bheki, and his friend claim Mr. Vercueil is drinking himself “into a dog” (p. 45). They impose their power on someone weaker just as the apartheid regime does. Florence is proud of them, and when Mrs. Curren confronts her on that ground, Florence makes a startling judgement about Vercueil: “[H]e is rubbish. He is good for nothing” (p. 47). She, too, has conferred on herself the right to judge and condemn others on the strength of their perceived otherness. Rankled by Florence’s apparent categorisation of humans, Mrs. Curren confronts Florence immediately: “‘He is not a rubbish person,’ I said, lowering my voice, speaking to Florence alone. ‘There are no rubbish people. We are all people together’” (p. 47). It is important that Mrs. Curren lowers her tone in order not to assume the same superior moral attitude that Florence has, yet her words bear a powerful, universal moral significance that informed her legitimate rebuke to Florence, who approved of what Bheki and John had done.

The assault on Vercueil, as well as Florence’s justification of it, is an appalling model of the political drama of South African apartheid. Ironically it is Mrs. Curren, a member of the privileged class, the master race, who intervenes, imposing her moral vision on the situation. The ensuing dialogue with Florence brings out, on the one hand, the complicated and self-destructive moral position Florence has adopted, and on the other, Mrs. Curren’s careful, self-doubting, yet morally clear, stand. She reminds Florence of her (Florence’s) shock at seeing a woman who was set on fire by children. Florence had disavowed that act, saying that she never thought that she would live to see something like that. Yet she believes it is the white man who made the children the way they are. Seizing the moment, Mrs. Curren compares the beating to that heinous act of burning people alive: “They kick and beat a man because he drinks. They set people on fire



and laugh while they burn to death” (p. 50). The two acts have one thing in common: they lack empathy, and they issue from hearts that have not learned to feel the pain of others. Mrs. Curren’s intervention, on the other hand, reflects her identification with Vercueil not only as Kristen Monroe argued above, but also as a result of her having reflected upon Mr. Vercueil’s condition. Mrs. Curren goes on to remind Florence that the hearts of these boys are turning to stone before their eyes. But Florence has a different opinion. The kids, she says, are “good children” because they are like iron, and “we are proud of them” (p. 50). Having exhausted her rhetorical prowess to no avail, Mrs. Curren quickly realises her limitations and, indeed, that of morality: you cannot change the other. Understanding her own unwilling complicity with the evil system, she has few options other than hope: “Children of Iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth?” (p. 50).

Her declared wish for the age of clay, the age of earth, suggests Coetzee’s play with the biblical account of creation in which God created man from mud, earth, which is closely related to the Hebrew word given to the human ancestor: Adam; *ādhām*, *adamah*, “ground”, one formed from humus, clay. To ask how long before we return to the age of clay is another way of asking how long it will take us to accept one another as fellow humans. How long before we begin to recognise the finitude, vulnerability, and pain of others?

Mike Marais argues that the title of the novel foregrounds the corruption of South African society by “the insensible system of power relations established under colonialism” especially given its allusion to “Hesiod’s description of the ‘age of the iron race’ in which ‘The father will quarrel with his sons, the sons with their/father,/guest will quarrel with host,’ and ‘Might will be justice’” (Marais 2009: 98). This is especially true given that the dearth of empathy is now endemic. That is why Mrs. Curren would welcome the age of clay, the exact opposite of the age of iron. As if to curtail her exercise of authority in ordering the boys to stop beating Mr. Vercueil, or in challenging Florence, she becomes critical of her own position, and asks perhaps the most morally informed question in the narrative: “And I? Where is my heart in all of this?” (Coetzee 1990: 50). She knows that her redemption has not yet been achieved. Who is she to judge Florence and her children when her own child is living in safety in America? It is here that Coetzee achieves one of his celebrated instances of narrative distancing, which, as Molly Abel Travis has argued, prevents an easy empathy with protagonists. In fact, Coetzee prevents us from empathising with Mrs. Curren, on the one hand, and on the other, with any of the victims; he avoids the simplistic binary world of oppressors and victims.



We, are, nevertheless, confronted by the issues that challenge people, issues that must be subjected to ambits of moral judgement.

In “Into the Dark Chamber”, Coetzee hints that the average privileged white South African knew very little about the shameful human right abuses in the country, especially in the most violent, and dying, days of apartheid. He notes that

the response of South Africa’s legislators to what disturbs their white electorate is usually to order it out of sight. If people are starving, let them starve far away in the bush, where their thin bodies will not be a reproach ... if the black townships are in flames, let cameras be banned from them. (At which the great white electorate heave a sigh of relief: how much more bearable the newscasts have become).

(Coetzee 1992c: 361)

The ignorance of the true nature of oppression in the country became a kind of smoke screen behind which the majority of whites hid. One of the truths about moral judgement is that one cannot be held responsible for what one does not know. In her discussion of the novel’s socio-political background, Susan VanZanten Gallagher notes that *Age of Iron* is directly linked to a particular historical moment which is made “apparent by the dates recorded on its final page-1986-1989 which represent both the years during which Coetzee was writing the novel and the specific time in which it is set .... These were years of unparalleled violence; as the crisis in the townships worsened, the number of those killed in incidents of black protest reached the thousands” (Gallagher 1991: 194).

Gallagher notes that few South Africans, especially whites, were aware of the extent of the violence in the country; international coverage was also limited. It is against this background that Mrs. Curren, aided by Vercueil, emerges from her imprisonment within herself and ventures into the real world of South Africa. To her daughter she writes, “In the world they project all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks learning about the square on the hypotenuse and the parrots of the Amazonian jungle” while ignoring the troubles in the school. About the violence that rages in Guguletu, she knows only what her hired housekeeper, Florence, told her and what she could glimpse “by standing on the balcony and peering northeast: namely, that Guguletu is not burning today, or, if it is burning, is burning with a low flame” (Coetzee 1990: 39).

At this point, Mrs. Curren appears to have accepted the moral implications of the desire to know about how others live. In what appears to be a self-excoriation she indicates that she has begun to care about her world. This new mindset or moral attitude to the world will force her to abandon the luxury of observing Guguletu from a distance; she makes a personal decision to enter the eye of the storm. This is the second situation that directly challenges Mrs. Curren’s moral world.



Guguletu is a microcosm of South African black society under apartheid. Though government agents are everywhere, the white people hardly know anything about the violence the government institutions unleash on the black population. Given their powerlessness in the face of government oppression, the black people turn their anger and frustration upon one another; they kill members of their group who are thought to be collaborating with the government, or those who fail to cooperate with them. Guguletu, as Mrs. Curren sees, is a demonstration of inverse aggression. She must see for herself why South Africa's blacks morph into iron at birth. The question of why it is necessary for her to go to the eye of the storm, or the "landscape of violence" (p. 92) as she herself has termed it, finds an answer in her observation of the incidents there. Mrs. Curren is shocked to see a man hacking at the door of a shack from which a woman flees, as from a cage, with a baby in her arms, followed by three barefoot children. The shack is then torched (p. 95).

While still in Guguletu Mrs. Curren sees the apparatuses of the apartheid state in action: "I saw them, further down the road: three khaki-brown troop carriers almost merging into the trees, and, outlined against the sky, helmeted heads" (p. 101). She will realise that these apparatuses are the prime movers of violence in South African black townships. She soon hears gunshots. It is then that she feels the urge to return to her home and to her life of privilege: "I want to go. I am in pain. I am exhausted" (p. 97).

Mrs. Curren's pain is a reflection of the misery everywhere around her, the pain that has resulted from her newfound empathy for those whose lives are wasting and being wasted. Her pain is therefore the pain of being alive and of realising her own limitations. She announces to Mr. Thabane, Florence's cousin, who takes her to the scenes of violence, that she wants to go home, but Thabane lets her know that she hasn't seen what she should see. "You want to go home .... But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?" (p. 97). Mr. Thabane appears to be forcing sympathy, lecturing Mrs. Curren on the nature of evil in the land.

Initially, it would appear that Mrs. Curren is incapable of any real sympathy for what these people go through. Rachel Ann Walsh makes an interesting observation in this regard and also in reference to the minor confrontation between Mrs. Curren and Florence noted above. According to Walsh, Mrs. Curren's suffering does not allow her to "comprehend or imaginatively appropriate the suffering of her neighbors across the apartheid divide". And Coetzee does well to not conflate her experience of suffering with that of the victims of apartheid; the two cannot be captured by any "universalising metaphors". Even when Mrs. Curren tells Florence that there are no rubbish people, her words, according to Walsh "are undercut by the two women's divergent experiences of apartheid" (Walsh 2010: 174).



While it is true that experiences cannot be conflated, and that one can never fully appropriate another's experience of pain, it is also true that the narrative is not just about apartheid; it raises broader questions about human suffering. Who causes such pain? How can we evade or stop it? How can we shield others from it? If there is therefore any universal experience in *Age of Iron*, it is that of pain; it is the question of how my pain can help me approximate what others are experiencing. Mrs. Curren's experience of pain in Guguletu reminds us that the other's pain can also be ours. In this way, she supports Coetzee's words that when others suffer undeserved, those who witness it suffer the shame.

The final stage of Mrs. Curren's direct confrontation with pain comes when she learns about the death of Bheki whom she loved. Given that Mrs. Curren had heard gunshots earlier and had seen the South African soldiers, she now knows how Bheki and his friends died. She is in the hall where Bheki's body and the bodies of his friends are laid out. "He still wore the gray flannel trousers, white shirt, and maroon pullover of his school, but his feet were bare. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too" (Coetzee 1990: 102). She declares that the sight of Bheki's dead body is the worst thing she has seen in her life, and "Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again" (p. 103).

Jean-Paul Sartre believes that the art of prose is realised in significant discourse. "Words are first of all not objects but designations for objects" (Sartre 1988: 35). In prose, words create a world in a way that relates the reader directly to that world. Words in prose are not ephemeral symbols in an art for art's sake aesthetic persuasion. Sartre's goal is to demonstrate the nature of engagement in the world of literature; without transparency such engagement would not be possible. To change a life, one has to call it by name. That is why he argues that the "prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure. It is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: 'what aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?'" (Sartre 1988: 37).

The answer given by the writer of/in *Age of Iron* is simple: see the world as it is. And Mrs. Curren has "seen it". There could not have been a better moral lesson. We recall that Coetzee's essay, "Into the Dark Chamber", is about the forbidden chamber created by politics. It is the chamber of evil, the chamber of secrecy; it is a world in which the politicians allow themselves all kinds of human rights abuses. Mrs. Curren has peered into the "dark chamber" of the human condition in South Africa; she will no longer be able to rationalise her passive silence. This is not far removed from what Coetzee discloses. The reader goes to Guguletu with Mrs. Curren. It suffices that she and the reader see the evil that was not meant to be seen. Henceforth they can no longer claim ignorance; they are within the ambits of moral judgement; they are responsible. To know is to be responsible. What follows is up to the individual.



## Remembering as an Empathic Gesture

We recall that Mrs. Curren portrayed John as unlovable. True enough, love cannot be commandeered. Yet Mrs. Curren tries to overcome her failure to love; she tries to understand the other by doing her best to reconstruct his experience. She has first to understand the forces that have made John the person he is; through this effort she comes to care about John even if she cannot love him. One major reason why John is the way he is becomes obvious: Guguletu. This is how Mrs. Curren comes to understand John. "There was a cornered, uncertain look about him" (Coetzee 1990: 134). Like a cornered animal, John's instinct is to fight back. At this point he represents the entire "cornered" black population. Mrs. Curren realises this difficult situation which the black populace is forced into; she makes it known in an imaginary dialogue with her daughter: "Yes, you reply, he is not lovable. But did you not have a part in making him unlovable?" (p. 136).

Mrs. Curren realises that Bheki and John had to resist annihilation, and whoever has to resist extinction had better be as strong as iron. But resistance requires an initial force or condition to resist against, something that many white South Africans have forgotten or never acknowledged. But not Mrs. Curren, who has acquired the moral obligation to not forget. While she despises the iron in John's heart, she knows how it was smelted. Bheki and John are merely reacting to history; they are responding to the invasion of their homeland. In this case her memory serves her well; she remembers important elements of South African history: "What, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite? Did we not have Voortrekkers, generation after generation of Voortrekkers, grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland? *Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe* (pp. 50-51).<sup>2</sup>

John and Bheki are products of apartheid. It would have been too easy for Mrs. Curren to simply exonerate herself by claiming to be a victim of the same system. Rather, she turns back to her moment of epiphany, to the moment she first met Vercueil and instinctively felt he was a messenger from beyond, one sent with news of her personal salvation. What should one do in the face of the absurdity of oppression? She arrives at an answer, but only after a process of self-interrogation, only after witnessing and mourning Bheki's death. She asks why she is only now becoming aware of the degree of depravity in her land. "Have I ever been fully awake?" (p. 109). Mrs. Curren's ruthless self-questioning is an early stage in her own redemption. Through that interrogation, she comes to understand that she

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2. *Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe* // *Ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika*. At thy will to live or perish // O South Africa, dear land. Until 1994, South African anthem, written by Cornelis Jacobus Langenhoven, in 1918.



might indeed have been part of the problem. She also understands that her redemption, though possible, will not be easily achieved. “I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but I am full of confusion about how to do it. That, if you like, is the craziness that has got into me” (p. 117). But she has already taken the necessary step towards that, and that is by writing, committing to memory the suffering of others. In this way, she bears testimony to what Giorgio Agamben calls “an impossibility of speaking”, and “desubjectification” of those who could not speak (Agamben 1999: 158).

Coetzee’s protagonists are often characterised by their feeling of uncertainty. This is a poststructuralist characteristic linking *Age of Iron* with *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which is another first-person narrative. The uncertainty that defines these characters is the means by which Coetzee overturns the rigid Manichean binaries and the authoritarianism of his society. Nonetheless, there are certainties that resist deconstruction. One of these is love. The protagonists of these two novels are at least certain of that. Mrs. Curren makes it clear: “I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. He is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation. I must love him” (Coetzee 1990: 125).

Mrs. Curren’s conflict is between what her moral consciousness perceives as necessary and what her personal inclinations deem convenient. Before her experience with John, he would have meant nothing to her. But morality is not based on personal interest; it is activated when we become involved in situations where personal concerns must be set aside. Mrs. Curren’s ambit of moral judgement is realised when moral values and judgements are considered disinterestedly, that is to say, without regard to personal advantage or gain; it is when she applies universal standards that have resulted from her intimate involvement with pain such as Rosa Burger did in Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty argues that the modern world has derived more moral progress from “descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in, e.g., novels or ethnographies) rather than philosophical or religious treatises” (Rorty 1989: 192). We derive moral progress from literature because the situations described force us to engage individuals not on some abstract, universalistic terms, but on their own terms, or on the terms that their pain or humiliation has dictated. Against the above background it is logical to conclude that Coetzee’s moral world presented in this novel urges us to be troubled by the pain of the Other; it also questions the reader’s settled, and sometimes, absolutist comfort, such that might even come from easy empathy. While empathy might form the basis for the ambit of moral judgement, morality devoid of critical consciousness, in Coetzee’s world, is deficient.



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