

Violence and Complicity in J. M. Coetzee's Works

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Abstract. The aim of the paper is to examine J.M. Coetzee's treatment of violence in his fiction and to trace the strategies he applies in his books. The perspective of over three decades of his writing that we now have makes it possible to discern an evolution of his representations of atrocities and his rendition of and response to the problems he has formulated in his critical essays on violence published in *Doubling the Point*. A recognizable feature of Coetzee's fiction is the theme of complicity of those who are not directly involved in the actual crimes committed by others but who, on various levels, have their share in the oppression and who must cope with their sense of guilt and shame. The works discussed in the paper – *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Age of Iron* and *Elizabeth Costello* – do not exhaust the complexity of Coetzee's explorations of aggressiveness but they seem to illustrate important transitions in his oeuvre. The transformations include both modulations of thematic concerns related to violence and modifications of textual devices applied by Coetzee.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee; violence; complicity

In "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State" (1986), one of the essays in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992), J.M. Coetzee interrogates the problem of representing violence in literature. He observes that many South African authors, including himself, reveal "a dark fascination" with tortures and he contends that there are two reasons for their enthrallment. The first is that "relations in the torture room provide a metaphor [...] for relations between authoritarianism and its victims" (Coetzee 1992: 363). Here brute force, unlimited power, "legal illegality," operates to destroy the prisoner and to break his resistance. Deprived of any rights, the detainee is utterly vulnerable to

the oppressor's whim. The torture room, Coetzee writes, "becomes like the bed-chamber of the pornographer's fantasy, where, insulated from moral or physical restraint, one human being is free to exercise his imagination to the limits in the performance of vileness upon the body of another person" (Coetzee 1992: 363). The second reason for authors' engagement with brutality is that the torture room "is a site of extreme human experience, accessible to no one save the participants" (Coetzee 1992: 363). It is a place that fascinates writers because there is no other access to it than through the imagination.¹ The novelist "creates, in place of the scene he is forbidden to see, a representation of that scene, and a story of the actors in it and how they come to be there" (Coetzee 1992: 364). "The dark forbidden chamber," Coetzee continues, "is the origin of all 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 1992: 364).

The challenge for an artist, Coetzee asserts, is "how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms" (Coetzee 1992: 364). The question is how to avoid the clichés, like eroticization of the victim's body, the pornographic fascination with atrocities, "dark lyricism" (Coetzee 1992: 365) or sentimentalization of suffering. Depiction of oppressors poses no lesser problems: to ignore them, which morally condemnable people may deserve, is to deny the historical reality and the actual human experience; to focus on the perpetrators' inner selves is to attribute a metaphysical dimension to their existence. The above dilemmas, Coetzee carries on to explain, are particularly urgent for fiction writers; they are less constraining for authors of auto-narratives: autobiographers' personal experience of suffering and pain gives them the authority to retell those aspects of experience they feel a need to speak out about.² But fiction writers, accountable to readers for the work of their imagination, must find ways of dealing with beastly abusers who due to their immoral character should not be exposed to the public gaze. What novelists are faced with is "how to justify a concern with morally

¹ At this point Coetzee recalls John T. Irwin's contention that the torture room becomes for an artist "the source of all his imaginings – the womb of art" (Coetzee 1992: 363).

² As an illustration of the point Coetzee mentions Breyten Breytenbach's memoir, *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. Breytenbach writes about his own imprisonment and, to comprehend what he has gone through, he feels an urge to scrutinize the nature of his oppressors. Out of this impulse he sets out to explore their inner selves and imagine their private lives – their daily routines outside prison and their intimate relations – wondering how they "find it possible to leave the breakfast table, kiss their children goodbye, and drive off to the office to commit obscenities" (Coetzee 1992: 366). This way, Coetzee contends, Breytenbach situates his oppressors in the sphere of ordinary life, attempts to understand them as human beings and ponders upon their humanity. Although the oppressors are given attention the morally deplorable do not deserve, it is the author's personal history that in Coetzee's view appeases Breytenbach's concerns (Coetzee 1992: 336).

dubious people involved in a contemptible activity; how to find an appropriately minor place for the petty secrets of the security system" (Coetzee 1992: 366).

The issue is related to selecting an appropriate mode of writing. The historical conditions in South Africa have imposed a duty on artists to document oppression and to commemorate its victims. Realism, with its traditional concentration on the actual conditions of life, with its dedication to verisimilitude and its rejection of idealization, might appear appropriate for this aim. Realism, however, is not an unproblematic mode and produces difficulties that must be solved by authors. One of them, Coetzee remarks, is that "the novel of realism has been vulnerable to criticism of the motives behind its preoccupation with the mean, the low, the ugly. If the novelist finds in squalor the occasion for his most soaring poetic eloquence, might he not be guilty of seeking out his squalid subject matter for perversely literary reasons?" (Coetzee 1992: 365). At this point Coetzee recalls Alex La Guma's *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* and contends that La Guma's effort to expose banality of the security police does not quite come off: "It is as though, in avoiding the trap of ascribing an evil grandeur, La Guma finds it necessary to displace that grandeur, in an equivalent but negative form, onto their surroundings, lending to the very flatness of their world hints of metaphysical depth" (Coetzee 1992: 365). Thus, attribution of disquieting significance to the world of the perpetrators appears as a flaw, a kind of "lyrical inflation," in *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*.

As an example of a text where representation of violence has been rendered in an imaginative way and hence has circumvented the trap of "lyrical inflation," Coetzee mentions Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* (1979). Instead of reproducing the world of the security police, Gordimer symbolically associates the sphere of brutality "the inner reaches of Dante's hell" and with "a damned, dehumanized world" (Coetzee 1992: 367). This way she shifts focus from the actual atrocities to the meaning of oppression and places barbarity in its appropriate moral context. But the real force of the novel, Coetzee writes, is that *Burger's Daughter*, with its undeniable immediate political engagement, goes beyond the present moment, beyond the actual aggression, and opens itself to the future, to the times to come when moral values and moral order will be restored. Gordimer, in *Burger's Daughter*, discerns a possibility for change and expresses hope, perplexed, uncertain and hesitant as it is, for the advent of a new era,

a time when humanity will be restored across the face of society, and therefore all human acts [...] will be returned to the ambit of moral judgment. In such a society, it will once again be *meaningful* for the gaze of the author, the gaze of authority and authoritative judgment, to be turned upon scenes of torture. When the choice is no longer limited to *either*

looking on in a horrifying fascination as the blows fall *or* turning one's eyes away, then the novel can once again take as its province the whole of life, and even the torture chamber can be accorded a place in the design. [emphasis original] (Coetzee 1992: 368)

J. M. Coetzee's analyses of the works of other artists reveal his deep concern with problems of aesthetic and ethical nature related to representation of tortures. The issues he scrutinizes – selection of the modes of writing and stand-points from which to approach brutality, examination of ways of representing the victims, finding positions from which to pass moral judgment of perpetrators – appear as of seminal importance also for his own writing. He, too, throughout his creative practice, has been interrogating possible strategies of writing about oppression.

The aim of the paper is to examine J.M. Coetzee's treatment of state-sanctioned violence in his fiction and to trace the strategies he applies in his books. The perspective of over three decades of his writing that we now have makes it possible to discern an evolution of his representations of atrocities and response to the dilemmas he has formulated in his critical essays on violence. The transformations include both the modulation of thematic interests related to violence and the modifications of textual devices applied by Coetzee. The works discussed in the paper – *Dusklands* (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) – do not exhaust the complexity of Coetzee's explorations of brutality but they seem to illustrate important transitions in his oeuvre.³ The interpretation given here proposes to trace trajectory lines discernable in Coetzee's novels. After his analysis of the sources and manifestations of colonial violence and concentration on tortures and aggressiveness of the perpetrators in his first book, *Dusklands*, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee broadens his perspective and subjects to scrutiny the effects of tortures, both in the individual and the social dimension. He focuses on the victims of tortures with their suffering, pain and reaction to brutality, and on the moral devastation of the community in which abhorrent acts are carried out. *Age of Iron* marks another important shift that relies on his departure from the aggressive mode of writing and ostensible literary stylizations of the early novels towards more realistic narration that responds directly to the actual situation in South Africa. In *Age of Iron* Coetzee examines closely the growth of ethical consciousness of a person living in the times of apartheid during the States of Emergency. *Elizabeth Costello*, in turn, on the meta-fictional level, addresses the problem of the ethics of representation and the

³ The paper does not address violence towards animals. Although in a sense this is also state-sanctioned violence (the slaughterhouses), the complexity of the theme requires a separate treatment. After 2003 when Coetzee published *The Lives of Animals*, this theme has been given broad critical attention.

personal cost that artists involved in writing about atrocities pay. A recognizable feature of his fiction is Coetzee's permanent theme of complicity of those who are not directly involved in the actual crimes but who, on various levels, have their share in oppression and who must cope with their sense of guilt and shame.

Reading his novels, one can hardly escape the impression that Coetzee, in particular in his early fiction, is scrutinizing and inspecting radical forms of representing aggressiveness. It is as if he were testing the ways to circumvent and miss, but very narrowly, the risks that depictions of violence entail. Needless to say, his liminal strategies do not derive from his unawareness of the traps that such depictions set. Coetzee definitely has the courage to measure himself against the hazardous terrain and never tires of searching for the means to express his ideas and to detect aspects of violence inaccessible from other perspectives.

Coetzee's almost obsessive preoccupation with oppression is related to his South African origin, to his socio-cultural heritage and his situatedness in history. The political crises in South Africa with its history of colonialism and the apartheid regime, where racism was endemic in the system, have exerted an impact on his works and compelled him to write, in either straightforward or in allusive ways, about colonial violence.⁴ The latter of his methods, characteristic of his early works, where he does not overtly address the actual situation in South Africa and is not directly involved in the political strife, has complexified the reception and assessment of his art and has drawn him in his home country into ideological polemic about writers' social accountability.⁵ The argument is that his rejection of realism, the accepted form of opposing apartheid in the novel, testifies to his withdrawal from political contestation of the regime. As David Attwell writes in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, dominant literary traditions "have adopted various forms of realism as the unquestioned means of bearing witness to, and telling the truth about, South Africa" (Attwell 1993: 11). Coetzee's preoccupation with late modernist concerns, his interrogation of language, discourses, textuality and narrative, his use of parody, pastiche, allegory and literary stylizations (Attwell 1993: 13), according to this line of criticism, are supposed to attest his insensitivity to the exigencies of life under apartheid.

⁴ Commenting on the political situation in South Africa that forces artists to deal with contemporary problems and restrains their freedom of expression, Coetzee writes: "How we [writers] long to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation." But it is the crude and unjust reality of South Africa and writers' social accountability that makes it impossible for the writers to turn away from the political (Coetzee 1992: 98-99).

⁵ The assessment of Coetzee's works in South Africa significantly differs from his reception abroad. While in South Africa he has been criticized for lack of sufficient political involvement, foreign reviewers have praised his allegorical mode and the universal value of his writing. D. Head (2009: 95-106) discusses the major trends in the Coetzee criticism and elaborates on the differences between the African and the international reception.

But to say that Coetzee keeps away from serious political discussion and that he evades moral judgment of persecutions is to underestimate two important aspects of his use of literary modes alternative to realism: first, the critical force of non-realistic representations and, second, Coetzee's artistic aims that are not free of political intent. Throughout his work he has been expressing his conviction that literature has the power to rival the political, and not merely to respond to it. He believes that art should not be used as a tool in immediate ideological strife in terms imposed by the political. To perform the task of rivaling history, Coetzee insists, literature must protect and preserve its independent status and delineate the fields of contestation on its own terms. Hence his passionate and spirited involvement in maintaining literature's autonomy. Sovereignty of literature is, in his view, the source of its enormous potential, of its power to stimulate not only resistance but real ethical transformations. With such an understanding of art,⁶ Coetzee, throughout his work, has been looking for a medium with which he could address South Africa's anguish and oppose violence in meaningful ways.

Dusklands (1974), his first novel, pursues the aim of diagnosing the sources of colonial violence. Coetzee scrutinizes here the analogy between the brutality that characterized the Dutch colonization of South Africa in the eighteenth century and the aggressive spirit of the American invasion in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. The two stories in *Dusklands*, "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," respond to the oppressive forces of history that impressed themselves upon the social reality of South Africa and the USA – his homeland he decided to leave and the country he wanted to settle in. When he was departing from South Africa at the age of twenty one with the intention of "shaking away the dust of the country from his feet" (Coetzee 1992: 393), he could not have anticipated that several years later, in America, he would be confronted with a political situation in some sense comparable to the one that had caused his emigration, that is use of violence as the state's legitimate method to reach its political aims.⁷ In *Dusklands* Coetzee thematizes convergence of the historical

⁶ Coetzee's argument about protecting the independent role of literature and its being a rival to the political has been discussed by many critics, e.g. D. Attwell (1993: 15), D. Head (2009: 24-25), D. Attridge (2004: 15).

⁷ In the 1960s and 70s, during Coetzee's stay in America, Susan Gallagher asserts, the reality of the Vietnam war could not have been ignored: the war was given full coverage in the mass media and its unconceivable violence was exposed to the public. The atrocities in the battlefield were shown on television nationwide; propagandists spoke about the significance and value of the war and spread myths of soldiers' courage and heroism and linked them to the founding myths of American civilization going back to the times of the frontier exploits. The propaganda campaigns in the media, on the one hand, glorified the American soldiers with the aim of uniting the nation and gaining support for the military and, on the other, denigrated, debased and dehumanized the enemy (Gallagher 1991: 53). Years later, in his memoir, "Remembering Texas" (1984), Coetzee stated that the problem with the invasion in Vietnam was not the ignorance of the public about the war; on the contrary, "[t]he problem was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge"

and the contemporary state-sanctioned violence and explores its relatedness to colonialism (Gallagher 1991: 51). He locates the sources of Western civilization's aggressiveness in the discourses of power that the civilized world produce about themselves to explain and maintain their dominant status.⁸ The work, underwritten by Hegelian master-slave dialectic, subjects to analysis the discourses of asserting will and power on the Other. In Coetzee's focus are the imperial texts, that is ideologies, and hence the historical reality is not represented mimetically but produced as a linguistic construct. The pseudo-documents, imitative of the historical texts, by means of parody and pastiche recount atrocities committed in the periods. The story of production of Eugene Dawn's commissioned war propaganda report and Jacobus Coetzee's accounts of his pioneering explorations of South Africa are records of pervert brutalities, obscenities and cruelties committed against the subjugated Other. Torture, mutilation, rape, extermination, sadistic practices, racial oppression, napalm bombings are narrated in dispassionate tone by the first person narrators. The effect of this method is, as David Attwell observes, that Coetzee does not merely write about violence: his writing is violent (Attwell 1993: 55).

The intensity with which aggressiveness is shown in certain passages of "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" is indeed puzzling and leads to questions about the purpose of 'violent writing.' In *Dusklands* Coetzee turns abhorrent acts into a spectacle and exposes them to readers' gaze. Among the most shocking passages that the novel contains there are scenes where violence is voyeuristic (Graham 2003: 442). Eugene Dawn has a collection of photographs and films that document tortures of Vietnamese prisoners (Coetzee 1983: 13-17). He contemplates the pictures with pervert pleasure and draws readers into a spectacle of pornographic character. In the pictures crimes are staged, abuse is celebrated and performed for the camera which captures the details of the show in close-ups. The victims are humiliated, denigrated and dehumanized, perpetrators are glorified in poses of victors, violence is eroticized and fetishized. Violation in this "mythico-ethnic register," to use Jean-Luc Nancy's term, appears "as the result of the legitimate anger of 'national' affirmation" (Nancy 2005: 19). The torturers - complacent, relaxed and amused - smile to the camera and

(Coetzee 1992: 51). In the brutality of the American military operations and war propaganda Coetzee detected the same kind of aggressive spirit that he had discerned in the seventeenth and eighteenth century expedition narratives and accounts of colonization of Africa. The similarities he noticed between the ideologies of the old texts he had been reading in libraries and the American propaganda talk about the Vietnam war influenced the shape of his first book (Gallagher 1991: 51).

⁸ Coetzee's diagnosis of colonial violence is based on Hegel's analysis of the Western civilization and its Cartesian scientific rationality as expressed in Hegel's critique of essential Enlightenment concepts (Attwell 1993: 38). The philosophical ideas that underwrite *Dusklands* have been explored, among other sources, in the excellent studies by S. Gallagher (1991), D. Attwell (1993) and D. Attridge (2004).

boast of the effects of their work: the detainees' faces with burnt eyes, severed heads of the war prisoners, an agonizing body of a violated Vietnamese girl.

Eugene's visual materials have the ominous power of realistically represented violence and obscenities.⁹ The photographs that he describes in detail to the readers, that he studies, holds in his hands and feels under his fingers ("I close my eyes and pass my fingertips over the cool, odorless surface of the print" [Coetzee 1983: 16]), petrify images that cannot fade away and retreat "into the forgotten" (Coetzee 1996: 79).¹⁰ They are and will remain a haunting and corroding presence in the text.¹¹ The acts the photographs retain are suspended in the present – in the moment when narration slows down and stops for the contemplation of the images. The present time of the spectacle asserts its superiority over the past and excludes any projection into the future. What is also disturbing about the pictures is that they position the victims and the offenders in the same temporal and spatial perspective and allow full display of power of the torturers over the tortured.¹² The moment of oppression, with the abusers and the oppressed performing their fixed roles is seized in the photographs as the only reality and gives no hope, no possibility of change, no room for resistance. Although the abhorrent brutality and obscenity of the oppressors is here displayed without any ambiguity, a question remains about the ethics of representing the violated: the treatment of the victims – with their anonymity juxtaposed to full identification of the oppressors, including their names, ranks, postures – suggests that they function as objects whose role is to give evidence to the transgressors' degeneration.¹³ One

⁹ Coetzee's aggressive writing in *Dusklands* has triggered an explosion of responses where the author was reproached for his use of parody and irony as inadequate means for the serious subject matter. Another claim was that the work itself produces transgressions it purports to oppose. Allegations have been raised against depicting abhorrent atrocities whose accumulation in the text violates readers' sensitivities. Peter Knox-Shaw's objections against brutality in *Dusklands* have led him to question its ethical and aesthetic values. He contended that Coetzee's writing "further the claims of true savagery. This is an art that can only re-enact" (Knox-Shaw 1996: 114).

¹⁰ In *Giving Offence: Essays on Censorship*, commenting on pornographic films, Coetzee draws attention to a specific aspect of pictures that appears useful also for interpretation of the pornographic in *Dusklands*, namely that the content of visual materials "cannot recede into the past and into the forgotten. Whenever the record is played, the scene is now" (Coetzee 1996: 79).

¹¹ In "Coetzee's *Dusklands*: The Mythic Punctum," Castillo uses R. Barthes's term – "overconstructed horror" – to demonstrate that Eugene's pictures have the piercing, poignant quality of photographic punctum (Castillo 1990: 1113, 1115).

¹² This kind of positioning of victims and oppressors in the realistic photographs is completely different than the positioning of Eugene in the story. Eugene is not directly confronted with his victims: the space of his operations is the discourses of power and aggression. As a propagandist he does not stand in front of those he means to violate but in front of the violent texts that he scrutinizes and invents himself. As a propagandist and one of the employees in the hierarchy of the war administration, he is placed in the extended war apparatus, and not, so to say, in a frontal, face-to-face position to the victims where he would have unlimited power over the oppressed.

¹³ As Debra A. Castillo writes, the violated and silenced other "exists in the tale principally as a background on which force is exerted" (Castillo 1990: 1111). What is also disturbing in *Dusklands* is that the unspeakable horror of the pictures excludes readers' empathy with the victims (Castillo 1990: 1113).

could say that the oppressed are commodified and serve as a background against which dehumanization of the soldiers is to be exposed.

The disturbing depictions of atrocities in *Dusklands* reveal, however, an important aspect of violence, namely, that it is unrepresentable in itself; what is representable about violence is not violence itself but its images. Violence maintains, as Jean-Luc Nancy explains, an essential link with the image (Nancy 2005: 20). Eugene's photographs present images of sheer violence. Tortures performed by the soldiers expose lack of any authority behind the crimes they commit. No attempt at authorization or justification of their violence, absurd as the very idea might be, is being made. The soldiers are violent for the sake of being violent. As Nancy observes, violence cannot be authorized by anything else than by itself: "Violence always makes an image of itself, and the image is what, of itself, presses out ahead of itself and authorizes itself." He carries on to explain,

The violent person wants to see the mark he makes on the thing or being he assaults, and violence consists precisely in imprinting such a mark. It is in the enjoyment [*jouissance*] of this mark that the "excess" defining violence comes into play. The excess of force in violence is nothing quantitative; it does not come from miscalculation, and it is not really even an "excess of force"; it consists in imprinting its image by force in its effect and as its effect. [emphasis original] (Nancy 2005: 20)

Eugene's fascination with his photographs derives not only from the pleasure he takes from contemplating the images they contain but also from the fact that they are material objects: the specificity of photographs is that they have a strong relation with reality in the sense that the reality they present must have existed at least at the moment when the pictures were taken. That is to say, as Roland Barthes has it, "this object has indeed existed and [...] it has been there where I see it" (Barthes 1993: 115). Eugene's celebration of the photographs, objects in his collection, betrays his desire to step out beyond words into the real world where words transform into deeds. Not satisfied with words, with texts, in the final section of his report he stops writing his commissioned propaganda project and, elaborating on the tactics of psychological warfare, advocates a return of a total war and extermination of the enemy. Spraying of chemical poisons on Vietnam, he speculates, would terminate once and for good all military operations: "Let us show the enemy that he stands naked in the dying landscape. [...] PROP-12 spraying, could change the face of Vietnam in a week" (Coetzee 1983: 29). The horrid idea that burgeons in his mind echoes the notorious comment which in *Heart of Darkness* closes Kurtz's report. However, unlike Kurtz's idea, Eugene's call to "exterminate the brutes" does not suggest the protagonist's inner complexity or moral anxiety, but his sheer insanity.

Eugene's mental disintegration is exposed both on the level of action and of narration. Coetzee's unquestionable achievement in *Dusklands* is that in the stories narrated and focalized from the perspective of the protagonists he does not give morally dubious attention to the perpetrators. Moral assessment of Eugene and Jacobus is unambiguous and there is no room in the texts for readers' emotional identification or fascination with them. Eugene's story may serve as an illustration of the case in point: his human context is that of multiple relations. He is son, father and husband, member of the middle class, neighbor in his community and employee in a state-run agency – all the roles he plays situate him in a broad social setting and his moral fall is staged against the background of many sites. His failure in all environments, paradoxically, does not complexify his character but exposes his corruption in which there is no metaphysical depth. Eugene's actions are made nothing more than primitive and selfish perversions. The unfolding tale of his degeneration and degradation does not leave any doubt about his pathology. In the course of his explorations he undergoes a deep crisis, loses grip on reality and recedes into insanity.

Coetzee's use of Eugene and Jacobus – two representatives of the Western civilization and its power apparatuses – as narrative consciousness produces the effect that their pathology does not emerge as a merely individual propensity: it is emblematic of the political orders they belong to. The texts they produce, on the one hand, reflect their personal brutalization and, on the other, expose the whole network of ideologies that their environments use to hide their aggressiveness. This narrative strategy allows Coetzee to deconstruct the Western aggressive ideologies from a location situated not in opposition to the structures of power but from within their very centre. To put it in other words, the narrators are placed inside power hierarchies and they lay bare the pathologies not from an external position but from within the systems.

That the ideologies of the systems are full of contradictions is reflected in the narratives Eugene and Jacobus produce because, despite their efforts, they cannot hide their insincerity. Eugene and Jacobus are aware of their brutality, they feel uneasy about it and attempt to excuse themselves from any responsibility for their actions. They turn to writing to suppress the disquieting burden. Dishonest motivation is paradigmatic of Eugene's tale full of lies and manipulations. Its very first sentence – "My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that" – augurs his line of his defense that rests on denouncement of personal accountability, on falsifying the truth and on notorious debunking of his own role in the atrocities of the war. Eugene's identification with the state and his commitment to state-sanctioned violence exemplifies Hannah Arendt's theory of banality of evil. Jacobus too indulges in intricate speculations whose aim is to put the blame on the

victims of his oppression. The banality of this sort of mitigations is revealingly exposed in Jacobus's story when he excuses himself with his mission and charges those he harms with his cruelty.

Eugene's and Jacobus's lack of moral consciousness is, perhaps, one of the most striking traits of their character. That they feel no pricks of conscience does not mean, however, that the novel does not consider the problem of moral responsibility. In *Dusklands* the theme of responsibility for crimes and of complicity is staged across various strata of the texts. Besides considering it on the level of the story and the protagonists' narratives, Coetzee takes it to the meta-textual level and turns complicity into a personal issue for himself – as an author and as a white South African. This he does by giving his own name to the characters: Eugene's superior in the office is called Mr. Coetzee, Jacobus' surname is identical with the real author's. Also the texts that supplement *Dusklands* in the form of appendixes – the lecture and the deposition at the end of the book – are authorized by the men who have the real author's family name. This way J. M. Coetzee places himself in his texts and draws readers' attention to the personal dimension of responsibility for the atrocities colonialism has committed against the Other.¹⁴ His avowal of his complicity is foregrounded in the book not merely on the personal level – the historical guilt of a white South African – but it extends to the sphere of authorial accountability and, potentially, complicity.¹⁵ An author who represents violence in his work should be aware of the risk that his writing may provoke harmful and undesirable reactions of the readers. The power of writing, its corroding, dangerous and aggressive potential is metaphorically expressed in the climactic scene of "The Vietnam Project," when Eugene loses control of himself, kidnaps his son and, in a moment of trance, stabs him with a knife. The power and aggressive capacity of writing is in the scene compared to that of the edge of a knife. "Holding it like a *pencil*, he pushed the *knife* in," is a laconic but burdened with meaning description of Eugene's attack on his own son [emphasis mine – A.C.] (Coetzee 1983: 42).

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) marks a discernable change in Coetzee's treatment of violence in the sense that unlike in *Dusklands*, here Coetzee re-directs his attention from the perpetrators to the victims of tortures and to the witnesses of atrocities who do not suffer themselves but who are demoralized by the vio-

¹⁴ "I would regard it as morally questionable to write something like the second part of *Dusklands* – a fiction, note – from a position that is not historically complicit," Coetzee told Attwell in one of the interviews [emphasis original] (Coetzee 1992: 343).

¹⁵ The immediate reason for convergence of protagonists' names with the author's name in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" is that when J. M. Coetzee was reading the historical documents, he discovered that one of his ancestors participated personally in the colonization of South Africa (Head 2009: 48).

lence of others. The theme of complicity inaugurated in *Dusklands* is here broadened and Coetzee shows the transformation of an accomplice from his initial denouncement of his complicity to his acceptance of responsibility to his attempt, unsuccessful as it turns out, at redeeming his own and others' transgressions.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee tells, in the allegorical mode, the story of the Magistrate in charge of a small outpost of empire in the border territory.¹⁶ The daily routines of the settlement are interrupted by the arrival of two sadistic officers, Colonel Joll and his deputy Mandel, with the mission to protect the fort from alleged attacks of the barbarians. Joll brings indigenes to the settlement and interrogates them. Absurd as Joll's allegations are, the tortures he subjects the prisoners to are real. After the officers' departure, when the prisoners are relieved, the Magistrate takes care of a barbarian girl, lamed and nearly blinded by the tortures. Driven by compassion for her, he escorts her back to her tribe. On return to the fort the Magistrate, accused of treason, is imprisoned and tortured by Mandel. In the novel the descriptions of the atrocities are not made less violent and less piercing than in *Dusklands* but in *Waiting for the Barbarians* they are viewed from the perspective of the oppressed and not of the oppressors. The focus falls on the victims' response to tortures and the results of tortures – the wounded, disfigured, disabled and mutilated bodies of the prisoners, their humiliation, pain and suffering. Simultaneously, the perpetrators, despite their undeniable power to inflict pain, are marginalized in the sense that their characterization reveals their banality.

The command Joll and Mandel have over the prisoners is that of unrestrained power of torturers, of 'men doing their jobs' without any reflection or questioning. "I have a commission to fulfill," Joll symptomatically explains to the Magistrate (Coetzee 1982: 23). Joll has no individual identity but personifies the empire's will to power. The Magistrate, overwhelmed by Joll's cruelty, at first feels an urge

¹⁶ Critical reception of *Waiting for the Barbarians* in South Africa was not univocally favorable for the author: Coetzee was accused of distancing himself from the current political problems and not addressing in the work the crimes committed under apartheid. The allegorical mode of the novel, with the action set in unspecified time and place, which evokes the Roman Empire rather than South Africa, provoked charges that he lacks commitment to the actual oppression in his motherland and that his postmodernist allegorical method serves mystification of the real historical scene. Coetzee himself, while less bothered with the criticism of his book on grounds of its insufficient political involvement – the kind of criticism he must have anticipated as resultant from his rejection of realism for the sake of metaphorical expression – in an interview with Attwell commented on the problematic aspects of the novel. He stated that the developments in South Africa did have a direct influence upon his work but what he highlighted was a specific aspect of apartheid, namely, censorship. Awareness that a work would be censored pushed authors to excessive, perhaps, preoccupation with the impermissible, a reaction which he detected also in his own writing: "I have no doubt, that the concentration on imprisonment, on regimentation, on torture in books of my own like *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* was a response – a pathological response – to the ban on representing what went on in police cells in this country" (Coetzee 1992: 300).

to comprehend Joll's aggressiveness, to imagine what it is like to live with the burden of horrid atrocities. He wants to believe that Joll knows that he is "trespassing into the forbidden," that he perhaps has "a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men" (Coetzee 1982: 12). But a moment later it occurs to the Magistrate that Joll is a new man created by the Bureau, a man "who can pass without disquiet between the clean and unclean" (Coetzee 1982: 12). When the Magistrate is himself subjected to tortures, he returns to these questions and ponders about the nature of his torturer, Mandel. He wants to detect something human about his oppressor and asks Mandel whether he has any feelings:

How do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been...working with people? [...] Do you find it easy to find food afterward? I have imagined that one would want to wash one's hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require a priestly intervention, a *ceremonial of cleansing*, don't you think? Some kind of purging of one's soul too – that is how I have imagined it. Otherwise how would it be possible to return to ordinary life – to sit down at a table, for instance, and *break bread* with one's family or with comrades. [...] I am trying to understand the *zone* in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. [emphasis mine – A.C.] (Coetzee 1982: 126)

Mandel's only reply is a powerful stroke and a curse. At this moment the Magistrate realizes that ethical dilemmas do not pertain to Mandel or Joll.¹⁷ Any attempt to understand "the zone" (Coetzee 1982: 126) in which they live is futile. Deprived of elementary decency, the oppressors do not belong to the human order where the breaking of bread with other men would be meaningful or the performing of rituals would have any symbolic value. There exist no rituals of cleansing, no rites of purification to wash away the blood from their hands. The ground they trod is outside the categories of the sacred and the profane. The unqualified banality of Mandel kills the Magistrate's interest in his perpetrator. He even contends that he "finds it hard to hate [Mandel]" (Coetzee 1982: 84). As Dominic Head observes, "Coetzee ensures that the oppressor is not demonized in such a way as to mythologize his power. Rather, the writing strategies Coetzee employs serve to demythologize his power" (Head 2009: 51). By placing the transgressors outside the conceivable "zone," (Coetzee 1982: 126) Coetzee relegates them from the sphere of human communities and thus excludes interest in them as characters whose identity would be worth penetration.¹⁸ This way

¹⁷ S. Gallagher writes that Coetzee succeeds to solve the moral issue of representing violence through his use of textual strategies that create a reality of "moral vacuum that allows torture to exist in the contemporary world" (Gallagher 1988: 278).

¹⁸ A similar reduction seems to pertain to the tortures the perpetrators inflict. At first the Magistrate

Coetzee avoids the trap he wrote about in his essay of judging the perpetrators in a situation when any moral evaluation would be incommensurable with the suffering they inflict on others. The portraits of Joll and Mandel appear as exemplification of the point that Jean-Luc Nancy makes about violent oppressors. To Nancy, a violent person is

nothing but the one who strikes, breaks, the one who tortures to the point of senselessness – not only his victim’s senselessness, but his own. His force is no longer force; it is a sort of pure, dense, stupid, impenetrable intensity. A mass, gathering and shaping itself to strike, an inertia gathered up and launched in order to shatter, dislocate, and crack open. (Let us put something else on hold: violence exposes itself as figure without figure, as a “monstration,” an *ostension* of something that remains faceless). [emphasis original] (Nancy 2005: 17) ¹⁹

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee shifts the focus of his interest from the torturers to the consequences of their aggressiveness – the impact violence has on the oppressed and on those who are not directly subjected to brutality but who are aware of oppression of others. A witness of abhorrent aggression, a person that knows about violation of others is as if automatically drawn into its contaminating influence. This idea is expressed with astounding force from the first pages of the novel. When the detainees are brought to the settlement and ‘herded’ in a fenced yard, they are looked at from every corner of the enclave. The gaze directed at the prisoners, at their tormented bodies, bruises and cuts, is not innocent. The tortured people evoke no sympathy among the inhabitants of the fort: soldiers shout out obscenities at the detainees, adults and children look at the prisoners with curiosity, nobody seems to show any compassion. The Magistrate, too, gazes at them “as though they are strange animal” (Coetzee 1982: 18). The prisoners induce nothing but contempt and scorn. With time, when the reality of tortures reveals itself to all men and they become fully aware of Joll’s deeds, they turn their eyes away from the spectacle, close the windows and retreat to their activities far from the prison, wishing to be cut off from the sight, from the knowledge. “I know somehow too much,” the Magistrate admits (Coetzee 1982: 21).

thinks there might be something mysterious about the tortures but he discovers that the “mystery” (Coetzee 1982: 6) of torturing and of the torture chamber is nothing more than execution of blunt power. Tortures are the oppressors’ aim in itself. The Magistrate intuits this the first time he walks into the torture room when he wonders whether metaphysical categories apply to this place: “I enter the hut holding the lantern high, trespassing, I realize, on what has become holy or unholy ground, if there is any difference, preserve of the mysteries of the State” (Coetzee 1982: 6). The “mysteries” of the State belong neither to the sacred nor to the secular sphere but to a void because they are removed any from ethical judgment.

¹⁹ Joll and Mandel are, in a sense, faceless: Joll’s face with the eyes hidden behind dark glasses expresses blankness, a blankness to which there is no depth. Mandel has blue eyes but they express nothing but void.

He fears the damage and demoralization the Colonel has brought to the enclave and realizes that Joll's aggressiveness may release base instincts in common men and kill their sensitivity. The Magistrate detects in himself a reaction he is ashamed of, namely, that a terrified person makes no effort whatsoever to oppose brutality. One of the officers expresses this attitude: "I decided it was not my place to argue with [Joll]" (Coetzee 1982: 22). Later on, with dramatic development of events, the Magistrate will learn that lack of reaction is not the worst reaction to tortures but that it merely marks a step towards transformation of witnesses to oppressors.

After days of hearings, the detainees, "sick, famished, damaged, terrified," turn out to be of no use to "the empire of pain" (Coetzee 1982: 24, 23). Joll leaves the enclave and the Magistrate sends the barbarian folks back to the desert, wishing to dispose of them and to rid himself of the memory of them forever: "It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain" (Coetzee 1982: 24). The Magistrate knows, however, that this is impossible, that he cannot seal the chapter and carry on as before, that is pretending that after doing his job he may return to ordinary life and to his hobby – collecting and deciphering ancient tiles. He realizes that "from this knowledge, once it has been infected, there seems to be no recovering" (Coetzee 1982: 21). After the departure of the detainees, the Magistrate notices in the fort a begging woman left behind by her people. Crippled by the tortures, she was unable to walk away with the kinsmen from her tribe. The Magistrate is intrigued by the woman, takes her to his place, finds a job for her in the fort kitchen and shares his life and bed with her (Gallagher 1988: 278). Moved by her deformity – her lame legs and damaged eyes – he feels an urge to learn what has been done to her. Every evening he performs a kind of ritual of washing her feet and her body. The ritual, of erotic character as it undoubtedly is, has, however, little to do with the Magistrate's desire for the woman. What thrills him is her maiming, the tortures she was exposed to. "Show me what they have done to your feet," he demands (Coetzee 1982: 28). The Magistrate reveals a sort of perverse fascination with the girl and becomes obsessed with her experience in the torture chamber. But the girl is reluctant to speak. The Magistrate tries to "decipher" her wounds and retrieve the story of her maiming: "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on that girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (Coetzee 1982: 31).²⁰ When she eventually tells him in sparse

²⁰ As Stef Craps writes, the barbarian girl's tortured body and the marks of oppression "stimulate the Magistrate's hermeneutic interest" (Craps 2007: 61). The Magistrate is a reader and writer who interprets and re-interprets the girl's body to retrieve her story.

words and dispassionate manner about her violation, he gazes at her, touches her face, examines her burnt eyes. He wants to know more – about her pain, her suffering, her feelings towards the oppressors. He desires to learn what he has been denied to see when the torture room was closed to him.²¹ But the girl will not satisfy his curiosity – “I am tired of talking,” she says (Coetzee 1982: 41). She refuses to re-tell and re-count her experience; she names the tortures but does not describe them. With her broken ankles and blinded eyes, she does not need words to confirm her experience.

The Magistrate’s relationship with the tortured girl is ambiguous and disquieting. He is fascinated by the tortures she was subjected to and celebrates her wounds in his evening ritual. The act of washing feet appears as an act of hospitality. The Magistrate as though wants to build an emotional and moral bond with the girl, a bond that would go beyond the actual act. He thinks he reveals his compassion and empathy for the girl and pays homage to her victimization and suffering. In fact, the Magistrate throughout the story attempts to link tortures with religion.²² Although he knows that the oppressors do not belong to the religious, he tries to find meaning in the suffering of their victims and his own compassion. His ritual of washing is a celebration of the massacred body, the body in pain. But in his actions and intentions there is insincerity he does not want to admit even to himself, namely, that he is driven by egoistic motifs and by his pervert curiosity about the Other – a woman, a barbarian, a victim. He has no interest in her as a person and makes no attempt to understand her. The girl – utterly brutalized by Joll, in mourning of her father tortured to death, with nowhere to go – is vulnerable to the Magistrate and succumbs to his rites but she does not enter any bonds with him. He is blind to her condition because he uses the girl and treats her as an object of his fantasy. He aestheticizes and fetishizes her disfigured body to elevate his sense of guilt and shame and to get absolution. It takes him time to notice that he imposes himself on the girl, that his acts of washing are a perversion of pornographic character, a form of torture. It eventually occurs to him that he is not much different than Joll, that his inquisitiveness is close to the Colonel’s pathology and, terrified at the idea, he wants to stand clear of Joll: “What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? [...] There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cells. [...] I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!”

²¹ Wenzel in “Keys to the Labyrinth: Writing, Torture, and Coetzee’s Barbarian Girl,” writes: “The Magistrate finds the girl’s body impenetrable, unwilling to yield its secrets, and as such he experiences it as wholly other, unknowable.” As a Westerner, the Magistrate is used to reading signs, to attributing meaning to signs. “He can make presence or absence as he chooses” (Wenzel 1996: 65).

²² Jamie S. Scott in *And Birds Began to Sing* (1996) analyzes *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a novel where torture is linked to the theological, religious and sacred.

(Coetzee 1982: 47). When the Magistrate acknowledges his complicity, as an act of retribution, he decides to free the girl and take her back to her people.

On return from the expedition, the Magistrate is charged of treason and imprisoned in the torture chamber. Awaiting his trial he thinks of himself as a victim of the empire, not much different than other detainees. He wants to learn the truth about the tortures, to have the same experience as the girl. Under arrest, he muses on his position and constructs for himself, as Yeoh writes, "a narrative of identification and empathy with Empire's victims" (Yeoh 2003: 336). Contemplating his situation, the Magistrate recalls the girl and her father. Himself in the same chamber, he speculates and invents versions of their tortures but, as Yeoh demonstrates, the scenarios²³ he weaves, do not serve truth-telling and sincerity but self-deception. The Magistrate wants to believe that now, when he is the Empire's prisoner, his experience of tortures legitimizes his identification with the barbarians, the oppressed Other, but "[t]he true motivation and effect of his narrative is self-consolation rather than empathy and truth-telling" (Yeoh 2003: 337-338). The Magistrate's position is not identical with the girl's: "Coetzee's cynical point is that the magistrate's suffering under Empire, though severe and moving to the reader, has no redemptive value. [...] No matter how much suffering he undergoes and no matter how he manipulates language to construct identification, he is at a differential distance from her suffering. Any semblance of moral identification and empathy conveyed by his narrative is a self-deception" (Yeoh 2003: 337).

One might venture to say that the Magistrate's fabrications, his self-consoling fictions reveal his demoralization. No matter how hard he tries to identify himself with the barbarians, he is not their equal. No matter how much effort he puts into imagining affinities between himself and the barbarian prisoners, he cannot escape the truth that he is a servant of the empire and that the tortures of the barbarians have been performed also on his behalf. The Magistrate, thus, does not quite realize what moral havoc has been caused by Joll and Mandel's crimes. He is unaware of the depth of his and of other accomplices' demoralization. He wants to believe that his noble behavior (returning the girl to her tribe), the high cost he has paid for it (his suffering in the prison) and his confession of guilt (his thoughts in the prison and narratives of identification) are adequate counterba-

²³ Yeoh writes: "The first scenario imagines the girl's father as a broken man and ends by casting him in an overly sentimental posture: 'No wonder he wanted to die.' The magistrate's pitying representation removes any possible edge of anger, protest, or self-assertion on the father's part. His next scenario of the girl is in a similarly sentimental tone that subtly elides her brutal maiming. As witness to a crime, what the magistrate can confidently attest to on the girl's behalf is not that 'certain movements of the heart [are] no longer possible to her' but rather certain movements of her body are no longer possible. His sentimentalized representation enables him to evade her bodily violation" (Yeoh 2003: 337).

lance to the oppression of the barbarians and that his experience has redemptive force. It is the events in the fort that occur in the weeks following his imprisonment that open his eyes to moral devastations he has not conceived of and in the face of which he is utterly helpless.

What he sees now is that the inhabitants of the enclave no longer close their eyes to tortures. After their initial reactions of curiosity, followed by hostility towards the oppressed and then by the shame caused by their own insensitivity, the inhabitants of the fort once again return to the sites of tortures and, hardened by long exposition to atrocities, now watch them with a sort of pleasure and amusement. The perpetrators meet the crowd's expectations and turn tortures into thrilling public spectacles. One of the shows is a horrid scene staged for the community: the detainees are gathered in the fort's central square, the oppressors write on their backs the word "enemy" (Coetzee 1982: 105). with charcoal and beat them up to the moment when the inscription vanishes from their skin.²⁴ The Magistrate watches the execution with terror but he realizes that the beholders enjoy the performance. The abusers, excited by the spectators' reaction, draw them into the show: they offer canes to the observers and invite them to participate in the beating. Confused, the onlookers cannot understand the gesture but with some encouragement, they join in. At first the children and later the grown-ups take the canes and beat the prisoners (Coetzee 1982: 106). The brutalization that violence has caused in the settlement exceeds the Magistrate's imagination. When he is himself forced into the role of actor in one of the staged ceremonies of oppression, the mob look at him with curiosity and growing merriment. The climactic torture - of his mock hanging - makes him realize that atrocities have become a carnival for the community (Coetzee 1982: 120). When he is being hanged on a tree, a child helps the executioners tie the rope to the bough and when he is swung in the air and screams, the audience's reaction to his roaring is sheer amusement: "There is nothing but laughter," he bitterly observes (Coetzee 1982: 121).

The aim of the Magistrate's torture is nothing else than his humiliation and infliction of pain upon him. The aim achieved, the torturers depart and let him live with his shame, denigration and suffering. The settlement returns to ordinary life, cold winter approaches, there are insufficient provisions in the fort, rumor spreads that barbarians will soon approach with no friendly intentions. Determined to carry on as before, the Magistrate tries to prepare the enclave for the hardships of the season. But even if the enclave survive the winter and the attacks, the future does not seem to offer any improvement. This community needs

²⁴ Jennifer Wenzel relates this torture to the theme of writing and reading, i. e. that tortures transform bodies of the tortured into texts (Wenzel 1996: 65-6).

regeneration, restoration of values on which it would build a moral community but there is not a thing that augurs advent of moral transformations. In the last scenes of the novel the Magistrate still deceives himself and muses that the Empire is a useful political formation because the barbarians will always need the help of civilized men. The children, who witnessed oppression in the camp, now play in the snow and make a snowman, a snowman without hands. Looking at this crippled snowman ("It is not a bad snowman"), the Magistrate reflects: "This is not a 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" (Coetzee 1982: 156).

Commenting on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee stated that the novel deals with "the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (Coetzee 1992: 363). Indeed, the novel shows victimization of "the man of conscience," the Magistrate, whose personal life is broken when he first witnesses and later experiences the abhorrent brutality of the Empire he is a servant of. The Magistrate, however, does not fully understand the causes of his victimization nor can he imagine a social order alternative to colonialism. The persecution he has undergone does not result in his being aware that aggressiveness is immanent to imperialism. Whereas his response to violence is predictable – he does not step outside the liberal discourses of complicity – the barbarian girl's retort or, rather, her lack of retort is unexpected and her unpredictability, paradoxically, becomes a source of her power.

In the novels that followed *Waiting for the Barbarians – Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986) – Coetzee was gradually turning away from depicting tortures towards scrutinizing the victims' resistance to oppression, their discord to enter any relations with the perpetrators. Michael K and Friday develop strategies of resistance similar to those of the barbarian girl in the sense that they refuse to engage in dialogue with their oppressors: Michael K finds for himself a mode of existence and a space where aggressors will not turn him into a predictable subject whose life and suffering might be controlled by them.²⁵ Although he cannot avoid victimization, he preserves his dignity and independence and, despite his vulnerability, derides and defies oppression. *Foe's* Friday too manifests his independence: he refuses to communicate in any language proposed by those who have power over him and escapes the discourses that legitimize oppression by means of familiar binary categories of tortured/torturers, oppressed/oppres-

²⁵ Fiona Probyn (2002) and Jane Poyner (2003) in their articles elaborate on Coetzee's strategic evasions of authority. They demonstrate that his 'writing without authority' and the positions of weakness in which he places protagonists paradoxically become a source of their strength. The perplexing locations liberate the characters from imposed discourses and give them the power to resist oppressors, despite their victimization.

sors, victims/perpetrators. Friday and Michael K, like the barbarian girl, have power because their description within such categories, true as it is, is strikingly incomplete. What their perplexing and powerful resistance reveals is that the transgressors are predictable and defined and, as such, they belong to the already written, to the past. The barbarian girl, Michael K and Friday defy categories and labels, escape definition and thus they belong to the future. This does not mean that the victims may become texts without closure susceptible to unceasing interpretation and speculation or that they may dissolve into textuality – a charge that has been raised in the criticism of the novels. As Coetzee aptly observed commenting on Friday's silence in *Foe*,

The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. [...] in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reason, not for ethical reasons [...], but for political reasons, for reasons of power. [...] it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes the authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (Coetzee 1992: 248)

Coetzee's novel from 1990, *Age of Iron*, marks another turn in his treatment of violence. This is his first book in which he addresses directly the actual political situation in South Africa. The novel is set in Cape Town in the late 1980s, "during the worst years of the States of Emergency" (Attwell 1993: 120). Coetzee gives witness to the atrocities committed by the regime and depicts the brutality of the security forces and the police. He also shows the rise of militant youth groups of black opposition in the townships. What is in focus in *Age of Iron*, however, is not violence with its sources, manifestations and effects; nor is it even the personal or ethnic sense of complicity. The crucial question is about the meaning of violence for an individual, that is how an individual person comes to understand violence on one's own terms. The process of understanding goes far beyond admitting one's complicity and leads from acknowledging what oppression really is to asking questions about what one can do with this knowledge and how one can turn this knowledge to meaningful action. The book is about the rise of ethical consciousness and its consequences: the protagonist's attempt to re-assess and re-formulate her relations with the oppressed other.

In *Age of Iron* the protagonist is Elizabeth Curren, an elderly white woman, a retired lecturer in Latin, living on her own in the suburbs of Cape Town. She is repelled by the political situation in South Africa and cannot accept the ever-present racial oppression. But she is equally terrified by the insurrectionary spirit in the townships where teenagers, inspired and encouraged by their political leaders, turn to militant actions thus endangering their lives. Aware of her limita-

tions, Elizabeth cuts herself off the current affairs and lives a life of an internal exile who does not want to be involved in the political crisis. She thinks her old age and lack of power justify her withdrawal from broader concerns. Also, her personal problems she struggles with are not slight: she has cancer, the difficulties of daily life overwhelm her and she feels an acute sense of loneliness and longing for her daughter who emigrated to the USA. "The country smolders," she thinks, but she can only "half-attend" because she is terrified with her cancer ("My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word") (Coetzee 1998: 39). The novel begins when Elizabeth learns that her illness is terminal. She decides to write a farewell letter, a sort of confession, to her daughter whom she would never see again. One day Elizabeth discovers that a homeless alcoholic vagabond, Vercueil takes lodging with his dog in her backyard. She has no strength to send him off but she also realizes that he is the only person that may accompany her in her last days. Mrs. Curren entrusts him with a mission and obliges him to send her letter to her daughter when she passes away. Soon her life is further complicated when her servant, Florence, brings her children to Mrs. Curren's house: the riots in townships endanger their life and the mother wants to keep her two small girls and the fifteen-year-old son away from the place of bloodshed. The son, Bheki moves in to Elizabeth's garage with his comrade John.

Elizabeth from the start feels aversion for the rude boys but when Bheki is hurt by the police, she makes an official complaint about their vicious violence. Bheki recovers from the incident but he returns to the townships and is killed there. When Elizabeth sees his body, she is deeply sorry for the boy and mourns his senseless, premature death: "My eyes are open and I can never close them again," she thinks (Coetzee 1998: 102). Contact with the boys and Vercueil and her visits to townships make Elizabeth aware of political horrors in her country. When she sees racial oppression and the living conditions in townships, she says she must find her own words to fully understand the crimes that are being committed there. "These are terrible sights," she says. "They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth" (Coetzee 1998: 99). Elizabeth says, she cannot comprehend the crimes with others' words. She needs her own language to appropriate the knowledge. It is by means of her own words, her own language that she becomes aware that although she has never been politically active and has kept herself at a distance from politics, she cannot escape the truth of racial oppression and cannot cut herself off the crimes against the blacks. At first skeptical about her guilt ("But why should I bear the blame? [...] Is it my doing that my times have been so shameful?" [Coetzee 1998: 116]), with time she accepts her responsibility. It is in and through her writing – the letter to her daugh-

ter, the confession she makes – that Elizabeth comes to understand oppression. Unlike the characters from Coetzee’s earlier books, Elizabeth is not satisfied with admitting her guilt in the available liberal discourses of complicity. She ponders whether there is any way she could elevate her guilt. Despite her pain and weakness, she decides to take care of Bheki’s friend, John, and to protect him. She has no power, however, to offer him safety and when the boy is killed by the police she realizes that all she can do is change her personal attitude to the oppressed other and learn to love the other as he really is, without forcing her expectations upon him. This is why she tells Mr. Vercueil: “I want to see you as you really are. [...] A man who came without being invited” (Coetzee 1998: 179). Derek Attridge explains Elizabeth’s contention in terms of Derrida’s understanding of hospitality: “to welcome the *arrivant*, the other that arrives on your doorstep, is to be willing to remake your familiar world without setting any prior limits on how far you are willing to go” [emphasis original] (Attridge 2004: 121).²⁶ Elizabeth’s attitude to the tramp, according to Laura Wright, her “ability to embrace the homeless and surly Vercueil despite the fact that he makes no promises to her is potentially hopeful, the first step toward a kind of altruistic responsibility for the other” (Wright 2006: 69).

In this perspective, *Age of Iron* appears as a novel where Coetzee goes beyond representations of violence, oppressors and the oppressed, and where he forsakes the conventional talk of complicity. What he expresses in the book is, according to Attwell, “a certain faith in the idea, or the possibility, of an ethical community” (Coetzee 1992: 340). That the story is open to the future, possibly a future based on meaningful values, is suggested additionally by the names of the youngest generation – Florence’s two daughters: Hope and Beauty. Elizabeth, a representative of the old generation that introduced apartheid is dying, the future may belong to the girls. *Age of Iron* does not offer a prospect for glorious future – the girls come from an utterly brutalized background, from the “landscape of violence” (Coetzee 1998: 92) – but the novel expresses of a possibility of restoring human relations.

Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*, with her belief in the need and possibility of regenerating personal bonds anticipates two characters – David Lurie and his daughter, Lucy – from Coetzee’s post-apartheid novel *Disgrace* (1999). They too break out of the discourses of complicity and undertake action towards re-shaping and re-formulating their relations with their environments. Although David’s growth is debatable (he refuses to admit his guilt which is not only historical but

²⁶ Derek Attridge discusses the relationship between Vercueil and Mrs. Curren in terms of Derrida’s concept of the *arrivant*, that is the one who comes without invitation but who deserves hospitality (Attridge 2004: 120-123).

also personal – he violated a woman), towards the end of the story he discovers in himself new sensitivity. This sensitivity compels him to action motivated not by selfish aims but by commitment to elevating the suffering of animals.²⁷ He volunteers to work in a clinic where stray dogs are put to death in a humane way and then incinerated. David takes care of the corpses of the dogs – the unloved ones – because he is repelled by the disrespectful treatment of their corpses by the workmen of the clinic who beat and cut dead dogs' bodies with shovels. David's evolving sensitivity, ambiguous as it is because it extends not to people but to animals, seems to possess capacity to effectuate change of man's attitude to his environment: in the South African reality where racial oppression has been practised for centuries and empathy for people has been thwarted, man must as if from the scratch learn the meaning of elementary ethical values. Change of attitude to animals is, perhaps, a beginning that may lead to setting up a new type of relations between individuals. In the broadly commented upon passage from *Disgrace*,²⁸ David wonders about the reason for his work in the clinic: "Why has he taken this job? [...] For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know about honour and dishonour anyway? For himself, then. For his idea of the world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted [...]. That is where he enters their lives" (Coetzee 2000: 45-46). His promise to take care of the dogs "because they are unwanted" echoes Elizabeth Curren's resolution in *Age of Iron* that she "must love, first of all, the unlovable" (Coetzee 1998: 136).

Elizabeth Curren resembles also David's daughter, Lucy: both women admit their share in the historical and ethnic guilt and look for ways they could turn their sense of complicity to some good. Lucy chooses to bear the burden and pay, as she understands it, the price for ages of racial oppression. Perplexing as her decisions are – she refuses to report her rape to the police, is determined to give birth to the child conceived as a result of multiple rape, gives her land to Petrus (her neighbour related to one of her rapists) and consents to marry him – they reveal her courage to take responsibility for the past, to compensate for it and this way to earn a place in the new post-apartheid Africa. No matter how problematic Lucy's motivation and sacrifice – the sacrifice of a women paying for the male

²⁷ *Disgrace* addresses the problem of treatment of animals. Animals have always occupied an important place in Coetzee's fiction but animal rights and cruelty to animals emerged as a distinct theme in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello*, where Coetzee provocatively compared the Holocaust to the killing of animals in slaughterhouses and animals' suffering to that of people. Cruelty to animals, Coetzee's point is, is one of the manifestations of aggressiveness and violence in men.

²⁸ David's respect for animals' bodies may suggest his belief in the possibility of restoring moral values but whether or not his empathy may have the power to originate social change remains an open point (Cain 2003: 103; Boehmer 2006: 141, 145; Head 2009: 79-80; Attridge 2004: 187).

colonial guilt – might appear, it should be noted that her behavior is directed towards the future and that its aim is to reverse the historical relations of power.²⁹ Also the child she will give birth to foreshadows the future. The time to come will not be free of pain – the child, whose mental impairment cannot be excluded, will require a lot of care and love – but the new life may bring new inter-human relations based on ethical values, on respect for a human being and responsibility for oneself and the other, the *arrivant*. In *Disgrace* Lucy accepts the challenge and is ready to enter relations on entirely new terms, even if this means her suffering, humiliation and disempowerment. She wants to “start at the ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity” (Coetzee 2000: 205).

The evolution of Coetzee’s treatment of violence in his works may be described as progression from his examination of the perpetrators and tortures (from *Dusklands* to *Waiting for the Barbarians*) to his concentration on the oppressed with their suffering and resistance (from *Waiting for the Barbarians* to *Age of Iron*) to his projection of meaningful relations based on ethical values (from *Age of Iron* onwards). In his oeuvre he has elaborated several strategies of representing atrocities, such as diminishing the stature of offenders by uncovering their banality (Eugene, Jacobus, Joll, Mandel); shifting focus from the guilt of transgressors to the complicity of ‘characters of conscience’ (the Magistrate, David, Lucy, Mrs. Curren); exposing the banality of evil that motivates violence (Hannah Arendt’s conception appears here as an adequate descriptive category); empowering of the victims by placing them in ‘unlocatable’ positions (the Barbarian girl, Michael K, Friday, Lucy); defamiliarizing and recontextualizing the suffering of victims, which makes their bodies in pain the crux of the texts. The diversity of modes he applies to write about violence such as the pseudo-documentary mode, allegory, confession, parody and pastiche shows Coetzee’s search for artistic means that may challenge the historically sanctioned tradition of realism as the only adequate and morally acceptable mode of representation. Last but not least, there is Coetzee’s politics of authorizing the narrative voice, that is giving the narrator the authority to speak about oppression. With the exception of the narrators in *Dusklands*, who are located in the centers of power, Coetzee’s tactic is to place the storytellers (the Magistrate, Mrs. Curren) in positions of marginality. This way the narratives are unfolded from the perspective of the underprivileged, that is

²⁹ Representation of violence and protagonists’ reactions to it in *Disgrace* have been subjected to criticism on political grounds. Among the common allegations against Coetzee’s politics of violence are objections to his idea of retributive violence performed by blacks on the white woman. The charge is that such images of racial violence “exploit racist stereotypes” (Jolly 2006: 149). Lucy’s response to historical complicity is, in turn, contested as a stereotypical view that it is women who are expected to take the blame and make up for the patriarchal colonial oppression (Head 2006: 102).

by narrators whose authority is undermined by their own weaknesses, such as illness, old age, gender, social exclusion or their own victimization. This tactic excludes the possibility of readers' identification with the morally dubious.³⁰

The above concerns – of the ethics and aesthetics of representation – Coetzee was to bring together again in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), his meta-fictional novel written in the format of, as Attridge calls it, lecture-as-fiction (2004: 196). This method is a reversal of the 'fiction-as-lecture' device that J. M. Coetzee has himself appropriated for his own public addresses: instead of lectures he would give readings with the opinions of Elizabeth Costello, his invented character, his *alter ego*. Coetzee had published 'her lectures' in journals and as pamphlets before he included them in the novel (Head 2009: 85).³¹ Frame-breaking, both in the novel and in his lectures, makes it impossible to distinguish Costello's from Coetzee's ideas. Besides many other implications this method may have, one is that it gives Coetzee a possibility to distance himself from the views expressed in Elizabeth's speeches and to "adumbrate ideas that would be difficult for him to address directly" (Head 2006: 110).³² The plot of *Elizabeth Costello* about the protagonist's journeys all over the world, serves as a narrative frame in which Coetzee/Costello's lectures, so called "Lessons", are embedded. One of the lectures that Elizabeth gives at a conference in Amsterdam is devoted to evil and to representations of violence.³³ The talk, "The Problem of Evil," is a critique of a real book published in 1991 by the English novelist Peter West about the failed conspiracy against Hitler and the execution of the plotters. West's fictional memoir of Count von Stauffenberg describes in a realistic manner and in meticulous detail the hanging of the conspirators. Elizabeth objects to West's treatment of the execution the description of which she finds obscene and abhorrent. The scene, she claims, purely fictional and conceived in the writer's imagination, has vicious, contaminating power. She says she will never forget West's hangman:

It is terrible, terrible beyond words: terrible that such a man should have existed, even more terrible that he should be hauled out of the grave when we thought that he was safely dead.

³⁰ The essays edited by Jane Poyner in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (2006) discuss Coetzee's strategy of evasion as an empowering strategy for his characters. The critics also demonstrate the efficiency of the strategy of evasion that Coetzee, as a public intellectual, uses to 'speak truth to power.'

³¹ Acknowledgements in *Elizabeth Costello* list the publishing history of particular chapters of the novel. Derek Attridge (2004: 192-197) explains the adjustments Coetzee has made to incorporate his lectures into the novel.

³² This strategy may also be seen as strategy of 'camouflage.' Coetzee, who is known as a person fiercely protecting his privacy, may be using this method as a means not to expose himself to the reader.

³³ J. M. Coetzee participated in a Nexus Conference on evil in Tilburg in 2002 and delivered a 'fiction-as-lecture' reading. It appears as Elizabeth Costello's Lesson Six in the novel (Mulhall 2009: 201).

Obscene. That is the word, [...]. She chooses to believe that *obscene* means *offstage*. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!*) must remain offstage. Paul West has written an obscene book, he has shown what ought not to be shown. [emphasis original] (Coetzee 2003: 168-169)

When Elizabeth protests about showing “what ought not to be shown,” she does not propose to introduce censorship. Rather, she believes that storytelling is like “a bottle with a genie in it.” Authors should not “open the bottle” because once “the genie is released into the world, and it costs all hell to get him back in again. [...] better, on the whole, that the genie stay in the bottle” (Coetzee 2003: 167). Her claim is that representations of utter violence, of nothing but sheer violence, may bring no good. On the contrary, the reader may be corrupted when he gets access into the forbidden: “The cellar in which the July 1944 plotters were hanged is one such forbidden place. I do not believe that we should go into that cellar, any of us” (Coetzee 2003: 173). She says that as reader she has been drawn into a pornographic spectacle that she should not have seen: “Mr. West, when he wrote those chapters, came in touch with something absolute. Absolute evil. His blessing and his curse, I would say. Through reading him this touch of evil was passed on to me. Like a shock. Like electricity” (Coetzee 2003: 176).

Serious as Elizabeth’s argument about violence as manifestation of metaphysical evil is, it is played down by the very story that is recounted in the chapter: the story tells of the revisions she tries to introduce to her address the night before her lecture when she learns that Paul West will be in the audience. Elizabeth, working on the revisions, recalls passages from West’s book that have caused her aversion and shares with readers the brutalities she so ardently objects to. She also reminisces an event from her own past, an event she says she prefers not to remember, when as a young woman she was brutally beaten by an aggressive man. Moreover, after her lecture, she cannot stop thinking about the atrocities of the war and describes the horrors that haunt her. The obscenities of West’s book, of her personal violation and of the Nazi crimes are not spared to readers. It is not clear, then, that Elizabeth’s argument leads her to re-conceptualize violence as manifestation of absolute evil that must not be “released from the bottle.” A couple of pages later, Elizabeth returns to Arendt’s theory of “banality of evil” (Coetzee 2003: 176) when she contemplates “the history of what happened in the cell in Berlin” (Coetzee 2003: 177). And, still later, she says (somewhat as an aside in parentheses) that the term “banality of evil” is perhaps overused: “(she has begun to feel that the word too should be retired, it has had its day)” (Coetzee 2003: 179). Throughout the Lesson, thus, Elizabeth ponders upon the nature of evil and its manifestations in violence but she does not go beyond doubts, as though she were merely rehearsing her ideas.

After the lecture she wonders: "How will Amsterdam react to Elizabeth Costello in her present state?" (Coetzee 2003: 159). It is as if Coetzee were signaling here and, perhaps, testing his readers' reaction to "his present state," that is to his view of violence as manifestation not of relative evil (the conception that seems to dominate in his early novels) but of "absolute evil" (Coetzee 2003: 176). Elizabeth's perplexity and lack of confidence look as though they were also her author's: her disquiet about the Amsterdam audience's reaction to her speech appears as Coetzee's own uncertainty about whether listeners want to be confronted with serious subjects. It is as if Coetzee were anxious about the risks an author faces when he addresses contemporary readers with essentialist concepts. In the contemporary voyeuristic culture readers may not be prepared for philosophical discussion and difficult ideas. Significantly, the only question that is asked after Elizabeth's lecture shows that the listener has not understood her claim at all: "Perhaps we could read what Mr. West writes and learn from him, and come out stronger rather than weaker, more determined *never to let the evil return*" [emphasis mine – A.C.] (Coetzee 2003: 175). The naiveté of the question suggests that the person who has asked it cannot imagine evil as a metaphysical category, that is as a problem that cannot be pragmatically solved and disposed of. If his comment is to be representative of contemporary readers' responsiveness, then indeed, Elizabeth/Coetzee's sensitivity, their anxiety about the nature of evil, does not correspond with it. "To convey the sense that evil exists, and that it is a contaminating force" for those who depict it and those who view it, Jolly writes, is "to risk being accused of censorship; to risk being thought 'old-fashioned' through her association of evil not simply with acts themselves, but with her notion that the repetition of those acts through representation extends the realm of the contaminated, the realm of the evil; and finally, to risk alienation" (Jolly 2009: 106).

The nature of evil is not aimed to be resolved in *Elizabeth Costello*. What is unraveled with full force, however, is related to the ethics of representing evil. Significantly, when Elizabeth, in the disturbing passages of the novel that describe abhorrent acts, thinks about oppression, she ponders on the experience of the victims, not the transgressors; when she condemns West's book, she is revolted by his indecent gaze and his fascination with the obscene that in her view has no other function than to satisfy his pervert pleasure.³⁴ Her moral concerns seem to be close to Coetzee's views as formulated in *Doubling the Point* (Coetzee 1992: 366-368). Elizabeth/Coetzee's reservations about West's depiction of atroci-

³⁴ Elizabeth imagines West at the moment of writing about the execution as a man possessed by the voices of Hitler and the hangman. She imagines him identifying himself with their voices: "*Ours is the death that will be died, ours the hand that will knot the rope*" [emphasis original] (Coetzee 2003: 174).

ties are fundamental: they refer to West's representation of the hangman and the plotters in a pornographic, voyeuristic manner. Also, West's very idea to write about victimization of the plotters and to excite sympathy and pity for them – for the unconceivable offenders – is morally unacceptable. The critique, thus, addresses the issue of misrepresentation which has not 'merely' aesthetic but also ethical consequences.

Coetzee's overt critique of West's treatment of violence and, at the same time, his ambivalence about the nature of evil and violence appear as a conscious and meaningful evasion that shows yet another aspect of representing violence. In the novel *Elizabeth* "is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed" (Coetzee 2003: 160). And later she adds, "I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into the forbidden places: risks, specifically himself; risks, perhaps all" (Coetzee 2003: 173). What Elizabeth addresses here is the author's cost of fictional creation.³⁵ The problem might be explained in terms of Coetzee's understanding of the process of writing. For Coetzee writing is "a matter of awakening the counter-voices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those counter-voices in himself" (Coetzee 1992: 65). According to this conception, Jolly contends, "writing requires hosting the other, without knowing what the other may be(come); and if the other becomes evil, then the self – even, or most particularly, the writing-self – may become the agent of evil" (Jolly 2009: 107).

In this perspective, perhaps, the metaphor of the torture chamber, of "the forbidden" Coetzee speaks about in *Doubling the Point*, might be read as the one of the artist who evokes, invokes and activates in himself the counter-voices – the voices of the tortured and the torturer, of the oppressed and of the oppressor-pornographer who penetrates the body of the victim with the intent of finding out the limits of human experience, of invading the victim, of possessing him. As a result, in the process of creation, the artist may be led to territories that, due to their depraving and contaminating potential, he may – although reluctant to accommodate and come to terms with – fear to share with his readers. The problem appears as primarily of ethical nature – of the author's public responsibility for his representations of violence – but not slight, at this point, appears also the artist's personal risk of betrayal. In the contemporary voyeuristic culture

³⁵ Coetzee's preoccupation with writers and the relation between authors and their texts is one of his recognizable themes. Eugene, Jacobus, the Magistrate, Mrs. Curren, David and Mrs. Costello are all writers for whom their writing becomes a kind of crucial experience: it may bring illuminations and be the source of ethical values (e.g. Mrs. Curren), but it may also turn out destructive for the writing self (e.g. Eugene, Jacobus). On the critical-theoretical level Coetzee raised the problem of the cost of fictional creation in his essays on censorship in *Giving Offence* (Coetzee 1996: 74).

where people watch others with curiosity, the writer who undertakes to pursue the truth and not merely entertain the reader exposes himself to the public eye when he lets the voices within himself speak with full force. And even though this artist does not write about his personal, individual experience, he lays bare his innermost self – his writing-self – and by so doing he offers himself to the public gaze. The effect is that he exposes himself in front of the readers, betrays himself and becomes utterly vulnerable.

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