

Fiction as Foe: The Novels of J.M. Coetzee

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The settings of J.M. Coetzee's five novels are, at first glance, unusual for a contemporary South-African writer.¹ They are, respectively, the United States, undefined parts of the South-African hinterland of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the frontier of an unnamed country on "the roof of the world," a war-ravaged Cape Town and Karoo of the future, and the fictional-cum-metaphorical territory of the Robinson Crusoe fable. In fact, each of the novels is, not surprisingly, a fictional extrapolation from South Africa's current historical crisis. In these fictional projections, however, the very fictional properties of myth, ideology, and history—and finally fiction itself—are themselves targeted as a principal source of hostility to human values in the colonial context.

Coetzee's first experiment in damaging and deranged fictions, *Dusklands* (1974), couples two megalomaniacal narratives. The first, "The Vietnam Project," is that of Eugene Dawn, a "mythographer" employed by the American military in a Californian research station to explore the potential of radio broadcasting for psychological warfare against Vietnam. The second, "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," purports to be a translation of an eighteenth-century frontier narrative of a brutal punitive expedition against the Namaqua Bushmen. The first is, by implication, a modern version of the colonial frontier narrative insofar as the American occupation of Vietnam is a continuation of the processes of Western imperialism, and both men are revealed to be paranoid victims of the colonial mentality. Both mythologize their war into the pattern of benign fathers putting down rebellious children who are incapable of taking care of themselves (the American authorities finally discover Dawn, at the peak of his madness, torturing his young son in a hotel room). Both condemn their subjects to death in the name of some higher power, each regarding himself as an instrument of God or a "tool in the hands of history" (109), though for Jacobus the gun is the major instrument and symbol of control, for Eugene the word. Like his historical Afrikaans counterpart, the latter has an exploring temperament: "Had I lived two hundred years ago I would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open to colonization. In that vertiginous freedom I might have expanded to my true potential" (31-32). Like the Magistrate in Coetzee's third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), he likes to record the customs and decipher the relics of the people he is involved in destroying. To the power of the gun is added that of the pen, camera, and radio-speaker, through which academic writers and media men presume to speak for the obscure, remote people whose right of speech they in fact deny and who, as in the living analogue of contemporary South Africa, are still unable to speak for themselves. *Dusklands* challenges the idea that the exploring social scien-

¹ J.M. Coetzee's novels are: *Dusklands* (1974; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983); *In the Heart of the Country* (1977; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982); *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982); *Life and Times of Michael K* (1984; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); *Foe* (1986; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). All page references are given in parentheses in the text of the article and are taken from the Penguin editions of the novels.

tist—the ethnographer and mythographer—can neutralize his stance towards, and distance himself objectively from, the colonized subjects of his exploration. Rather, his own mental fictions are imposed upon them, locking them into a foreign code of consciousness, and Coetzee refuses to exempt the novelist himself from the colonization process. Coetzee situates himself at the edge of Dawn's narrative by giving his own name to the director of the propaganda program, ironically called the "New Life Project," and Jacobus Coetzee's eighteenth-century narrative is supplemented by a critical afterword from an "S.J.Coetzee" and is translated by one "J.M.Coetzee," thus linking the author with his Afrikaans ancestors. Since both of the narrators are mad, it is difficult to distinguish what happens from what they imagine, to mark off what is "real" from what is invented, but the novel does not stay for long even within the elastic bounds of a deranged psychological realism. As Teresa Dovey has observed² the self-implicating strategies of Coetzee's fiction, by candidly announcing its fictionality, take self-consciously into account the material circumstances of the book's composition, the conditions for the production of narratives like this, and the processes by which particular modes of narrative and discourse that have been tied up with the colonization process are officially institutionalized and constitutionalized. The very arbitrariness with which the two narratives are conjoined implies that their relation to historical reality is problematical and is not a straightforward matter of representation. Behind *Dusklands* are the implications that "Realism" is simply a product of one limiting kind of language code, and that, as Stephen Watson has argued,³ it is not only through violent military conquest that we are colonized but through language itself, through conventional sign systems passing themselves off as "natural" and "universal." To the extent that historical realism is the favored mode of the frontier and colonial narrative, the literary deconstruction of traditional realism is simultaneously a political act of decolonization, and Coetzee attempts both of these in his first novel.

Coetzee's second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), is sited in the nightmarish world and murderous fantasies of another "mad" person, Magda, a vaguely nineteenth-century spinster living on a farm out in the veld, "totally outside human society, almost outside humanity" (118). In her fantasy Magda is perpetually killing and burying her father Johannes, one of the mythic fathers of the Afrikaans government who refuses to be got rid of in spite of her imaginative efforts to "fold him away for the night" (137). "If I intend to settle him in this grave there is no way to do so but to pull him in, to climb in first and pull him in after me," she concludes (92). "But now I think that for some days after my death he will still lie here breathing, waiting for his nourishment" (137). Her desire to be rid of her father, and the regime he represents, springs from her white liberal impulse to communicate with and befriend her slave servants Klein Anna and Hendrick. Magda, as suffering white female, empathizes with the oppressed blacks to the point where she virtually thinks herself black: "From wearing black too long I have grown into a black person" (96). She wears white only at night and black by day, and imagines both her "black" daytime self and her "white" nighttime self as being raped by Hendrick. She is barren and, like the blacks in the scheme of the official colonial fiction, is viewed as

² Teresa Dovey, "Coetzee and His Critics: The Case of *Dusklands*," *English in Africa* 14.2 (1987): 25.

³ Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M.Coetzee," *Research in African Literatures* 17.3 (1986): 374.

sexless by a white paternal authority which considers itself as the supreme embodiment of potency. The father's codes, however, have also entrapped the daughter, who finds her behavior circumscribed by the inherited patterns of dominance and subservience. A female colonial Crusoe, she insists on renaming her "Friday" and, like her father, resorts to the gun when willpower fails and refuses to let the African take charge of his own destiny. But Magda is caught up in fictional codes of a sociolinguistic as well as a historical order, for the nineteenth-century colonial spinster in her historical backwater is, amazingly, familiar with the commonplaces of structural linguistics: "Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it" (26). As in *Dusklands*, the madness/reality frontier is also the site of a debate between postmodernism's and traditional realism's approaches to language, and the novel, by thrusting its heroine and an implied nostalgia for realism into the heart of the postmodernist breakdown, acquires an often painfully reflexive awareness of the contemporary contexts of its composition.

Waiting for the Barbarians, Coetzee's third novel, is a timeless parable of Empire, set on the frontier of an anonymous country, in the fort of an unnamed imperial power, and focuses on the moral dilemma of a liberal-minded Magistrate who takes the side of the nomadic people occupying the wilderness on the other side of the "barbarous frontier." The dominant enemy-fictions in this novel are the "barbarians" of the title and the "fisherfolk" with whom the indiscriminating imperial power frequently confuses them. The real nomads and hunters behind the labels desire only, it seems, to be left alone in peaceful co-existence with the frontier people on land which they consider theirs to traverse. The imperial power, however, persuades itself into believing that it is under threat and sends out an army to kill or imprison and torture the "barbarians," who respond by destroying crops and leading the garrison into the desert where the soldiers die of starvation and exposure. The military of the "civilized" power, who are of course the real barbarians, then proceeds to inflict a terrible and hideous revenge. The barbarians, who are basically innocent, are really a mental fiction born of colonial paranoia and a political convenience: their invention has become indispensable for the maintenance of a blind, insane power which sucks everything into its vortex and for the antithetical definition of the Empire as a force for "civilization," which presupposes the existence of barbarism. The title is taken from a poem by Cavafy: "And now what will become of us without Barbarians?/Those people were some sort of solution."⁴ Civilization cannot exist without an enemy. A compassionate man who always "believed in civilized behaviour," the Magistrate is thrown into jail and tortured for his treasonable kindness to a crippled barbarian woman whom he nurses back to health and then returns to her people. By taking the side of the oppressed, the Magistrate—much more than Magda—effectively becomes one of them and at his eventual release is left stranded between two camps, "a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (156). His muddled minority position makes him a common figure in Coetzee's work: the reluctant colonizer who can no longer bear the burden of an arbitrary historical role which condemns him to treat others as things

⁴ "Waiting for the Barbarians" in C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978) 15.

and himself to a state of murderous self-hatred. He tries, the narrator says, "to live outside of history."

What the Magistrate attempts, the protagonist of the next novel, *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), does. Michael K, concludes the hospital doctor into whose care he drifts, is "a human soul above and beneath classification." He is "untouched by history . . . a creature left over from an earlier age" (207). The novel depicts the strange peregrination of Michael, a municipal gardens laborer, from the Cape to the Karoo with the sick body, and then the ashes, of his mother: a pilgrimage which is blocked at every border by army and military police, and which leads to his triple internment as vagrant and suspected guerrilla in prison, camp, and hospital. There is a war, civil or revolutionary, going on in the background of his journey but it remains vague: it is fought, according to the camp commandant, "so that minorities will have a say in their destinies," which probably refers to the ruling white minority keeping their "say" (215). K, who "barely knows there is a war on," is out of it because he is busy existing on his own marginal terms, unresponsive to historical determinants which to him are unreal. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the ruling abstraction, the hostile fiction preoccupying the paranoid mind of the oppressor was the barbarian. In *Michael K*, however, there is a sense in which the prevailing "fiction" is extended beyond the guerrillas—the "friends" Michael is accused of collaborating with by growing them food on his improvised allotment in the Karoo—to take in the whole unreal, insane historical situation of South Africa which has issued in Civil War. The keynote is again sounded by the doctor, who sees Michael not as part of the substantial historical world which he himself believes in but as "scuffled together" from "a handful of dust . . . into the shape of a rudimentary man." He is a "genuine little man of earth," his fingers hooked and bent, ready "for a life of burrowing, a creature that spends its waking life stooped over the soil, that when at last its time comes digs its own grave and slips quietly in and draws the heavy earth over its head like a blanket and cracks a last smile and turns over and descends into sleep, home at last, while unnoticed as ever somewhere far away the grinding of the wheels of history continues" (220).

Continually lapsing out of and back into consciousness, less a human being than a spirit of ecological endurance, Michael K is a creature not of human history but of earth, his true literary ancestors Lear's "naked unaccommodated man" and those rocklike, purely elemental Wordsworthian presences, the Leech-Gatherer and the Old Cumberland Beggar, rather than Voltaire's *Candide* (who also "works in the garden"). Disenfranchized from a human existence on the earth's surface, he is directed back towards the earth itself and goes literally underground like an animal, insect, or grub, leaving no trace of himself; he is ploughed back into the soil and, after surviving three dungeon-like incarcerations, rises, as if from the dead, from the element to which he has rooted himself. Earth is a constant touchstone and referent for his existence. He burrows, grubs, plants, and hides in it, he carries his mother's ashes to the part of it from whence she came, and he will take back as food only what he has put into it: his family of sister-melons and brother-pumpkins, the fruit of his real mother, to which he is umbilically connected by an invisible "cord of tenderness." It keeps him barely alive and adumbrates his grave, for his desire to grow food is inversely proportionate to his need to consume it: "As he tended the seeds and watched and waited for the earth to bear food, his own need for

food grew slighter and slighter . . . When food comes out of this earth, he told himself, I will recover my appetite, for it will have savor" (139). He plants for posterity, not for the present, and, as Nadine Gordimer has noticed, to keep the earth, not himself, alive.⁵ Planting is K's, and the earth's, positive alternative to history as War: "Enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (150). Thus K makes his own kind of history: the earth man does not ponder the meaning of his existence but creates and becomes it. For those who live moment by moment there is, as K claims at the close, "time enough for everything" (249): for the tender of earth who transcends the historical, suspended time of war, time is as full at one time as at any other, being ever geared to the fruitful eventfulness of nature. At the end of the book he is bound for earth again, without money for food but with half a packet of seeds to reestablish his connection with his element.

Coetzee does not provide his protagonist with a surname that would particularize him as a Cape Colored but chooses instead to surround him with Kafkaesque trappings--like the "K."s of *The Castle* and *The Trial*, he has no permit to be where he is so is moved restlessly on by authority derived from "the Castle," and is made to feel unspecified guilt over an unnamed crime--and the author, remarkably, draws our attention on the first page not to Michael's color but to the harelip which so hampers his speech that he is barely articulate. Of course, everything in K's circumstances insists that he isn't white. Coetzee's silence and apparent color-blindness, Kelly Hewson has argued,⁶ immediately betokens a refusal to label him in any way--black, white, or colored--because that is precisely what the dehumanizing classifications of apartheid do, but more important than this is K's representation of something so elemental and irreducible that it is beyond formulation in any of the existing historical codes: he is chthonic man, outside of language and history, as inarticulate as the seeds, plants, and humus of the earth cycle into which he is locked. Equally important, K is allowed only a minimal articulacy precisely because he is black and because it is dangerous for a white author, a composer of self-conscious fictions from the enemy camp, to presume to speak for him: a dilemma which Coetzee resolves in a different way in his most recent and startling novel, *Foe* (1986).

Commenting on Gordimer's achievements in the mode of critical realism, Coetzee has said, "I would like to think that today the novel is after bigger game"⁷ and, during the composition of *Michael K*, expressed feelings of dissatisfaction with the limitations of traditional form.⁸ In *Foe*, he does away with conventional realism almost altogether, dismantling his own fictions and stripping his fictional practice to the bone. *Foe* is simultaneously a retelling of the Robinson Crusoe fable, an allegory of South Africa's racial dilemmas, and a meditation on the art of fiction. In this version of the "Cruso" story the hero is a

⁵ Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," *The New York Review of Books* 2 February 1984: 6.

⁶ Kelly Hewson, "Making the 'Revolutionary Gesture': Nadine Gordimer, J.M.Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer's Responsibility," *Ariel* 19.4 (1988): 65-65.

⁷ J.M.Coetzee, "Speaking: J.M.Coetzee" (Interview), *Speak* May-June 1978: 23.

⁸ J.M.Coetzee, Interview in *Kunapipi* 6.1 (1984):10.

sullen boor without energy, imagination, or desire. Susan Barton, another shipwrecked voyager who is washed up on his island and into his dull celibate existence, is amazed that he has kept no journal of his island life—"Nothing I have forgotten is worth remembering"—and has frittered away his time building, with Friday's help, stone terraces for the planting of nonexistent seeds. Reluctantly rescued, Crusoe dies at sea a few days from Bristol, and Susan takes his story and his black servant to one Mr. Foe (the novelist Daniel Defoe). At his quarters she slips into his bed and, in the fashion of the Muse, begets upon him the tale which he later pours forth as "Robinson Crusoe."

Through all this, Friday remains mute (his tongue was cut out, either by slavers or Crusoe himself) and all attempts at communication with him come to nothing, principally because they are founded—and therefore founder—on erroneous European cultural assumptions. When Friday plays his flute, Susan can make nothing of the repetitive six-note melody of his African scales, and when she teaches him to write, can make no sense of what he puts to paper. The attempt is abandoned and it is only in the surreal last scene of the book, when a visitor from the future encounters the wraiths of Defoe, Susan, and Friday, that the black slave's mouth is prised open and from it issues "a slow stream, without breath, without interruption . . . it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth" (157). As Michael K's harelip is correctable and articulation restorable, so Friday's dumbness, a culturally enforced rather than a physical condition, is remediable. But we do not hear, because Coetzee does not and cannot know, what Friday says. Friday, if he could speak, would speak only in the colonial language of Crusoe; and Coetzee, who can speak, is no longer prepared to speak for him, thus abandoning the token narrative and psychological realism of *Michael K*. Instead, as Helen Tiffin has cogently argued, he has demonstrated the oppressive structures—in this case, colonial narratives—that render blacks voiceless.⁹ Coetzee dramatizes the complicity of colonial settler narratives with exploitative politico-historical processes: the enemy is the imperial text through which the white author shuts the racial and cultural otherness of colonized peoples into closed European myth systems and codes of interpretation. It is not (and never was) tenable for such an author to write either about or on behalf of anyone who, like the South-African black, is still denied a voice of his own. In *Foe* Coetzee candidly abdicates from the fictionalizing process which the earlier novels are either about or participate in. In his deepening and darkening vision, the white fiction, by virtue of its privileged existence in the context of black oppression, is always the "foe," whether its author's name is Defoe or Coetzee.

⁹ Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse," *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987), 29-32.