MT That's the thing. That's what I'm talking about. I'm saying, okay, they [cultural workers] might be engaged in trying to encourage writers to write. For instance, they asked me to go and provide a workshop, at the Windybrow Theatre. I was too busy, but I said okay I'll go and do this. Notices had been sent out asking aspirant writers to come for help with their short stories and so on. I sat there for two hours, but there was nobody. Nobody turned up. Because there are other factors which are pertinent which have to be dealt with, and which have not received attention. It's not enough to say just sit down there and write a story. How can you say that to a person who is concerned about how to survive, where to get the next meal. It's still fighting against the odds. You have to remove all these problems that prevent people from sitting down, reading the books, appreciating them and developing their own writing.

11

Speech and silence in the fictions of J. M. Coetzee

BENITA PARRY

I

David Attwell maintains that Coetzee's novels are 'directed at understanding the conditions – linguistic, formal, historical and political – governing the writing of fiction in contemporary South Africa'. In turn, he offers the volume of interviews and essays he has edited as reflecting 'on an encounter in which the legacies of European modernism and modern linguistics enter the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid' (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 3). This is an apt and elegant designation of the fictions' moment and space, and I use it as a starting point for considering the ways this fraught confluence is negotiated in self-reflexive novels which stage the impossibility of representation, estrange the norms of reality, and work, in Coetzee's words, to 'demythologize history'.

Metropolitan reviewers, as well as those critics whose attention, when reading South African novels, was focused on detecting condemnations of an egregious political system, have been predisposed to proffer Coetzee's fictions as realist representations of, and humanist protests against, colonial rapacity at large, and in particular against the intricately institutionalized system of racial oppression that until recently prevailed in South Africa.[1] Other critics whose concern is with the radicalism of Coetzee's textual practice, and who foreground parody and reflexivity as oppositional linguistic acts, argue that the authority of colonialism's narratives is undermined by subversive rewritings of the genres traditional to South African fiction – the heroic frontier myth, the farm romance, the liberal novel of stricken conscience[2] – hence opening conventions to scrutiny and confronting the traditional and unquestioned notion of the canon (see Attridge, 'Oppressive Silence').

1. See, for example, Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa*, and Penner, *Countries of the Mind.*
2. See Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, and Attwell, 'The Problem of History'.

Such readings have come from Coetzee's most attentive critics, amongst some of whom there has been a tendency to construe the fictions as calculated transcriptions of the author's known critical stances on the instability of language and the unreliability of narration. The consequence is that paradox and impasse, gaps and silences are accounted for, not as textually generated through the interplay of the referential and the rhetorical, or by the interruptions of incommensurable discourses, but as the planned strategy of a highly self-conscious practice which displays the materials and techniques of its own process of production.

What I will be considering is how novels that weave a network of textual invocations traversing European literary and philosophical traditions, as well as contemporary theory from linguistics and structuralism to deconstruction, circumvent, or rather confirm, that quandary of white writing's insecurity or dislocation in South Africa which Coetzee as critic has detected. For the principles around which novelistic meaning is organized in Coetzee's fictions owe nothing to knowledges which are *not* of European provenance, but which *are* amply and variously represented in South Africa; while the disposals of Western interpretative paradigms are disseminated in a poised, even hieratic prose uninflected by South Africa's many vernacular Englishes.

That Coetzee's novels interrogate colonialism's discursive power is indisputable, through estrangement and irony making known the overdeterminations, fractures, and occlusions of colonialist utterance; while their excavations of the uneasy but timid white South African liberal consciousness are amongst the most far-reaching in South African writing. All the same, I want to consider whether the reverberations of Coetzee's intertextual transpositions, as well as the logic and trajectory of his narrative strategies, do not inadvertently repeat the exclusionary colonialist gestures which the novels also criticize. Let me, then, put forward the polemical proposition that despite the fictions' disruptions of colonialist modes, the social authority on which the rhetoric relies and which it exerts is grounded in the cognitive systems of the West. Furthermore, I will suggest that the consequence of writing the silence attributed to the subjugated as a liberation from the constraints of subjectivity – a representation to which I will return – can be read as re-enacting the received disposal of narrative authority.

The paradox as proposed by this hypothesis is that in the double movement performed by Coetzee's novels, the subversions of previous texts enunciating discourses of colonial authority are permutated into

renarrativizations where only the European possesses the word and the ability to enunciate, the lateral routes of the virtually plotless novels taking in nothing outside the narrators' world-views and thereby sustaining the West as the culture of reference. A failure to project alternative perspectives might signify Coetzee's refusal to exercise the authority of the dominant culture to represent other and subjugated cultures, and might be construed as registering his understanding that agency is not something that is his to give or withhold through representation. Yet I will argue that the fictions do just this, because of which European textual power, reinscribed in the formal syntax required of Literature, survives the attempted subversion of its dominion.

For whereas the novels do enact the discursive processes whereby 'Bushman' and 'Hottentot' in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' (*Dusklands*), the Barbarians in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the servants in *In the Heart of the Country*, the gardener in *Life & Times of Michael K*, and the enslaved black Friday in *Foe* are muted by those who have the power to name and depict them, or as in *Age of Iron*, are subjected to acts of ventriloquizing, the dominated are situated as objects of representations and meditations which offer them no place from which to resist the modes that have constituted them as at the same time naked to the eye and occult. The question however has been differently phrased to privilege the transformative force of an unspoken presence: do these figures, as Derek Attridge maintains, perform 'the capacity of Coetzee's work to engage with – to stage, confront, apprehend, explore – *otherness*', in this engagement broaching 'the most fundamental and widely significant issues involved in any consideration of ethics and politics' ('Literary Form and the Demands of Politics', 244)?

In 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' (*Dusklands* (1974)), for instance, the conflicting enunciations in the making of a colonial discourse are ironically rehearsed. But what is there, in a narrative that dramatizes a metaphysics of conquest, to contradict Jacobus Coetzee's doomed discovery that 'in that true wilderness without polity . . . everything, I was to find, was possible' (66), since the Khoi-Khoin are relegated as being unable to impinge on and participate in annulling the discourse of mastery disclosed by an autocritique? Is the silence of these 'strange' and defeated people deployed here as a textual strategy which counters the colonizing impulse and impudence in simulating another's voice? Alternatively can it be construed as a mute interrogation and disablement of discursive power? – a possibility offered by Attridge, who

reads Coetzee's fictions as a continued and strenuous effort in figuring alterity as a force out there disrupting European discourse, a force which is both resistant to the dominant culture and makes demands on it, not by initiating dialogue, but by 'interrupting or disturbing the discursive patterns in which we are at home' ('Literary Form and the Demands of Politics', 250). On the other hand, can this narrative muteness be read as intimating a narrative disinclination to orchestrate a polyphonic score? And if so, then the consequence is that the silenced remain incommensurable, unknowable, and unable to make themselves heard in the sealed linguistic code exercised by the narrating self, and hence incapable of disturbing the dominant discourse?

Tzvetan Todorov, whose discussion of the other constituted by colonialism enlists the work of Levinas, has written that 'one does not let the other live merely by leaving him intact, any more than by obliterating his voice entirely. . . . Heterology, which makes the difference of voices heard, is necessary' (Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 250, 251). This suggests a notion of commerce with alterity as a contact taking place in an intersubjective space where the non-identity of the interlocutors is respected and retained, and which leaves both 'I' and 'you' separate and intact but enhanced. A text written from within this interval or 'in-between' would register the opening of one's own discourse to strange accents and unfamiliar testimonies, but without suppressing or erasing difference, without pretending to simulate another's authentic voice or speaking on another's behalf, and without imprinting an absolute dissimilarity which simultaneously offers an explanation of, and excuse for, oppression. Such a procedure would engender a multiple, 'neologistic' idiom, which because it inscribes alterity not as a disarticulated presence but as an interlocutor, would counter what Levinas names (in *Totality and Infinity*) 'the eclipse, the occultation, the silencing of the other'.

II

Within the discussion of colonial and postcolonial discourse, silence has been read as a many-accented signifier of disempowerment and resistance, of the denial of a subject position and its appropriation.[3] In keeping with this recognition of the multiple resonances to silence, critics

3. On silence as a privileged signifier of postcolonial writing, see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*. See also Paulo Freire's writings, where silence signifies a culture of defeat and resignation.

have construed Coetzee's deployment of the topos as if this is notated by the text to be intelligible as an emblem of oppression, or to be audible as that unuttered but inviolable voice on which discourses of mastery cannot impinge and, thus, as an enunciation of defiance.[4] However, I will suggest that the various registers in which silence is scored in the novels speak of things other than the structural relationship of oppressor/oppressed, or the power of an unuttered alterity to undermine a dominant discourse, and that these other things are signs of the fiction's urge to cast off worldly attachments, even as the world is signified and estranged. I have already noted how in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' the process of muting is staged as an act of conquest. My hypothesis about Coetzee's figures of silence in the subsequent novels is that although they are the disentitled, and are therefore available to be read as manifesting subordination to, and retreat from, a subjugated condition, the potential critique of political oppression is diverted by the conjuring and endorsing of a non-verbal signifying system.

Shared by Coetzee's protagonists of silence is an absence or economy of speech which is, in all cases, associated with sexual passivity or impotence: the hare-lipped Michael K, a gardener and progenitor of fruits and vegetables, lacks a father, a patronymic and sexual desire, and remains bonded to the mother; it is intimated that the dumb Friday is without tongue and perhaps without phallus; while the taciturn Vercueil in *Age of Iron* is perceived by the narrator as unable to beget children, his semen imagined as 'dry and brown, like pollen or the dust of this country' (180; refs. to Secker & Warburg/Penguin edition). These deficits have been read as signalling their location on the fringes of the phallocentric social order, whose dominance through their speechlessness and asexuality they evade.[5] Yet although the silence of each of these figures has a distinctive tenor, what all signify is not a negative condition of lack and affliction, or of sullen withdrawal, but a plenitude of perception and gifts: Michael K's aphasia facilitates a mystic consciousness; the verbal abstinence of the drunken and incontinent Vercueil, who means more than he says, is appropriate to his metaphysical status as the unlikely incarnation of an annunciation – 'verskuil' in Afrikaans means to obscure, conceal or mask; while the outflow of sounds from the mouth of Friday gives

4. See Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin'; Huggan, 'Philomela's Retold Story'; Splendore, 'J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*'; Attridge, 'Oppressive Silence'; Castillo, 'Coetzee's *Dusklands*'.

5. See Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

tongue to meanings? desires? which precede or surpass those that can be communicated and interpreted in formal language. It could be argued, then, that speechlessness in Coetzee's fiction exceeds or departs from the psychoanalytic paradigm it also deploys, to become a metaphor for that portentous silence which signifies what *cannot* be spoken.

Coetzee's figures of silence are not without a quotidian dimension, and an inequality in social power is marked by the disparity between the obsessional will to utterance in Coetzee's female and European narrators, who literally perform the constitution of the subject in language and are authors of a discourse of the body, and the inaudibility of those who are narrated: Michael K, who is cryptically identified as coloured (96), is a unpropertied labourer; Friday is a black slave; and Vercueil is a tramp of unspecified race. However this incipient critique of how deprivation inflicts silence on those who are homeless in a hierarchical social world is deflected by the ascription of value to the disarticulated body, since the reader is simultaneously offered intimations of a non-linguistic intuitive consciousness, and is invited to witness the fruits of speechlessness when there is a failure of the dialectic between the 'Imaginary' and the 'Symbolic', or, in Kristeva's vocabulary, between the 'semiotic' and the 'thetic'.

Both surmises can be referred to Michael K, who is written as a being without an identity, outside the writ where the Law of the Father runs, and as the exemplar of a mind turned inward. Spoken for in the narrative – his representation depends on 'he thought', 'he found', 'he said' – Michael K is interpreted as being too busy with fantasy 'to listen to the wheels of history' (217); he is 'a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history' (207) who lives in 'a pocket outside time' (82), has access to a numinous condition when he 'emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing' (74), and attains an ineffable state of bliss on eating a pumpkin he had reared in a parodic act of parental nurturing.

Although the narrative gloss has him likening himself, a gardener, to 'a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence' (248), Michael K is attributed with an ambition to interpret his own solitary, eidetic consciousness: 'Always when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it' (150–1). Here failure to attain and articulate self-consciousness is not rendered as disappointment, since silence is privileged as enabling

the euphoria of desire unmediated by words; and if Michael K is perceived as dramatizing the inability to achieve a voice in the 'Symbolic' order, then we can note that his 'loss of thetic function' is not represented as a lapse into psychosis but as a path to the visionary.

Because Friday's inner consciousness is not narrated, his silence is more secret, and less available to the attention of conjectural readings, a sign of which is that he is offered alternative futures by the fiction, one within and the other outside the formal structures of language. In her discussion with Foe on how to bring Friday into the realm of representation, Susan Barton protests at Foe's proposal that he be shown writing, believing that since 'Letters are the mirror of words', Friday, who has no speech, can have no grasp of language. For Foe, on the other hand, writing is not a secondary representation of the spoken word but rather its prerequisite: 'Writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech... God's writing stands as an instance of a writing without speech' (142, 143). It is Foe's view that would seem to prevail in the first narrative turn, where the prospect of Friday as a scribe is prefigured. Formerly the pupil of an Adamic language taught by Cruso and a pictographic script offered by Barton, Friday, who had previously uttered himself only in the 'semiotic' modes of music and dance, now takes his seat at Foe's desk, and with Foe's quill, ink, and paper, and wearing Foe's wig, appropriates the authorial role.

His mouth likened by Barton to an empty buttonhole, Friday begins by forming *O*s, of which Coetzee has written: 'The O, the circle, the hole are symbols of that which male authoritarian language cannot appropriate' (cited by Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, 411). All the same it is intimated that Friday will go on to learn *a*, a portent of his acquiring linguistic competence. There is, however, yet another narrative turn, when the dream-like quest of a contemporary narrator for Friday's story takes him into the hold of a wrecked ship. This time, Friday does not cross the threshold into logical and referential discourse, remaining instead in that paradisal condition where sign and object are unified, and where the body, spared the traumatic insertion into language, can give utterance to things lost or never yet heard, whose meanings, we are given to understand, will water the globe:

> But this is not a place of words . . . This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday . . . His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption . . . it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. (157)

It would seem, then, that although the various figures of silence in Coetzee's fictions are the dominated and, hence, intimate disarticulation as an act of discursive power, they are not only 'victims' but also 'victors' accredited with extraordinary and transgressive psychic energies. Furthermore, since it is explicitly posited in the fiction that writing does not copy speech and is not its symbol or image, might we not consider whether for Friday, and the other disempowered figures who cannot or will not make themselves heard in the recognized linguistic system, their bodies are to be read as encoding a proto-writing? Friday's mythic home is designated as 'a place where bodies are their own signs', and to the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) who cannot understand the gestures of the barbarian girl, and can communicate with her only in makeshift language without nuance, her body is a script to be decoded in the same way as the characters on the wooden slips he has excavated.

It is therefore notable that when Coetzee's novels stage another discourse of the body, it is not in the scripted silence of the lowly and the outcast, whose oppression is also the condition for their access to transcendence and/or intuitive cognition, but as the progeny of women who speak, albeit uneasily, from a position of entrenched cultural authority, while also articulating their homelessness in and opposition to the patriarchal order. Three of Coetzee's narrators so far have been women, and while it could seem that he is enlisting the notion of the body as progenitor of woman's language – a notion posited by several feminist theorists – it is less certain that the writing he invents for them does transgress standard usage to register the irruptions of repressed libidinal elements into the performative text.

What is evident, however, is that Coetzee's female narrators explicitly represent the body as the agent of language: Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron*, declares in her letters to an absent daughter that her words 'come from my heart, from my womb' (133), assigning to writing the properties of the genetically communicated code, of the phylogenetic inheritance made flesh in print: 'These words, as you read them . . . enter you and draw breath again . . . Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow towards her, may I live in you' (120). In another register, Susan Barton, in *Foe*, who asks 'Without desire, how is it possible to make a story?' (88), asserts that 'The Muse is a woman, a goddess, who visits poets in the night and begets stories upon them' (126); while Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, rejects her 'father-tongue' as a language of hierarchy which is not 'the

language my heart wants to speak' and longs for 'the resonance of the full human voice . . . the fullness of human speech' (97, 47).

All Coetzee's female narrators resolutely position themselves as authors of their own narratives:

> I have uttered my life in my own voice. . . I have chosen at every moment my own destiny. (Magda, 139)

> I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire . . . the story I desire to be known by is the story of the island. (Susan Barton, 131, 121)

> How I live, how I lived: my story . . . my truth, how I lived in these times, in this place. (Mrs Curren, 140, 119)

However, in terms of dis/identification with masculine narrative traditions, each produces a differently accented script: the recitations of Magda and Mrs Curren ostentatiously enunciate maternal desire, whereas Susan Barton, who insists on her freedom as a woman to choose her speech and her silence, affirms her wish to be 'father to my story' (123). By resisting Foe's determination to write 'the history of a woman in search of a lost daughter' (121), Barton thus refuses to be party to a discourse of motherhood.

Furthermore, alone amongst Coetzee's narrators, Barton articulates a reluctance to exert the narrative power which she as an Englishwoman, however disreputable, holds over those who are muted, when she resists Foe's urgings to invent Friday's story, 'which is properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative' (121). It is above all in *Foe*, which amplifies its status as a book about writing a book, that the disparate stratagems of novelistic authority are conspicuously and self-reflexively dramatized. The dialogue of Foe and Barton condenses a contest between protagonists holding different positions on language and representation. With her commitment to the priority of speech, Susan Barton formulates the task as descending into Friday's mouth, seeking a means to use Friday as an informant in order to fill the hole in her narrative: 'It is for us to open the mouth and hear what it holds' (142). But to the exponent of writing's primacy and the father of linear realist narrative – 'It is thus that we make up a book . . . beginning, then middle, then end' (117) – it is the author's brief to fabricate another's consciousness and circumstances: 'We must make Friday's silence speak, as well as the silence surrounding Friday . . . as long as he is dumb we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish' (142, 148).

Is Coetzee's fiction free from the exercise of that discursive aggression it so ironically displays, since it repeatedly and in different registers feigns woman's writing? The artifice of the rhetoric perhaps serves to foreground the fact that these texts are artefacts contrived by a masculine writer pursuing the possibilities of a non-phallocentric language. But why does a male novelist take the risk of simulating woman's speech, indeed her self-constitution in language (Magda declares 'I create myself in the words that create me', and Mrs Curren writes 'I render myself into words') while this same white novelist refrains from dissembling the voices of those excluded from the dominant discourse (where such voices are audible, their status as written by a white narrator is made apparent), instead elevating their silence as the sign of a transcendent state? If, as I have suggested, both the topos of silence and the imitations of a woman's writing act to transcribe and valorize the body as an agent of cognition, then both the claim that the fiction contrives to manifest an identification with feminism, and the charge that it consigns the dispossessed to a space outside discourse, could be dismissed as irrelevant to the novels' interests. Such an argument overlooks the fact that the effects of bestowing authority on the woman's text, while withholding discursive skills from the dispossessed, is to reinscribe, indeed re-enact, the received disposal of narrative power, where voice is correlated with cultural supremacy and voicelessness with subjugation; just as the homages to the mystical properties and prestige of muteness undermine the critique of that condition where oppression inflicts and provokes silence.

III

I have attempted to argue that Coetzee's narrative strategies both enact a critique of dominant discourses and pre-empt dialogue with non-canonical knowledges through representing these as ineffable. I now want to consider whether the noticeable absence of inflections from South Africa's non-Western cultures in the narrative structure, language, and ethos of Coetzee's fictions registers and repeats the exclusions of white writing, omissions on which Coetzee has commented in identifying 'the baffling and silencing of any counter-voice to the farmer/father' in the South African farm romance (*White Writing*, 135). The eclipse, the occultation, the silencing of the other is what South Africa's settler colonialism, as the self-appointed representative of Western civilization in Africa, was intent on effecting. Hence, the cognitive traditions and customs of South Africa's indigenous peoples were

derogated and ignored, as were those of the practitioners of two world religions whose communities in South Africa were initially brought as slaves from the Dutch East Indies in the seventeenth century and as indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century.

The paradox is that whereas the institutional structure of the previous South African regime internally duplicated the divide between the hemispheres, and its state apparatus exercised an imperialist ascendancy over neighbouring and *de jure* autonomous territories, within the orbit of imperialism's global system it was an outpost complicit with but on the boundaries of the West's power centres, its white comprador class deferential to the cultures of the metropolitan worlds. Such subservience was perpetuated, as Coetzee has shown in his essays, in the adoption/adaptation of established European fictional genres by both English and Afrikaans literatures, which, until the 1950s, were overwhelmingly aligned with, and served to naturalize, the ideology of white supremacy and segregation coterminous with Afrikaner, British, and subsequent diverse European settlement. Such writing is now virtually extinct, while a literature predominantly in English, but also increasingly in Afrikaans, positioned itself as opposed to the former status quo. But whether it was to classical and modernist realism or to postmodernism that they turned for inspiration and sustenance, writers until now have been dependent on metropolitan modes – although critics are now claiming that the later Nadine Gordimer, and those younger white writers who have transgressed cultural insulation and have assimilated knowledges and accents from which previous generations were through circumstance and choice isolated, are on the brink of inventing other forms in their plurally located and multiply voiced 'post-apartheid' novels.[6]

Meanwhile, the predominant mode of the South African novel, white and black, has remained social realism, a mode from which Coetzee, in his critical writings and novelistic practice, has intimated his distance.[7] If

6. On Gordimer, see Cooper, 'New Criteria'. The notion of the white 'post-apartheid novel' has been mooted by Graham Pechey in numerous reviews that have appeared in the *Southern African Review of Books*; see also his contribution to this volume.
7. The question of which mode exercises the most subversive power under contemporary South African conditions has been raised by Neil Lazarus, who argues for the subversive power of modernism; see 'Modernism and Modernity' (131–55).

Coetzee's own writing defamiliarizes the practices of white South African fiction, then its subversions of the representational paradigm also set it apart from black writing, which, for complex historical reasons, was similarly indebted to established Western modes, despite the ambition to register the heterogeneous black experience in its own oppositional terms and its own resistant voice.[8] The preference for a responsible realism aimed at reclaiming black history and registering black agency was reinforced on different grounds by 'cultural agendas' devised during the 1980s by the most visible organizations of the liberation movement. These decreed that writers commit themselves to developing a purposeful, expressive, and accessible literature depicting oppression, illuminating the struggle, and serving to raise consciousness. Such demands in turn generated a 'solidarity criticism', which by arguing that evaluation should be based on cultural function, inhibited the debate on what might constitute a revolutionary literature and art.[9] A climate in which established Anglo-American critical paradigms vied with political programmes for the arts is now changing. This is evident in the self-interrogations of critics and writers who as members of one or other community were aligned with the struggle against an oppressive regime, and who, as scholars, are aware that the discussion on autonomy and commitment in the arts in South Africa is in urgent need of redefinition.[10]

IV

It is from within this specific literary landscape that I now want to look at Coetzee's implementation of what he has referred to as 'a politics of writing for postcolonial literatures'. Detached from the hitherto predominant modes of South African writing, obliquely situated to the prevailing intellectual formations of his native land, whether white nationalism, liberalism, socialist-liberationism or black consciousness, and little touched by the autochthonous, transplanted, and recombinant cultures of South Africa's African, Asian, and coloured populations, Coetzee negotiates 'South Africa' as a referent in his fictions through defamiliarizing strategies that efface its spatial and temporal specificity,

8. See the essays by Nkosi, Ndebele, Parker, and Morphet. In a longer version of this essay, I attempt to address the different articulations of black writing by using the work of other critics (*New Formations* 21 (Winter 1994): 1–20).
9. See de Kok and Press, eds., *Spring is Rebellious*.
10. See Trump, ed., *Rendering Things Visible*, and de Kok and Press, eds. *Spring is Rebellious*.

denying it the identity of a social space and rejecting it as a site of cultural meanings. In one of the Attwell interviews, Coetzee, while speaking with admiration about the 'passionate intimacy with the South African landscape' of fellow-writer Breyten Breytenbach and the ostensible pleasure which playwright Athol Fugard takes in the beauty of South Africa (*Doubling the Point*, 377, 369), explains his own refusal to contrive 'nature description' of the Cape on the grounds that this represents no challenge to his 'power of envisioning', threatening 'only the tedium of reproduction' (142).

Such abstinence, I would argue, has further implications. In his critical writing, Coetzee has detected an impulse in the South African pastoral mode 'to find evidence of a "natural" bond between *volk* and *land*, that is to say, to naturalize the *volk's* possession of the land', observing too that 'the politics of expansion has uses for a rhetoric of the sublime' (*White Writing*, 61). It is these connections between landscape and the legitimizing narrative of the white nation which the novels sever by ostentatiously failing to register any signs of splendour in the very scenery that has inspired rhapsody.

Hence the terrain mapped by 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' constitutes an ideological cartography, the naming by an eighteenth-century explorer and proto-colonialist of rivers and mountains, and the designation of flora and fauna as yet uncatalogued in European taxonomies, establishing the authority of the invader's nomenclature and marking the act of territorial acquisition. Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, atones for her confession 'I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world' (138) by spurning the favoured images of the South African pastoral tradition and rendering the scene as existentially sterile, her lapses into humanizing the spectacle being swiftly followed by recantation. The pastiche of naturalist conventions in the litany of place names that tracks Michael K's journey through the Cape Province registers the past occupation of the territory by Afrikaner and British settlement, but screens the meticulously inventoried locations from the infiltration of affect. In *Age of Iron*, the romance and promise with which European voyagers infused their accounts of the fairest Cape in all the world, the Cape of Good Hope, are demystified when the majestically serene and smiling peninsula of legend is configured in a rain-soaked suburb built with bricks made by convict labour, and the drably named 'False Bay' is redesignated a 'bay of false hope'.

In thus estranging and voiding of emotional investment a landscape

named as the Cape, Coetzee's narrators effect a distancing from the historic claim to the land celebrated by white settler writing. But does not rendering a locale as null and void repeat that 'literature of empty landscape' which Coetzee has designated a literature of failure because it articulates a homelessness in Africa? Further, does not restricting the site of the colonial drama to the Cape act to produce a truncated version of the narrative of conquest which the fiction invents in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'? Because the beginning colonial confrontation is played out here between Afrikaner and Khoi-San, the so-called Hottentots and Bushmen, whose resistance was effectively crushed, whose populations were decimated and whose cultures were dispersed, the boundedness of the staging excludes the violent and prolonged struggles that took place between the white settlers as they moved across the southern subcontinent and the Nguni- and Sotho-speaking peoples, struggles in which military defeat and dispossession did not entail genocide. And indeed, since Coetzee's fiction only leaves the Cape and its immediate hinterland for the unnamed and unspecified imperial frontier of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and the textually received locations of *Foe*, it might perhaps even be seen as turning its face from Africa.

When Africans do enter the recent past of South Africa in *Age of Iron*, the passing of so pitiless an era is contemplated by the narrator as a return to kinder times, to the age of clay, the age of earth. A novel which speaks an intimacy with death was welcomed in reviews as an allegory where the narrator's affliction with cancer is a figure of a diseased body politic – and certainly this is a connection which her rhetoric insistently makes. But since the narrative of Mrs Curren's dying occupies a different discursive space from the story of South Africa's bloody interregnum, her terminal illness is detached from the demise of a malignant social order; while her salvation, effected by Vercueil, the tramp-as-figure-of-deliverance who ensures that in the disgraceful state of the old South Africa she will die in a state of grace, also draws attention to the absence of any prospect of another, transfigured social order. This withholding of a gesture to the politics of fulfilment in a novel which does intimate a personal redemption is made all the more conspicuous because the aspiration of the oppressed for emancipation detaches the narrator from an attachment to a liberal–humanist ethic; and the text's refusal to countenance the hope for a tomorrow – 'the future comes disguised, if it came naked we would be petrified by what we saw' (149) – is perhaps the strongest signification yet of the fiction's urge to mark its

disengagement from the contingencies of a quotidian world in transition from colonialism.

All the same, another ending narrated by *Age of Iron* has very different resonances, for in taking to its limits the only political discourse to which she has access, the narrator recites a requiem for South African liberalism. For when she discerns the exclusions in an old photograph taken long ago in her grandfather's burgeoning garden, self-exculpation of her own ideology is suspended, and nostalgia for the golden days of her childhood, 'when the world was young and all things were possible' (51), is annulled:

> Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in? . . . No longer does the picture show who were in the garden frame that day, but who were not there. Lying all these years in places of safekeeping across the country, in albums, in desk drawers, this picture and thousands like it have subtly matured, metamorphosed. The fixing did not hold or the developing went further than one would ever have dreamed . . . but they have become negatives again, a new kind of negative in which we begin to see what used to lie outside the frame, occulted. (102–3)

That this act of erasure in white self-representation cannot be restored by Mrs Curren's story is the burden of a narrative whose efforts to bring the blacks into representation issues in bathos, when pastiches of a benign naturalism and moral outrage all too familiar in the South African protest novel are offered, and the exhaustion of the liberal tradition of white fiction which this signals is confirmed by the death of its author. But does not this extended metaphor of the eclipse, the silencing, the occultation of the other in the chronicle of white South Africa have yet further reverberations which hark back to the exclusions, the holes in the narratives, 'the baffling of counter-voices' in Coetzee's own novels?

In protesting against the predicament of writing's compliant instrumentality, Coetzee as his own critic appears determined to detach his novels from their worldly connections. While it does not follow that his novels are so dissociated, I have considered here whether a body of fiction which is at such pains to avoid playing 'the flat historic scale' does not position barriers against readings that would privilege its secular particularity. The apparent referents of Coetzee's fictions have encouraged their literal interpretation as protests against colonial conquest, political torture, and social exploitation, while critics have argued that by

subverting colonialism's oppressive discourses, his work performs 'a politics of writing'. What I have attempted to suggest is how a fiction which in its multivalence, formal inventiveness, and virtuoso self-interrogation of narrative production and authority remains unmatched in South African writing, is marked by the further singularity of a textual practice which dissipates the engagement with political conditions it also inscribes.

NOTE Although I am aware that they will continue to dissent from the revisions, I am indebted to the stringent criticisms made of an earlier version by Derek Attridge and David Attwell, which prompted me to reformulate some of the arguments.

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