

Allegories of power in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee

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Summary

It is suggested that *allegory* is a prominent literary vehicle for political dissent in contemporary literature of dissent, as can be illustrated especially in J.M. Coetzee's novels. This suggestion, however, requires a redefinition of our conventional sense of allegory's nature and purpose. Medieval and renaissance allegory is discussed as the background to the doubleness of the allegorical mode which emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Allegory has only recently been used for the purpose of explicit social and political criticism, as is indicated in a discussion of Coetzee's novels, as well as references to works of Buzzati, Kafka, Calvino, Borges, Donoso, Allende, Kundera and, within the South African context, Paton and Stockenström. It is ironic that allegory has become a mode particularly suited to the novelistic expression of fragmentation and injustice, and has become an effective medium of protest against the simplifications of absolute power.

Opsomming

Daar word aan die hand gedoen dat die allegorie 'n opvallende literêre hulpmiddel vir die politieke dissidente skrywer in die hedendaagse letterkunde is, soos in die besonder in J.M. Coetzee se romans geïllustreer kan word. Hierdie suggestie vereis egter 'n herdefiniëring van ons gewone begrip van die aard en die doel van die allegorie. Die allegorie in die Middeleeue en Renaissance word as agtergrond bespreek vir die dubbelslagtigheid van die allegoriese vorm wat in die agtiende en negentiende eeu ontstaan het. Die allegorie word eers sedert onlangs gebruik vir die uitspraak van eksplisiete sosiale en politieke kritiek, soos dit aangetoon word in 'n bespreking van Coetzee se romans, asook in verwysings na werke van Buzzati, Kafka, Calvino, Donoso, Allende, Kundera en, in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks, Paton en Stockenström. Dit is ironies dat die allegorie 'n vorm geword het wat in die besonder geskik is vir die romanskrywer se uitdrukking van fragmentasie en ongeregtheid, en dit het 'n doeltreffende medium vir protes teen die vereenvoudiging van absolute mag geword.

Nadine Gordimer, in a review of J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), discusses the literary issue which lies at the heart of that novel: the nature and uses of allegory. In fact, allegorical symbols and structures are central to each of Coetzee's four novels, and are becoming increasingly important to contemporary literature of dissent in general, whether in South Africa, Latin America, or Eastern Europe. The allegorical fable, invented in its modern form by Franz Kafka and refined by Dino Buzzati, has recently been used not only by Coetzee but also by Alan Paton, José Donoso, Isabel Allende, Milan Kundera, and others, to indict contemporary abuses of power. The oscillation of the allegorical fable between public and private realms, and between realistic and symbolic narration, makes it a particularly useful mode for Coetzee and the other writers whom I have just named. But to suggest that allegory is a prominent literary vehicle for political dissent is to require a redefinition of our conventional sense of its nature and purpose. For that reason, a brief look backward at its history will be useful at the outset.

Allegory has traditionally been a conservative rather than a subversive form.¹ Though the quest motif is common enough in European medieval and renaissance allegories, the form itself was not presented as a quest so much as an assertion, or rather, a re-assertion, of the institutional imperatives of church and crown. Medieval allegory rests on the understanding of a universe in which all things are fundamentally signs, an understanding inherent in the ubiquitous trope of the world as God's book. The framework for all medieval signs was believed to be fixed and guaranteed, and diverse spheres believed to be ultimately congruent: the allegorical literature of the medieval period was a means of making this congruence visible.

Like medieval allegory, renaissance allegory presents an admirable and elaborate surface of action and description which corresponds to a moral and ethical system – unstated, perhaps, but palpably present. Both the medieval Pearl Poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Edmund Spenser's *The Fairy Queen* are conservative in their intent to present – and hence preserve – beneath their intricate surface of description, the values of worlds which their authors sensed to be slipping away under the changing social and intellectual pressures of their times. The Elizabethan literary theorist, George Puttenham, in his study of figurative discourse in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), did in fact recognize that the allegorical techniques of indirection and dissimulation were also those of statesmanship, and he recognized as well that both the courtier and the courtly poet might use allegorical figures to criticize their prince.

However, Puttenham concludes, allegorical poetry serves ultimately to enhance, not undermine, the splendor and strength of the monarchy: the affective power of the poet's imaginative forms may actually contribute to the authority which they describe.²

It is in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the doubleness of allegory begins to be used to reveal not the similitude between the word and the world but the disparity, and further, the disparity between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. In England, the great political satirists, Alexander Pope, John Dryden, and Jonathan Swift, adjust the relation between the realistic and symbolic levels of allegory: it is at this point in its evolution that structural irony becomes a regular feature of allegory, and the mode establishes itself in the English literary tradition as a tool of political protest. These seventeenth and eighteenth century satirists, however, were hardly revolutionaries; on the contrary, the motives impelling their allegorical satires were optimistic, conciliatory, and essentially conservative. Underlying their allegories is the same hope which underlies medieval and renaissance allegory – that their disparate levels of signification may yet be reconciled in friendly fashion.

The nineteenth-century English Romantics also wrote allegories, of course, and it was principally to myth that they looked to provide the descriptive level for their work. Though critics often refer to William Blake, William Wordsworth, George Gordon and Lord Byron, as revolutionaries, it is generally in the realm of aesthetics and psychology, not politics, that their mythic allegories move. The English Romantics were inspired by individual imperatives,

not communal ones: even their commitments to national revolutions were based on individualistic ethics. Their allegories were allegories of the self and the soul, not of the system.

My point in this backward glance at the English allegorical tradition, however open to exception my generalizations may be, is to suggest that allegory has not, until recently, been used for the purpose of explicit social and political criticism, nor has it often been used to confront political or social or ethical systems which are felt to be irremediable. Here, then, the contemporary fiction which I will discuss departs radically from traditional allegory, for its symbolic characters and plots point not to an ideal system but rather to the abuses of the system as it is. The purpose of allegory in Coetzee's fiction is no longer to suggest the means to mend a fractured world, but rather to draw attention to the fractures, a purpose which current events in South Africa are also tragically serving. His allegories depict a painfully divided world, a state of irreconcilable contraries and unresolvable differences. They are spare, often incongruously poetic depictions of the moral and psychic repression which results from a corrupt political and social order. So they invoke the spirit of Franz Kafka's 'The Penal Colony' (1919) and Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe* (1945). It is the particular achievement of Coetzee, as it was of Kafka and Buzzati, that they use the traditional narrative techniques of allegory to advance their essentially polemical purposes. So they set their novels in ironic relation not only to the reality they would enact, but also to the tradition of allegorical narration which they implicitly invoke.

J.M. Coetzee has written four slim novels, each of which presents an exploration of the relations between the powerful and the powerless, between public corruption and private conscience. His first work, *Dusklands* (1974), is comprised of a pair of novelas entitled 'The Vietnam Project' and 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee.' Since then, Coetzee has published a novel regularly at three year intervals: *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). All of Coetzee's fiction reiterates the basic political allegory defined by Hegel in an essay entitled 'Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage', in *The Phenomenology of Mind*.³ In this well-known essay, Hegel proposes that the master and the servant are mutually dependent, but that the servant, not the master, embodies the positive capacity for renewal in the community. In a system based on the power relations of master and servant, the master inevitably grows less productive as he grows more dependent, and the servant inevitably becomes aware of his master's increasing dependence upon him. The servant's knowledge of his indispensability – his awareness of his own growing power – leads him to seek others with whom to ally himself in new social and political configurations. Thus, while the servant depends upon his master for his self-definition (as the master depends upon his servant for his), it is the servant who will advance historical evolution by seeking new social modes and relationships. So Hegel proposes the equivocations of power in his outline of the process by which servants become the masters of their masters.

Each of Coetzee's novels presents this modern political allegory from a

different point of view. Both first-person narratives in *Dusklands* (1982) deal with the ill-advised imposition of power, but I will discuss only 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', because only it deals specifically with South Africa. In fact, it begins almost at the historical beginnings of South African relations between master and slave. Jacobus Coetzee's narration is presented by the author as a translation of a diary, kept by his ancestor in 1760 during his elephant-hunting expeditions northward into the interior, to the land of the Great Namaqua. A three-page historical document, a deposition given by Jacobus Coetzee in that year to the presiding official of the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, is appended to the diary, as is an afterword about Jacobus Coetzee written by S.J. Coetzee, the author's father, and published in 1951.

The patriarchal Jacobus, armed in 1760 with his Afrikaner conviction of his privileged status and his adamant resolve to impose his will on both the land and its inhabitants, describes his expeditions. Though he is unsuccessful in bringing home the ivory for which he went in search, he does return with a prize more significant by far: his sure sense that he has possessed and mastered the territory which he has surveyed. His conviction of his authority is often expressed in religious terms: in a passage of transparent self-justification, he describes his elimination of Hottentots who have refused to acknowledge his status as master. His murderous confusion of himself with God is clearly apparent to the reader, though he of course does not perceive the confusion: 'As explorer of the wilderness I have always thought myself an evangelist and endeavored to bring to the heathen the gospel of the sparrow, which falls but falls with design. There are acts of justice, I tell them (I told them), and acts of injustice, and all bear their place in the economy of the whole. Have faith, be comforted, like the sparrow you are not forgotten. Over them I then pronounced the sentence of death' (p. 101). Despite this assertion of omnipotence, Jacobus is ultimately deprived of his power. A violent illness completes the Hegelian process by which power inevitably shifts from the master to servant. In his diary, Jacobus cites his 'retrogression from well set up elephant hunter to white-skinned Bushman' (p. 99), and his narrative concludes with his wistful recognition that he too is 'a tool in the hands of history' (p. 106), that he too must die. J.M. Coetzee, like Hegel, understands the shifting complexities of the roles of master and servant far better than to present them simply as a binary opposition.

The complementarities and coincidences, as well as the polarities, of the roles of master and servant are acknowledged by the narrator as 'our little comedies of man and man, prospector and guide, benefactor and beneficiary, victim and assassin, teacher and pupil, father and child' (p. 81). 'Our little comedies' suggests a complicity between the white explorer and the Bushman – a tacit accession on both sides to the ambiguities of domination and submission. Jacobus' men – his 'tame hotnots,' as one rebellious servant calls them – consciously play the role which they know their master expects, a role which in turn supports their master's part in the 'comedy'. When Jacobus is forced to relinquish his sovereignty in the bushmen's camp, both he and the bush-

men seem immediately to understand and accept the circumstantial revisions in casting and script.

As a self-conscious European explorer bringing 'light' to the 'dark continent', it is not surprising that Jacobus also likes to characterize the ambiguities of power in spatial terms. Whereas the savage is enslaved by space, he tells us, the explorer is the master of space, because the explorer's gun has a longer range than the bushman's arrow. This fact of logistics means the eventual and inevitable transformation of savage into servant: Jacobus describes 'the obscure movement of the soul (weariness, relief, incuriosity, terror) that comes with this familiar transformation, [which] we feel as a fated pattern and a condition of life' (pp. 80-81). But he realizes that the 'fated pattern' by which the explorer imposes his will is also the pattern by which he becomes a slave to the system which he has himself established. Jacobus refers to the 'desolate infinity' of his power over his servants, and despairs that 'here and everywhere else on this continent there would be no resistance to my power and no limit to its projection. My despair was despair at the undifferentiated plenum, which is after all nothing but the void dressed up as being' (p. 101). Such, Jacobus observes, is the material basis for the sickness of the master's soul.

Unstated here is the most trenchant of the ironies of the shifting relations of master and servant in South Africa. The master's total power is total no more: as Hegel insists, it has been irrevocably undermined by its very totality, by its 'undifferentiated plenum.' Events in South Africa are now putting an end to the 'desolate infinity' which Jacobus so elegantly (and hypocritically) laments.

I have said that 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' is presented by J.M. Coetzee as a translation of a historical document narrated by his ancestor. However, the modernity of the narrator's insights into the psychology of domination and the modernity of his literary style immediately belie the authenticity of this supposed 'translation.' The eighteenth-century explorer and fortune hunter, Jacobus Coetzee, would hardly have sensed the ironies of the system of absolute domination which he was committed to establishing in South Africa. J.M. Coetzee has taken the historical sketch provided by Jacobus Coetzee's brief 1760 deposition and created from it a contemporary narrative imbued with the ambiguities developed by Hegel in his parable of the master and the servant. 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' presents a compelling portrait of an enslaved master, but that portrait is ultimately too cruel to evoke the ironic sympathy which Coetzee knows the master deserves. Jacobus is depicted as too imperious, the black man too submissive, and the allegory of power thus too schematic, despite the ambiguities and reversals which I have noted. It is in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in his characters of the magistrate and the barbarian woman, that Coetzee presents a portrait of the relations between the possessor of power and the possessed which is both a subtle and a pointed indictment of those relations.

Waiting for the Barbarians, Coetzee's most allegorical work, is narrated by a magistrate who serves in an outpost of Empire (the word is consistently written in the text with a capital E). His principal duty is to preserve the civilization he represents from the barbarians who supposedly assail it from

without. Here the Hegelian dialectic between mastery and slavery is complemented by the ambiguities of civilization and barbarism. Coetzee knows that these latter categories are as likely to overlap and reverse themselves as are the former, a likelihood also embodied by the Alexandrian Greek poet, C.P. Cavafy, from whose poem *Waiting for the Barbarians* takes its title.

Like Coetzee's novel, Cavafy's poem is a sparse allegorical depiction of the ironic interplay between definitions of civilization and barbarism, and a depiction as well of the ironic distance between the ideals of empire and its reality. The setting of a number of Cavafy's poems is the panhellenic world of the third and fourth centuries after Christ: he describes Greek colonies in Persia, India, and the Mediterranean which were ruled by puppets of Rome. These outposts of the Roman empire were powerless to act or believe except according to the dictates of Rome, so politics is regarded with detached cynicism, they must obey their masters, whatever their names. Cavafy's poem, 'Waiting for the Barbarians', begins, 'What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?/The barbarians are due here today' (1975: 31-32). Cavafy describes the ways in which the assembled authorities – emperor, consuls, praetors – define themselves according to what they imagine the barbarians expect of them. They wear their scarlet togas, their amethyst bracelets, emerald rings and gold canes because 'things like that dazzle the barbarians.' Then we read the following lines, which conclude the poem.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?

...

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come

And some of our men just in from the border say

There are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

Those people were a kind of solution.

Civilization and barbarism, mastery and servitude, are the subjects which connect Coetzee to Cavafy, and connect both to Hegel.

The narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), a magistrate who is never given any other name, is an intellectualizing observer who watches as the imperial army tortures, then moves to exterminate, the peaceful barbarians who fish and hunt beyond the walls of his outpost. Though he says repeatedly that he wants only peace, he involves himself in events to assuage his conscience, befriending a woman who has been tortured and disabled. However, this attempt to counteract the politics of empire on the level of the individual fails because the magistrate is utterly incapable of seeing the woman as an individual human being. She remains for him always and only a representative of her class – she is a barbarian. Despite his recognition of injustice and his good intentions, he is rendered impotent by the political and ethical system of which he is a part. The magistrate is both the symbol of empire and its victim; his impotence is figured sexually as well as politically. Because he can no more escape the role which the Empire has assigned him than can the barbarian woman, he is not condemned in the text but rather offered as an example of the corrupting effects of systems of domination on

every level. So Coetzee dramatizes the blurred lines between compassion, complacency, and complicity.

Within this allegory of Empire narrated by the magistrate is another allegory which he tells us that he *wishes* to write. Toward the end of his narration, he explains that he wants to write the history of a world in tune with the rhythms of nature, and dreams of writing his history in the following way: ‘ “No one who paid a visit to this oasis,” I write, “failed to be struck by the charm of life here. We lived in the time of seasons, of the harvests, of the migrations of waterbirds. We lived with nothing between us and the stars. We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth” ’ (p. 154). The magistrate recognizes that such a history is in fact the wishful opposite of the story he has already told – the story of the novel itself. His allegory of natural existence conflicts with the history actually imposed by Empire, a sober history which he has already described: ‘Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history’ (p. 133). So these competing allegories of history (smoothly spinning cycles, jagged rises and falls), based as they are on opposing conceptions and sources of political power, remain suspended within Coetzee’s text, pointing to a reality which is as unresolved as the versions which the magistrate presents. Unlike traditional allegory, the narration of this novel does not point to an ideal level of meaning where truth awaits interpretation. Indeed, it repeatedly calls into question the very possibility of interpretation, and hence, the most fundamental assumptions of allegory.

It hardly needs saying that traditional allegory involves the interpretation of a set of symbols or circumstances, and the translation of that interpretation to a context beyond the text itself. Allegory announces its figural status, its connection to the world, and it depends upon the reader’s acceptance of that connection. However, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee repeatedly deconstructs the referential certainty upon which allegory has always stood, as in the magistrate’s conflicting histories which I have just mentioned. He uses the forms of allegory to undo the traditional referentiality of allegory, undermining and ultimately dismissing interpretive determinacy within his own allegorical fable.⁴ *Waiting for the Barbarians* repeatedly rejects the closed circle of traditional allegorical signification.

In the magistrate’s attempts to interpret his own dreams, we see this deconstructive process at its most complex. The magistrate dreams repeatedly of the barbarian woman, allegorical dreams with archetypal figures and movements which seem to represent in some meaningful way the waking world of the magistrate. He describes six dreams which contain the shrouded figure of a woman who is obscured from his view by blowing snow or dust. In some, the woman’s back is turned, her head hooded; in others, her face is visible, but it is blank featureless (‘it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale; it is not a face at all but another part of the human body that bulges under the skin; it is white; it is the snow itself’, p. 37). In yet another of his dreams, the

woman changes shape, sex, size; and again, in another, two horrible shapes appear: 'massive and blank, they grow and grow till they fill all the space in which I sleep. I wake up choked, shouting, my throat full' (p. 87). The dreams do not yield to the magistrate's attempts at interpretation, nor to any translation beyond their own obscure realm.

Coetzee nevertheless tantalizes his character with the sense that several of his dreams may be on the very verge of revelation, that they may in fact refer to his waking world – in short, that allegorical interpretation may yet be valid. In four of the dreams, the hooded figure, often with the help of children, is building a castle out of snow. In one dream, her construction becomes more specific: she is building an entire town which the dreamer recognizes as his own, though there are no people there at all. The dream, he tells us, takes root: 'Night after night I return to the waste of the snowswept square, trudging toward the figure at its center, reconfirming each time that the town she is building is empty of life' (p. 53). The magistrate cannot avoid seeing the reference of this dream to the future of his own walled outpost, but his understanding quickly dissipates. The novel ends on the snowswept square of the town, with the magistrate walking and watching children building snow structures, as he has watched them do in his dreams. However, he tells the reader resignedly, 'This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere' (p. 154). The dreams should be referential but are not. They have told him nothing about his world. They resemble it only in their resistance to meaning.

Though Coetzee's magistrate is denied the consolation of allegory, Coetzee's reader is not. If the resistance of the magistrate's dreams to interpretation and translation is due in part to their indeterminacy, it is also due to the magistrate's own blindness. If the magistrate sees the face of the woman in his dreams as blank and meaningless, the reader sees its blankness as full of meaning: her blurred features represent the magistrate's perpetual incomprehension, and the incomprehension of the empire which he serves. (The magistrate is in fact never able to see the woman clearly: images of obscured vision are not limited to his dreams.) While Coetzee's narrator distances himself from reality via the impenetrable allegories of his dreams and the irrelevant allegory of his intended history, Coetzee's reader approaches the reality of a system based on willful blindness such as the magistrate's. Though we may sympathize with the magistrate's frustrated attempts to decipher a system which is not of his making, Coetzee makes clear that his failure is one more ironic reversal of power and its lack. We will see that the referential vacuum of the magistrate's dreams – the product of an abusive system – becomes in Coetzee's subsequent novel a characteristic of language itself.

In her book, *The Language of Allegory* (1979), Maureen Quilligan argues that 'all true narrative allegory has its source in a culture's attitude toward language.' (p. 15). The ways in which a culture links signs to its experience of the world is crucial to allegory, as I have already suggested in my comments on the history of the mode and in my discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Coetzee directly addresses the capacity of language to convey meaning in his

novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). His narrator, a psychotic woman, insists that her 'monologue of the self is a maze of word' and she refers to words as 'that cool, alienating medium of mine'. Words do not describe the world so much as separate her from it: of the flowers and stones and bushes of the veld, she says that she is 'alas forever set off from them by the babble of words within me that fabricate and refabricate me as something else, something else' (p. 48). She, like the magistrate, is a self-conscious interpreter of symbols, and like the magistrate, she is aware of her essential failure as such. Referring again to the countryside which she inhabits (a region more psychological than physical), she speaks of 'a landscape of symbol where simple passions can spin and fume around their own centres, in limitless space, in endless time, working out their own forms of damnation' (p. 12). The symbols float just beyond her ability to grasp them: again, the promise of interpretable meaning is always – and only – on the verge of fulfillment.

The relations of dominance and subservience in this novel are less racial than familial: the parent/child relation may have much to do with the master/servant relationship, as Coetzee's narrator repeatedly suggests. We recognize here in distorted form the common tendency, perhaps never entirely outgrown, for children to imagine their parents as oppressive masters, no matter how lovingly and intelligently they may be reared. Such is the condition of helpless dependency into which we are born. Parental authority and filial obedience become pathologically unbalanced in the mind of the narrator. She detests her father, imagining his murder and the murder of her step-mother as a necessary stage in her plan to escape his domination. But her visions are no more useful than the magistrate's dreams: reality remains stubbornly disconnected from her feverish allegories of empowerment.

The narrator conceives of her domination not just as parental but worse – as paternal, masculine. Again, it is language which is her touchstone. She distinguishes (however over-simply) her own words from those which men use with each other ('Men's talk is so unruffled, so serene, so full of common purpose. I should have been a man', p. 21), and she envies them their 'work in the sun', her image for what she conceives (again over-simply) as their direct, uncomplicated relation with nature. Though Coetzee's narrator is so disturbed that her commentary on familial and sexual relations cannot be taken as a reliable indication of any generalized social or political domination, her narrative nonetheless evokes a feminist perspective on sexual domination, and on a paternalistic system. It is in another South African allegorical fable of abused power, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1981), by Wilma Stockenström, that we find this perspective reliably embodied by a female narrator. We understand more clearly from this narrator than we do from Coetzee's that a woman's mastery is often founded, as it is for Hegel's servant, on the dependency of those in power. The sparse lyricism of Stockenström's narrator recalls the narrator of *In the Heart of the Country*, as do her thematic concerns. So it seems perfectly appropriate that *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* is translated from Afrikaans into English by J.M. Coetzee.⁵

Toward the end of *In the Heart of the Country*, the narrator hears voices speaking to her in Spanish, though she tells us that she does not speak that

language. Among other things, these voices quote a statement from Hegel's essay on lordship and bondage. The paragraph containing the statement is italicized in the text, and like all of the paragraphs in the novel, it is numbered: '250: It is the slave's consciousness that constitutes the master's certainty of his own truth. But the slave's consciousness is a dependent consciousness. So the master is not sure of the truth of his autonomy. His truth lies in an inessential consciousness and its inessential acts' (p. 130). Here the author literally combines Hegel's critique of power with his narrator's critique of language: the relations of power between master and servant, man and woman, parent and child, are equivocal and volatile, as is the language upon which those relations depend.

Alan Paton's novel, *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), is also narrated by a 'disabled' woman character. Paton's female narrator is not mentally disturbed, as is Coetzee's, or physically abused, as is Stockenström's. Her acute consciousness of language comes rather from a speech impediment: she apparently has a hare lip (a handicap shared by the main character in Coetzee's most recent novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*). In particular, she is aware of the need to use language in order to avert catastrophe – in this case, a catastrophe which results from both racial and familial repression. She refers constantly to language and its relation to the crisis in their household: it was silence, she believes, that brought about the downfall of her beloved nephew, and it will be her words, her narration, which will recuperate her loss, if anything still can. In this novel, there is no doubt about the referentiality of language: indeed, there is an almost medieval certainty of the similitude between language and the world. The narrator tells us that for her brother, the patriarch of the family, 'our Afrikaans language was a holy tongue, given by God in the wilderness' (p. 82). Thus, the word is often indistinguishable from the Word; the narrator both entertains and embodies in her text the dialectic between poetry and power, as does the sacred text which is its model.

The Bible is the only book that the narrator has read, and the cadences of her repeated narrative formulations reiterate those of the King James Bible (an irony, given the hostility of the Afrikaners toward the English, though necessary for Paton, writing in English about devout Afrikaners). But both 'holy languages' are inflexible and thus inadequate to deal with a power struggle which is both psychological and political, and in both cases, based on racial discrimination. Paton, like Coetzee, dramatizes the ways in which the formulas and images of injustice are woven into the fabric of his characters' language, and control the articulation of their thinking. This novel is less starkly allegorical than *In the Heart of the Country* – Paton's characters are named, his settings are localized, his descriptions are detailed and particular. But impelling *Too Late the Phalarope*, as it does Coetzee's fiction, is the dynamic described in Hegel's allegory: the master's authority is undermined and must ultimately collapse because it depends upon the servant. It is authority founded not upon strength but upon weakness.

At one point, the narrator of *In the Heart of the Country* avers that it is the lyric, not the chronicle, which is her medium. And recalling the lyrical history

which the magistrate wishes to write, we might say the same of the narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Life and Times of Michael K* is another matter. In it, the symbolic and temporal abstraction of the earlier novels gives way to the more specific description and linear structure of chronicle, and the lyric intensity of first-person narrative is exchanged for a detached recounting of events by an omniscient narrator. This is Coetzee's only novel explicitly set in contemporary South Africa; we are given street names in the riot-torn neighborhoods of Cape Town, landscapes on the way to Prince Albert, the system of travel permits which limit and control the movement of certain segments of the population in South Africa. This would seem to be the material of historical realism, for allegory does not ordinarily describe specific contexts. On the contrary, it depends upon physical decontextualization. The generalized descriptions of traditional allegory resist being taken as instances, and insist rather on their status as types, though there is always some balancing in allegory between abstraction and particularity. The emphasis on the latter in *Michael K* leads to the conclusion that the novel is less an allegorical fable of power than his other novels, more a realistic account of power relations gone wrong in South Africa.

Nor is the concern of this novel language or signification or interpretation as such – necessary subjects of allegory, as I have repeatedly suggested. Of course certain images and situations recur which the reader must interpret, and which we begin to construe (despite their specificity) as types: K's mother's ashes, the earth's fruit, the road itself upon which K perpetually wanders. It is the road which provides the central structuring device of this episodic chronicle, rather than the referential relations of allegory. The diachronic sequence of K's experiences reiterates the historical concatenation of cause and effect which Coetzee invokes in this novel: history here is decidedly *unlyrical* but rather a dispassionate description of the inevitable redistribution of power in the system of mastery and slavery in South Africa. Hegel again, but Hegel thematized realistically rather than allegorically.

And yet, in the review with which I began my discussion, Nadine Gordimer insists on the allegorical impulse at work in *Life and Times of Michael K*. She argues that though allegory is not self-consciously imposed upon this novel, as it is in Coetzee's earlier novels, allegorical significance is nonetheless here to be discovered. Michael K is an individual, but also the whole black people of South Africa; his personal destiny figures the destiny of the collective. Perhaps, though the specificity and the limitations of the character may also work against this equation. In any case, we may agree about this novel that Coetzee wishes both to approach the situation in South Africa more closely by portraying it more realistically, and yet also retain at least some of the generalizing distance which allegory allows. What is undeniable is that the author wishes to connect his novel to the tradition of allegorical dissent which I have traced here. Why else would he have given his victimized character the same name that Kafka once gave his?⁶

The tradition of the allegorical fable has recently been enriched in various parts of the world. One thinks of Italo Calvino's surreal tales of creation and consciousness, or Jorge Luis Borges' metaphysical allegories of the world as

library or labyrinth, or Donald Barthelme's wryly concentrated reflections of contemporary American mythology. However, since my interest here is in the potential of this mode for dissent, I will mention three writers from countries where political and social criticism is as urgently needed as it is in South Africa. These writers – two Latin American, one Czechoslovakian – also address the relations of power in their countries by means of allegory.

The magic realism which characterizes much recent Latin American fiction is compatible with the symbolic strategies and reflexive structures of allegory. The Chilean José Donoso's *Casa de Campo* (*House in the Country*, 1978) is structured by elaborate substitutive patterns involving the duality of master and servant, structures which reflect the traditional oligarchies in much of Latin America. An opulent country house in a stylized, unidentified territory comes to represent the ruling establishment – it is owned and occupied by the decadent Ventura family, the political and economic masters of a system based on membership in an old, entrenched class. Within the house there is an intricate hierarchy of power which depends on age, family position, and moral character – the less his or her moral capacity, the more power that character is likely to possess, whether in the hierarchy of servants or masters. Outside the wrought iron fence surrounding the house, Donoso (like Coetzee) dramatizes the threat to the entrenched system in the form of 'barbarians' – symbolic embodiments of exploitation, upon whom their exploiters are totally dependent. To this depiction of dependent masters, Donoso adds another level of power relations: those of parent and child. I have already referred to the family relations which figure importantly in Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*, and Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*; corrupt family relations in those novels do not, however, so explicitly parallel social and political corruption as they do in *House in the Country*. Donoso's allegory oscillates between the power relations of family and state, individual and community, one level reflecting and intensifying the other. We are led to the conclusion that abuses in one realm necessarily spawn abuses in the other. And in another example of the particularly Latin American combination of magic realism and allegory, *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*, 1982), Isabel Allende refers to the events of the last decade in Chile. In Allende's novel, like Donoso's, family relations co-exist with and confirm social and political relations.

The Czech writer Milan Kundera plays with a variety of genres, including allegory, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979). There is one character, for example, who appears in a number of the sections, and plays a number of different roles, going from a realistically described character to a mythic figure who virtually embodies Czechoslovakia. It is precisely this kind of flexibility which the allegorical fable allows. The contemporary writers of dissent whom I have discussed here may vary their narrative stance vis-a-vis the political and social conditions which they oppose more subtly than they could in a conventionally realistic mode because the form allows them to shift from realistic to symbolic narration, and from public to private realms. Their allegorical narrative structures permit them to distance or to approach the

reality which they describe, and thus to modulate the intensity and the angle of their protest.

It is ironic that allegory, a mode which in the English tradition flourished upon the medieval assumption of the similitude between the word and the world, and upon the assumption of the ultimate unity of the physical and the metaphysical, has become a mode particularly suited to the novelistic expression of fragmentation and injustice. Contemporary South African fiction, like the Latin American and Chechoslovakian novels to which I have briefly referred, are inspired by profoundly historical imaginations and by specific historical goals. It is another irony that in a symbolic form abstracted from specific time and place, these writers have found an effective medium for their very specific protests against the simplifications of absolute power.

Notes

1. General works on the philosophy and conventions of the allegorical mode which I have found useful are Honig (1959), Fletcher (1964) and Berger (1957).
2. For a discussion of Puttenham's commentary on the uses of figural language, see Montrose (1984).
3. Hegel (1949: 228-240). George Steiner (1982) notes Coetzee's affinities with Hegel.
4. I am indebted here to Paul de Man's study (1979) of the deconstructive uses of allegory.
5. I am grateful to Annette L. Combrink, professor of English at Potchefstroom University, for bringing this novel to my attention, and for sending me a copy.
6. Nadine Gordimer disagrees on this point, stating that the initial probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer and 'has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka'. Ms Gordimer is right that K may stand for Kotze of Koekemoer, but wrong to assert that it has no reference to Kafka. It is untenable to dismiss the existence of any of the meanings of a literary symbol, though one may wish to dismiss their importance. There is no possibility of avoiding the reference to Kafka in this character's name, however many other names or meanings may also be contained in that single and singular letter. See in this regard Carlos Fuentes' essay on Milan Kundera (1981).

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