

The writing of politics and the politics of writing On reading Dovey on reading Lacan on reading Coetzee on reading . . . (?)

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The Novels of J.M. Coetzee

Teresa Dovey 1988
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Summary

Prompted by the publication, in 1988, of Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee* – the first extended study of Coetzee's work – this review-essay takes issue with Dovey's total reliance, in her understanding of Coetzee, on contemporary theory (especially that derived from Lacanian psycho-analysis) at the expense of the "mimetic" challenge of social intervention and commitment. Instead of viewing history as a discursive "play of difference", the review-essay argues that in a crisis-ridden South Africa, if not in European and American intellectual circles, it might be necessary to "shut down" difference and affirm, even dogmatically, certain grand narratives of history. It is questionable whether either Coetzee or Dovey has found a voice which can address, productively, the urgent dilemmas of writing and politics in contemporary South Africa.

Opsomming

Geïnisieer deur die publikasie in 1988 van Teresa Dovey se *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee* – die eerste uitgebreide studie van Coetzee se werk – staan hierdie artikel krities teenoor Dovey se totale steun op kontemporêre teorie (veral dié afgelei van Laciaanse psigo-analise) in haar begrip van Coetzee ten koste van die "mimetiese" uitdaging van sosiale tussentrede en betrokkenheid. Eerder as om geskiedenis te sien as 'n diskursiewe "spel van differensie" argumenteer dié artikel dat in 'n krisis vervulde Suid-Afrika (indien nie in Europese of Amerikaanse intellektuele kringe nie), dit nodig mag wees om differensie "af te sluit" en sekere groot lyne van die geskiedenis selfs dogmaties te bevestig. Dit is twyfelagtig of Coetzee óf Dovey 'n "stern" gevind het wat op produktiewe manier die dringende dilemmas van literatuur en politiek in tydgenootlike Suid-Afrika kan aanpak.

Teresa Dovey's 434-page study *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee* appeared at about the same time (10-11 March 1988) as the Department of Literary Theory, at the University of South Africa, organised a two day seminar on Coetzee's most recent novel, *Foe*. I mention this because I find it difficult to respond to Dovey's book – the first extended treatment of Coetzee – outside the context of current theoretical debates: particularly those concerning the significance of the poststructuralist enterprise in relation to history. These debates have special pertinence in a country like ours, where history may certainly be regarded, poststructurally, as discourse while to millions of the dispossessed it is more likely to manifest itself, concretely, as low wages or the police cell.

At the UNISA seminar, to which Dovey had been invited as a key-note speaker but was unable to attend, there was enthusiastic endorsement, by many of the participants, for a "poststructuralist Coetzee". It is tempting to regard this as evidence of the continuing Eurocentric bias of our literary education and institutions. But, paradoxical as it may be in the world of poststructuralism, Coetzee was perhaps only being allowed his own intentions. As he has said:

history is not reality ... [but] a kind of discourse ... categories of history are not privileged, just as the categories of moral discourse are not privileged. They do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality. I see absolutely no reason why, even in the South Africa of the 1980s, we should agree to agree that things are otherwise. (Coetzee, 1988a: 4-5)

Philosophically, we cannot deny the "truth claims" of such comments: for once the working of "difference" as understood by poststructuralism is appreciated, history cannot provide an unquestioned ground. This notwithstanding, we do not need to deny that language is the origins of history in order to choose, at any particular time and place, to "shut down" the play of difference and accept the necessity, however provisional, of anti-Derridean "strategies with finality" in the practice of producing a new kind of human subject: one which, to quote Terry Eagleton after Brecht, "would experience not only the gratifications of libidinal language but the fulfilments of fighting political injustice" (Eagleton, 1983: 191).

What bothered one of the speakers, Leon de Kock, at the UNISA seminar was in fact what he perceived to be too great an absorption on the part of his fellow academics with libidinal language, and too little with political injustice. And he seemed more than willing to include Coetzee himself in his strictures (I suspect he would also have been willing to include Dovey):

Why do we privilege a single text by a self-confessedly marginal white writer for a seminar which approaches conference proportions. ... Bereft of the moral legitimacy of liberalism we [the white South African literary establishment] were left with an increasing sense of decadence, and we began to analyse our decay. In this, it seems to me, Coetzee became our chief articulator, fictionalising the crisis by setting up discourses within discourses and collapsing the epistemological and moral self-confidence of liberal writing by recalling our brutal, colonial heritage. (De Kock, 1988)

It is not that Coetzee is somehow "apolitical": "he showed us that there continues to be an imperialism in the modalities of the very discourse by which we imagine we are liberating ourselves. But with each act of rewriting the entrapment became more pronounced" (Ibid.). The consequence is a humiliating reversion to the prison-house of language, "where the awareness is marginality, frustration and historical obsolescence" (Ibid.). Aiming his broadside at those who appeared satisfied with a "multiplying analysis of absence", De Kock reminded delegates that, as Michael Vaughan had indicated earlier in the seminar, a black writer like Njabulo S. Ndebele is in a position, historically determined, to strip through so much of *la nouvelle*

critique and invest narratives with social legitimacy. "Can we not find a better use for the power we have," De Kock concluded, "than to pick at our own cultural carcass? Maybe we have no choice in the matter, or perhaps we should consider switching to ESL-teaching, for the time being anyway?" (Ibid.).

These are harsh words. Nevertheless, they help us to identify, I think, what in this country should be crucial to our study of Coetzee: the question of the writing of politics and the politics of writing. Dovey hardly recognises the challenge, and her primary concern is to validate a kind of super-subtle, metatheoretical Coetzee. But in the spirit of poststructuralism, I do not intend to allow Dovey all her own intentions; rather, I shall keep returning to the matter of her "silences" regarding socioliterary debate in South Africa. First, however, what do we find in her study? Referring to Coetzee's novels as fictions-as-criticism, or criticisms-as-fiction, she subtitles her book "Lacanian Allegories", and individual chapters on the five novels (I need the term, for convenience) are preceded by a lengthy "Theoretical Framework: Lacan, Narration, Temporality". Identifying Coetzee's texts as the re-writings of previous texts (the journey of exploration, in the case of *Dusklands*, the romantic pastoral, in *In the Heart of the Country*, the liberal-humanist novel, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the novel of the inarticulate victim, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, and current poststructuralist discourses, in *Foe*), Dovey sees Coetzee, like the hermit crab of Magda's monologue, inhabiting the empty shells of models and theories. From within, he deconstructs the languages of imperialism (whether political or sexual), and alerts us to a system of differences rather than hierarchies. His political significance is seen to lie, therefore, in the challenge he presents to the authority and the priority of sanctioned forms of sense-making and myth-making particularly within the living legacy of colonial ideology. He offers not an account of a given reality, but a way of forming a history.

So far this is Standard fare, and Dovey's "South African" interest comes to the fore, intermittently, in her comparative readings of Coetzee and Schreiner, in her observations on *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a critique on the discourse of the South African liberal novel, and in her treatment of *Michael K* as "realism of the surface": let the novel resist our desires to intrude our own significances; let Michael K refuse moralists and humanists the comfort of exploring his inner depths as victim. Dovey arrives at her insights, however, by a circuitous route, via an elaborate Lacanian vocabulary, in which innumerable poststructuralist critics are quoted at length as new authorities. The study was originally a doctoral thesis and, I suppose, there was felt to be a need to impress the examiners; nevertheless, it is strange that Dovey, who is so alert to the relativistic character of discourse, should set up the "play of difference" as her own unexamined "touchstone". At the centre of her approach, she identifies the Lacanian subject, split from its Mirror Stage. As Lacan has it, the child/signifier, standing before its image in the mirror, found a fullness, a wholeness of identity in the signified of its reflection. But, post-oedipally, it is plagued by the problem of poststructuralism: as prerequisite of adult self-recognition, the subject must enter into the Symbolic order of

language (represented by the Authority, or Law, of the Father), only to know that reality is not imaginary possession, but a process of difference and absence along an endless chain of signifiers.

In *Dusklands*, therefore, we can see that, despite Western mythography concerning Africa, Jacobus Coetzee will encounter no frontier. As Dovey says, "the self is always constructed in relation to the other, in the context of a social totality" (Dovey, 1987: 24), and the narrative abandons any attempt at scientific objectivity, producing an allegory of the quest for identity. Motivated by his desire for identity of self, Jacobus Coetzee, as authority figure, intrudes his phallic presence into the interior of the continent even as the Hegelian Master-Slave relation of coloniser and colonised ensures that he will not achieve recognition from the Hottentots. The ultimate logic of his cultural rootlessness is the reduction of human reciprocity to violent confrontation. Unlike the adventure story, pastoral has no sequential movement, and Magda's discourse (in *In the Heart of the Country*) does not even attain the continuity of narrative. Rather, her crisis is articulated around the very principle of stasis. She is a hole – as Dovey says, in the heart of the *cunt-ry* – waiting to be made whole, and her non-achievement of sexual identity (the thwarting of her desire) causes her to revert to the Mirror Stage of narcissistic self-sufficiency, where her powerlessness is revealed, psychologically, by her fantasies of aggression against her father and her rape by the servant. What we have, Dovey indicates, is colonial neurosis. Like Schreiner's Lyndall, Magda – the white, unmarried woman trapped in a patriarchal society – is trapped, discursively, in her own stony monologue. As Coetzee has said, the figures of Jacobus Coetzee and Magda "lack the stature to transform the 'It' into a 'You', to create a society in which reciprocity exists; and therefore condemn themselves to desperate gestures towards establishing intimacy" (Watson, 1978: 123).

If this remains – by analogy – a current "colonial" nightmare in South Africa, then Coetzee offers no transcendental cure. In fact *Waiting for the Barbarians*, according to Dovey, is designed expressly to block the religio-humanist desire (which she sees as central to liberalism in this country) for individual autonomy, freedom of choice and, tragedy being "essential" and not "material", for tragic sympathy with the victims of oppression. Instead, all aching humanists (the Magistrate and the readers) are dumped on to Lacan's couch, something which is corroborated by Coetzee himself:

In some models of psycho-analysis, we might note, the analyst, listening for the truths of the patient, listens not for the patient's truths, the truths the patient finds or tells, but for the patient's lies and silences and evasions, believing that there lie the clues to the "real" truth. The patient's lie becomes the analyst's truth. (Coetzee, 1984: 4)

We the readers are evidently placed in "psycho-analytic" relation to Coetzee's stories, which in turn play the analyst's role in relation to previous texts and draw attention to what has been repressed in histories that are assumed to be authoritative. If Coetzee's novels (like patients) seek to resist our mastery

of interpretation, this according to Dovey ensures an on-going analytic(al) dialogue between text and reader. Refusing to be appropriated into any one interpretative act, the novels retain a subversive function: they continue to subvert our habitual ways of thinking and perceiving and remind us, in our poststructural difference, of systems of power that endorse certain representations while prohibiting others.

In a sense, this is the writing of politics; but it is writing and politics confined to the intellectual bourgeoisie. It is not surprising that Coetzee has been ignored so far by black critics. Neither is it surprising that radical student opinion should be suspicious of Coetzee:

As the CNA award shows, this is a book [*Waiting for the Barbarians*] which will be enthusiastically assimilated into the very system it (vaguely) condemns. In the end it is not a disturbing book, and ultimately it challenges nothing. Coetzee is a fine writer. It's a pity he isn't a bolder one. (Quoted by du Plessis, 1981: 77)

The comment is interesting. For Dovey, in contrast, finds *Barbarians* a disturbing book in that it deconstructs the whole liberal-humanist novelistic discourse and so denies liberals their sentimental, nostalgic dreams of judging, from a purer moral position, the brute power of the police state. Paradoxically, however, the radical Left has dismissed the novel, while bourgeois teaching institutions have granted it a significance on syllabuses, where it is taught, I suspect, as a humanist novel. (We can respond, humanistically, to the story of the self-ironising Magistrate, whose humane but minimal concern begins to query its own moral torpor and, in the iron times of Colonel Joll, tries to keep alive the flickerings of consciousness and even conscience as it experiences the guilt of narcissistic self-justification.) Using the narrow frames of Stephen Watson's MA dissertation on the South African liberal novel, Dovey herself reveals a somewhat limited understanding of the liberal impulse in our fiction; and when we turn to a critic like Lionel Abrahams who in the South African social and literary terrain has struggled to adapt liberal humanism to changing circumstances, we hear that *Barbarians* is a work "likely to impress less by formal inventiveness and sheer fierce brilliance but more by an urgency of commitment" (Abrahams, 1981: 83). Turning next to Menàn du Plessis, we hear a partial refutation of the radical-student indictment (Coetzee is reflecting on the "ghastly stasis that our post-bourgeois society seems to be floundering in," and he offers no romantic transcendence) even as du Plessis feels compelled to "raise a small-voiced query" as to whether middle-class South Africans "actually sense, as they read Coetzee, a dangerous, liberatory ripping through the old worn fabric of bourgeois assumptions":

Or do they merely feel, having read Robbe-Grillet perhaps, that South African fiction has finally begun to resemble avant-garde European writing and so has, in a sense, arrived? I don't know the answers, but if the latter is the case, then the irony is a little bitter. (Du Plessis, 1981: 79)

Are these diverse responses due to the fact that Coetzee's novel successfully resists our attempts at mastery of interpretation? The important point is,

rather, that in the course of considering the various comments we have shifted from the writing of politics to the politics of writing. We are encountering barely concealed dialogues, or more accurately confrontations, between the ideologically constituted text and ideologically constituted readers. As I have said, however, the historicity of the text-in-context does not engage Dovey so much as the ingenious textual interpretation or, as she might have it, non-interpretation. And because she often claims the support of equally ingenious comments by Coetzee himself, her approach needs to be pursued with some persistence and seriousness. Of Coetzee's novels to date, *Foe* is probably the most puzzling, and it might be worth following at some length Dovey's response to what she describes as a novel "constituted by nothing less than the discourses of feminism, postcolonialism and postmodernism".

Through its four sections, this fiction-as-criticism focuses – we are told – on ways in which first Susan Barton and then the novel as a whole challenge the Author function. If we can see Susan Barton's name anglicised from the French Berton, then we may read Berton in combination with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (the authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic*). We will recall that G & G identified the palimpsest text as a positive strategy in women's struggles for literary authority (the surface "patriarchal" design conceals obscurer levels from where the woman writer can subvert male-literary expectations and standards). But what G & G (Barton/Berton) do not see is what Toril Moi sees: that in determining to avoid male authorship (in this case, that of Foe), one can easily end up assuming one's own authorship of authority. When we witness Susan, the Muse, straddling Foe in the bedroom, we are meant to realise that Susan has merely reversed positions of dominance. Continuing to seek authorial mastery (the right to tell her own story), Susan then attempts to colonise Friday as the subject of her narrative. But as Spivak says, feminism within the social relations and institutions of the metropolis has something like a relationship with the fight for individualism in the upwardly mobile bourgeois cultural politics of the European nineteenth century. If Susan fails to see that she cannot simply turn Friday, the other, into a self, Coetzee the metatheoretician according to Dovey anticipates the tyranny of another Master-Slave situation. As Dovey says: "The problem for women, indeed for all, writers wishing to signify their otherness within phallic discourse, is thus a rhetorical one, a problem of how to point to a strategic silence *within* speech" (Dovey, 1988: 380). Friday, we recall, has no tongue (signifier-ca/untly, neither it seems does he have a phallus), and he mocks the attempts by Foe and Susan to make him the model of their own respective power discourses. Mimicry, in postmodernism, repeats rather than re-presents, and Friday in mimicry disregards the function and status of Foe's guild-master's robes and Susan's attempts to teach him a new tune on her flute.

The final section of the novel – Dovey continues – provides figures of supplementarity, as an unnamed, un-sexed narrator recounts the discovery of the bodies of Foe, Barton and Friday. We are taken here beyond the elimination of bi-polar sexuality towards an area of relationship to the other where non-dialectical, Manichean oppositions between self and other are replaced by a process of mutual differentiation. *Foe*, therefore, anticipates the disap-

pearance of the author-authority function, and the questions posed are those of Foucault including, centrally, "Where has [this discourse] been used, how can it circulate and who can appropriate it for himself [sic]?" (Foucault, 1979). Finally, the soft, unending stream beating against the narrator's face suggests the possibility of a relationship in which each of the subjects would recognise the self to be simply an other amongst others, and Dovey concludes the chapter and her study:

In this way the conclusion points us forward to a time when the slow stream might become an anonymous murmur, to a time when the insistence upon difference and the claim to authority might no longer be a politically necessary strategy, and when it might be possible, like Foucault [one of Dovey's unexamined Authorities], to ask: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (Dovey, 1988: 402)

Such a state of mutual differentiation is laudable as an ideal. In South Africa most of us are too regularly "spoken to": black women more so than white women, white women more so than white men, progressively-inclined white men more so than conservative white men. But are forms of utopia really the signifieds lurking behind Coetzee's innumerable signifiers? In reading Dovey on *Foe*, I kept recalling the symbol-mongering of my own undergraduate days when steamers sinking to the bottoms of rivers = descents into the unconscious, etc., etc. And feeling that Dovey had performed some interpretative sleight of hand, I turned to Hanjo Beressem's article, "*Foe*: The Corruption of Words", where the emphasis is throughout on *Foe* as a "colonial novel". Academic acuteness, or rather cuteness, however, remained the name of the game.

Seeing parallels between Crusoe's island (in Defoe) and Cruso's island (in Coetzee), Beressem points to Lacan's identification in "Aggressivity and Psycho-analysis" of three notions of colonialism, individuality and economy, which had defined the earlier Crusoe's imaginary world and which, according to Lacan, still preside over our contemporary scene, ruling over it with their "narcissistic tyranny". Yet like Lacan, Coetzee – Beressem believes – proposes a way out of this "imaginary wasteland"; and before images of contemporary wastelands (e.g., Crossroads) can intrude, we are told that while hierarchies of power-structures define the differences between subjects, love emerges in Coetzee (as in Lacan) as the factor that provides a common element. This is not the love of the religio-humanist (as Menàn du Plessis has said, Coetzee is in his own way materialist) (Du Plessis, 1981); rather it is within sexual relations that the subjects feel both the lack as well as the value of intersubjectivity/textuality. In consequence, the "silent language" is the final perspective point of semiosis and the Symbolic, and refers to the human as a body and a living organism: the smallest common denominator which ultimately defines the master as well as the slave, marking them as human beings (Beressem, 1988: 233). (We may recall the Magistrate's very "human" response, as all his designs of freedom and justice pale against his preoccupation with a cold in the head, sniffing and sneezing, in the misery of being

simply a body.) In conclusion, Beressem sees the description in *Foe* of the world of colonialism as a "textual scenario" signalling a specific "linguistic turn" of South African literature (Ibid: 234). In later times, we are told grandly, *Foe* might well be found to belong to a number of "missing links" between a "Literature of Liberation" and poststructuralist theory (Ibid: 235).

All of this must sound a bit unreal (if I may be permitted the term) outside of the academic conference; and judging by the furore that Frank Lentricchia caused when he first raised the problem of poststructuralism and the question of history, adherents of the poststructuralist view are perhaps not always so sure that the "superior insights" of difference can get them off the hook in the mimetic world of moral and social action. (The Paul de Man affair has not helped matters.) In a recent book of essays *Poststructuralism and the Question of History*, for example, there are several, erudite papers which seek to refute Lentricchia's premise that poststructuralism "repeated an often extremely subtle denial of history" (Lentricchia, 1980: xiii). As the editors are at pains to point out in their introduction, Lentricchia's "history" (like Eagleton's), which is formulated in terms of the social, the ethical, the political, is always posited as existing outside writing and determining it. Discursively, this may be correct; but in practice Lentricchia is saying something very simple and (for white South Africans) something very hard: that we need to intervene, at certain times, in important issues in the life around us. After reading Dovey on *Foe*, it struck me how easily Coetzee's "deconstructions" can be appropriated by institutions of higher education, how remote they must seem to the *arché* and *telos* of black South African history.

As a white South African, I find disturbing my implication of our own retreat into linguistic ambivalence. (Dovey, incidentally, is also a white South African, and her study emanated from Rhodes University.) I can appreciate the need to question discursive structures of power (our state apparatuses, including SATV, are busy ensuring that we become increasingly brain-washed, or at least anaesthetised); I am dubious, however, as to whether the poststructuralism of our writers and intellectuals has been wrenched sufficiently from the climes of European and American campuses and squeezed forcibly into our own contested terrains. Turning for a moment from Dovey and Coetzee, I noticed that my ill-ease was shared by Gerrit Olivier, in his review of André Brink's latest novel *States of Emergency*. Writing in the middle of our emergency Brink has employed the poststructuralist approach to fiction, brushing the social landscape with the dangling signifiers of his own crisis-ridden love life (under the terms of his most recent divorce agreement, his novel may not be sold in South Africa). As Olivier says:

In dealing with a situation calling for commitment, poststructuralism faces two problems. To begin with, there is a tendency in the approach to deny the existence of objective reality, to reduce reality to just another code.

More fundamentally, poststructuralism destroys the notion of the individual subject as source of meaning. There is no room for the contesting author to stand up and be counted because he, too, is seen as no more than an intersection of codes and structures. (Olivier, 1988: 19)

Olivier concludes that Brink's novel fails, finally, because it refuses to take seriously the single politically most relevant and challenging characteristic of the poststructuralist view: the radical questioning of the power residing in the written word. In *States of Emergency* the controlling intelligence – white, male, somewhat chauvinistic – is never subjected to analysis.

At least, Coetzee cannot be accused of refusing to doubt the authority of his own words, and as he slips into hermit shells he has declared his own marginality on the South African scene while his novels find their main readership in London and New York. In his perceptive volume of essays *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, which also reads the “silences” of earlier texts, he poses the question: “Is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity then of a highly problematical South African-colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?” (Coetzee, 1988b: 7–8). And he himself finds in so much white writing a literature of “empty landscape . . . a literature of failure, of the failure of the historical imagination. The writer speaks but the stones are silent, will not come to life. Or when this is not true they do so in the form of some giant or monster from the past” (Ibid: 10). The reason for this, Coetzee concludes, is the white South African's refusal to face up to the consequences of human figures in the landscape. In our industrialised present, these will be black socialised human beings who, unlike Friday, have their own voices and their own stories, and even belong to trade unions. I should think that a valuable direction in the study of Coetzee, therefore, would be to apply the test of silent landscape to his own writing. Has he found a language with which to speak to Africa or to be spoken to by Africa?

In the case of *Foe*, one can of course allow allegory and analogy full reign, so that the critiques in the novel of political and sexual discourses can be made to apply to our own authoritarian, patriarchal society. Yet, despite Coetzee's implication that the feminist language of the metropolis cannot simply be transferred to Africa, *Foe* itself does not manage to shape its own intentions to the local demand. No doubt, a state of mutual differentiation, to return to Dovey, is a worthy ideal. However, living right now amid race and class antagonisms, I recently saw the historical play performed by the Natal Women's Organisation (NOW) commemorating the 1956 march to Pretoria, which focused the dilemma facing black women when they were forced to carry reference books. It was a march which signified a gender-specific struggle against economic marginalisation and accepted the challenge of mobilising women in their capacities as home-makers and mothers. In contrast to the epic resonances of the NOW play (Strijdom, you have tampered with the women, you have struck the rock!), *Foe* can too easily seem to lose its best purposes – the deconstruction of dominant and dominating codes – by sacrificing communicative effect for the esoteric procedures of the palimpsest text. In our knowledge of the human suffering on our own doorstep of thousands of detainees who are denied recourse to the rule of law, *Foe* does not so much speak to Africa as provide a kind of masturbatory release, in this country, for the Europeanising dreams of an intellectual coterie.

Or, that is the impression we are left with after attending to Dovey's

chapter. Perhaps a more African-directed investigation of the politics of writing would have allowed for a different kind of attention to *Foe*. Such an approach would necessarily have had to historicise its own ideological agenda in a more problematic way than Dovey is prepared to do in the case of her own authorial discourse. It would have to be prepared, in consequence, to subject the texts, the class/culture-bound novelist, and the critic herself to the sort of "deconstructive" reading of Coetzee as a colonial writer that characterises Stephen Watson's illuminating article, "Colonialism and the Novels of J M Coetzee". If Watson is not quite able to unpick the cocoon of his own literary and social education in the scheme of his value judgments, then this is probably the most difficult procedure for all of us. Nevertheless, in trying to define Coetzee's importance, he finds that the solid core of his works lies outside the works themselves – his novels are "the novels of a man who is himself a coloniser . . . who is an intellectual, but a coloniser who does not want to be a coloniser" (Watson, 1986: 377). (By contrast, Dovey says breezily: "He is Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town, and regularly spends time at North American universities.") Watson's description would seem to hold good also for many of the participants in the UNISA seminar on *Foe*, which I mentioned above, and goes some way to demystifying the "mystique" that Coetzee enjoys in white academic circles. As Watson continues, unlike the colonised blacks who have no choice but to be part of their struggles (the narrative mode must, necessarily, be realism), Coetzee is only half in praxis. Although he might have a great longing for history, he is lost to history, deprived of what Arthur Koestler writing during World War II in his essay entitled "The Intelligentsia" called the "responsibility of action". As a coloniser (albeit, a leftish "coloniser who refuses"), Coetzee can only be accused by history. If Michael K escapes the camps only by escaping history altogether, Watson asks, "is his achievement (for the time being) really enough?" (Ibid: 390). In responding to his own question he says that, more than any of his contemporaries, Coetzee has "provided insight into the colonising mind, as well as the dissenting colonising mind" and that he has a "passionate hunger . . . to escape the warped relationships that colonialism fosters" (Ibid: 390). Nevertheless, Watson admits that how we answer the sort of question he has posed will depend on any number of factors. In our current situation, the factors will most likely be "extra-literary", and one can be led to what may be ungenerous comparisons: while Coetzee was receiving the 1987 Jerusalem Prize as a writer against apartheid, the "people's poet" Mzwakhe Mbuli was once against being held in detention. At the crux of the issue, then, is the inextricable connection in South Africa today between writing and politics.

By choosing to write on Coetzee in the mid 1980s Dovey whether she likes it or not is also caught up, inextricably, in the problem of how a white South African (writer or critic) can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa. But instead of engaging with the terms of the debate, Dovey tends to dismiss those critics who are sceptical of the adequacy of history as discourse by swiftly branding them naive readers. When Paul Rich views Coetzee's post-modernism as an art form probably destined to remain the vehicle for ex-

pressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals (Rich, 1982: 72), or when Peter Knox-Shaw remarks that it is regrettable that a writer of such considerable and varied talents should play down the political and economic aspects of history in favour of a psycho-pathology of Western life (Knox-Shaw, 1982: 37), Dovey's retort is that "common to all of these criticisms is a view of language as a transparent medium for transmitting the realities of an empirical world, and a failure to see language itself as constitutive of those realities we are able to perceive" (Dovey, 1988: 53). I am sure, however, that both Rich and Knox-Shaw have heard of Saussure. Rather, the larger matter concerns the kinds of questions that in this society should be posed by, and posed to, literature.

According to the logic of her own premise (reality as ever-receding code), Dovey might be right to see *Life & Times of Michael K* as a resistant text, in that Coetzee by utilising minimal conventions of "character" creation and allegorical structure undermines the authority of writers and readers to "possess" the life of the voiceless victim. Ignoring the fact that the novel of liberal-paternalism in South Africa did not survive the 1960s, Dovey turns for her justifications to the example of the *nouveau roman*, where our desire (we are back with Lacan) to impose our control is frustrated as the text refuses us the comforts of "interiority", or complicity between the other and our own preferred moral and mythic schemes. ("Our" presumably refers mainly to liberal-humanist readers, but can be stretched in some instances to include intruding Marxists.) In his obscurity, his adherence to no code, his allegiance to no system, his commitment to no cause, Michael K is seen to offer a model of resistance which the medical officer describes as follows: "As time passed away . . . I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. . . . In fact, you did not resist at all."

Despite Dovey, however, it was not merely a theoretical incomprehension about the character of the postmodernist novel – the putting forward of the unrepresentable in presentation itself – that provoked Nadine Gordimer's reaction to *Michael K*. In her article "The Idea of Gardening" she complains that Coetzee denies the energy of the will to resist evil:

That *this* superb energy exists with indefatigable and undefinable persistence among the black people of South Africa – Michael K's people – is made evident, yes, heroically, every grinding day. It is not present in the novel. . . . A revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions rises with the insistence of the song of the cicadas to the climax of this novel. I don't think the author would deny that it is his own revulsion. (Gordimer, 1984a: 6)

I can understand Gordimer's disquiet. As the present article will have indicated, I too have a difficulty, which has been exacerbated by our continuing state of emergency, with enthusiastic justifications of Coetzee's project. In her article "Coetzee and his Critics . . ." (Dovey, 1987), which appeared in print before but was written after her study, Dovey attempts to refute the arguments of some of Coetzee's detractors by quoting Frederic Jameson to suggest that *Dusklands*, at least, is "not so much a text, as rather a text-to-be-(re-) constructed . . . whose means and techniques are themselves historically

irreversible, so that we are not at liberty to construct any historical narrative at all" (Jameson, 1977: 288). But this does not really enable me to overcome my own sense of the tendency of Coetzee's poststructuralist allegories to dismantle without rebuilding identities, to fragment the subject without seeking new solidarities. I remain disappointed that Dovey should feel "Coetzee's writing . . . has proved invulnerable to the kind of criticism it has thus far encountered" (Dovey, 1987: 27) as she continues to avoid the huge questions posed by the writing of politics and the politics of writing. To be told that Michael K's determination to be out of all camps represents the possibilities for freedom inherent in the process of textuality itself, in the text as an "atopic site, a drifting habitation taken up and abandoned with each successive reading" (Dovey, 1988: 290), is unfortunately to help further remove Coetzee's novels from the cutting-edge of the most crucial debates of the day in this country. It is to confirm the suspicions of many black writers that literary pursuit in white South Africa has rather more to do with the gratifications of libidinal language than the fulfilments of fighting political injustice. Neither are Dovey's arguments on textuality likely to persuade Gordimer to subscribe to K's stories at the expense of the stories of the guerilla band which he contemplates joining: "Theirs are stories for a life time", stories which recuperate the past for meaningful living in the future. It may be true that grand narratives of history can only be affirmed dogmatically, but now would seem to be the time for clear affirmations. As Gordimer says, perhaps white writers are condemned, historically, to gestures, but let these at least be "essential gestures" (Gordimer, 1984b). The essential gesture on Dovey's part would have been to take far more seriously than she does the experiential compulsion of the "mimetic" possibility. If history is formed in a textual area of subject-in-process, what are we in the process of becoming?

It is also a pity that the Lacanian language of so much of Dovey's study prevents her from doing justice to one of the striking features of Coetzee's art: his powerful, evocative prose. The Magistrate's discourse may allude to the act itself of writing the liberal-humanist novel; to "uneducated" readers, however, the Magistrate impinges his presence most immediately as a character: a decent if morally lax human being who finds himself increasingly caught up in what seems to him to be an impossible historical situation. Jacobus Coetzee may indeed personify the thrust of Imperial phallic-conquest, or he may even be a linguistic signifier (would you recognise one if you saw one in the veld?). But he also projects his pathological consciousness into the realms of human justification, delusion, cruelty and even bizarre vulnerability. Too often, however, Dovey's jargon manages to negate the "stories" of Coetzee's novels. At times, I felt as though I were trapped in a monstrous parody of Derrida's labyrinth of language (I know, we are all discursively bound, but let us occasionally wiggle a toe):

As Schleifer points out, temporality, as a concept, "emerges and is recognised simultaneously with the emergence of the subject", and in Coetzee's novel this insistence upon "eternal present" is both a refusal of narrative temporality and of the condition of subjectivity imposed upon the self with entry into the Symbolic.

The vertical units of Magda's speech, as separate successive attempts to signal her desire, are "anchoring points", or *points de capiton*, which may be identified with the metaphoric pole of the field of the signifier, in which, according to Lacan, signification as such arises. It is as though the metaphoric signifying function is made to intrude in the domain of the metonymic function, refusing to allow the repression of the signified; a repression which is maintained with the elision from signifier to signified. (Dovey, 1988: 187)

So, dear reader, if in the present essay you have followed the gist of Dovey, some credit is due to her Master-commentator: in this particular case, Me! My authority is of course only provisional, and awaits subversion in a further play of difference. But in the meantime, I noticed a review in *New Nation* (11–17 August 1988) of the study *The Independent Trade Unions 1974–1984 Ten Years of the South African Labour Bulletin* (ed. Johan Maree, Ravan Press), which concluded with the following observation: "The book and rich history it documents is still inaccessible to the people who have made that history." Each week *New Nation* publishes concise and clearly articulated chapters in the history of black South African literature, while we academics are under increasing pressure to publish our learned discourses in learned journals – preferably in those emanating from abroad – and so earn state subsidies for our institutions. Supported as it is by a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) publications grant, Dovey's book is unlikely to be understood outside the rarefied air of the academic-theoretician. The writing of politics and the politics of writing, however, is concerned fundamentally with the question of address to Africa, which involves the challenges of accountability and accessibility. To take two examples, one from abroad, one from South Africa. In looking at the work of the German artist Hans Haacke (who since 1965 has lived in the USA), we find *Les Must de Rembrandt* (1986), a replica of a concrete bunker containing the mock façade of a Cartier boutique with a photograph of black South African workers. Informational plaques establish the business links between Cartier Monde, The Rembrandt Group and Gencor, the mining concern known for its less than sympathetic treatment of the black mining workforce (Le Consortium, Dijon, France). In focusing on the functional dimension of the aesthetic construct, Haacke emphasises the idea of artistic signification as communicative action – a notion which anchors the aesthetic sign to a material referent. To quote Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "the idea of communicative action ... critically challenges the simulationist variety of postmodernism, in which artistic signification relies on a misconception of the aesthetic sign as analogous to Baudrillard's *simulacrum* (which in its turn is based on the notion of the linguistic sign): i.e., that artistic meaning can be determined exclusively by internal differentials and without the presence of an external referent" (Buchloh, 1988: 106). Or, nearer to home, we might attend to the plain speech of Es'kia Mphahlele on the role of the intellectual in the liberation struggle:

[Black people] need to be told now who they are, and where they come from, and what they should be doing about these things that we're talking about. That's where the scholar comes in; he must exploit that consciousness, the black con-

sciousness, so as to probe deeper into the personality *and move forward*. [my italics] (Manganyi, 1981: 44)

If Haacke's "factographic" alternatives question any privileging of history as discourse, so in their own way do Mphahlele's words. We are reminded in both cases that if poststructuralism has any value for us it is as a tool for interrogating power, but that it is only one tool among others and, in South African practice, has so far proved to be distinctly limited in the urgent search for productive ways of *moving forward* in sociopolitical life. Possibly Haacke's information-art offers little comfort to adherents of palimpsest subtlety. Possibly Mphahlele's view is problematic for the white intellectual. While we ponder the dilemma, a spell of ESL-teaching might be of benefit to all of us, including Dovey and Coetzee.

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