

«Positioning is, above all, a matter of representation»: J. M. Coetzee and the Transformative Power of Transgression

«El posicionamiento es, sobre todo, una cuestión de representación»: J. M. Coetzee y el poder transformativo de la transgresión

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Artículo recibido el / *Article received*: 30-10-2014
Artículo aceptado el / *Article accepted*: 14-04-2015

ABSTRACT: Cultural identity is constructed through and within representation, hence the great interest of postcolonial intellectuals in its creative and ideological potential. In the present essay, I read J. M. Coetzee's novels as innovative sites of transgression that open up an alternative space of interpretation of the literary devices he employs as a source for understanding and illustrating his moral and ethical position. Although he avoids explicit positioning in a binary political thinking and does not publicly establish a relationship between his ideological views and his fiction, the narrative strategies he adopts to represent experiences of suffering and pain speak for themselves. His fiction reveals the author's special interest in the process of creation and interpretation of meaning and in the power of writing. Self-reflexiveness as one of the main features of his texts draws the reader's attention to the linguistic status of representation and suggests that our only access to past events, including historical events, is through discourse.

Keywords: Coetzee, representation, transgression, literary devices, discursive positioning.

RESUMEN: La identidad cultural se construye mediante y a través de la representación. De ahí el interés de los intelectuales poscoloniales ante su potencial creativo e ideológico. En el presente ensayo, voy a estudiar las novelas de J. M. Coetzee como lugares innovadores de transgresión que, además, despliegan un espacio alternativo de interpretación de los recursos literarios que el autor emplea como fuente para comprender e ilustrar su posición ética y moral. Aunque el

autor evita formular su postura en un pensamiento político binario y no establece, públicamente, una relación entre sus posturas ideológicas y sus obras de ficción, las estrategias narrativas que adopta para representar experiencias de dolor y sufrimiento hablan por sí mismas. Sus novelas revelan el especial interés de su autor en el proceso de creación e interpretación del significado así como en el poder de la escritura. La auto-reflexividad, como una de las principales características de sus textos, atrae la atención del lector hacia el estatus lingüístico de la representación y sugiere que nuestro único acceso a eventos del pasado, incluidos los acontecimientos históricos, es a través del discurso.

Palabras clave: Coetzee, representación, transgresión, estrategias narrativas, posicionamiento discursivo.

1. Introduction

Coetzee's fiction has generated a wide range of scholarly research and his refusal to declare his political position on issues concerning post-apartheid South African reality has challenged critics to decipher the enigmatic meaning of his narrative strategies. His works convey the author's continuous interest in overcoming binary logic and constitute innovative sites of transgression and contestation not only to the ideological and social basis of colonial discourse, but also to realism as a form traditionally related to hierarchy. My study of his representational literary devices is based on the presumption that the relationship between the author's ideological and political position and his work is not one of resemblance; it is fragmentary, complex and more partial than some critics and readers may wish to see. Ashcroft's (2001: 9) idea that «the identity of the postcolonial intellectual is no longer structural but discursive» means that Coetzee's location as a postcolonial intellectual is made visible by analyzing and interpreting the discursive strategies he adopts. Although Coetzee avoids explicit ideological positioning, his narratives show the author's involvement in a creative process in which the representation of his vision of past events and present reality articulates his engagement with social transformation. We should not forget that the struggle over representation is essential in the struggle of colonized peoples to regain agency over the creation and consolidation of their identity.

Coetzee recognizes the responsibility of the writer for the discursive construction of reality and his self-reflexive fiction draws our attention to the power and the complexity of meaning production. Thus, the author pushes the limits

of the narrative text to reveal its constraints and to offer an ethical alternative to the political engagement that some critics demand. The choice of the writer to opt out of the political dualism and defend a third position, one that is centered around the responsibility for the «other», is a clear expression of his ideological position. Coetzee is aware of his moral responsibility, as are those of his characters who create reality through words, like Dostoevsky, Elizabeth Costello, or Susan Barton.

Derek Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading. Literature in the Event* (2004) is a crucial contribution to the current debate on Coetzee's work from ethical perspective. He examines Coetzee's fiction within the modernist tradition with special attention to the importance of the «relation between ethical and political decisions» (Attridge, 2004 *a*: x). In «Coetzee in Context [Review of *A Story of South Africa*, Gallagher]», he argues that

The haunting power to which readers often testify is the effect of a writing that refuses to subordinate form and technique to content, while ensuring that form and technique are never deployed purely for their own sakes. Here lies the particular difficulty of doing critical justice to Coetzee's fiction; to concentrate too narrowly on language and narrative method is to undervalue his work's close engagement with the history of our times, while to overemphasize that engagement is to lose sight of what makes us read and re-read this set of texts in preference to many others with a similar historical involvement. (Attridge, 1993: 321)

In his study *J. M. Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993), David Attwell claims that «J. M. Coetzee's first six novels constitute a form of postmodern metafiction» and explores Coetzee's novels «in the nexus of history and text», emphasizing «the *tension* between these polarities». For Attwell (1993: 1-3), the author tends towards «a reflexive examination of the constitutive role of language in placing the subject within history». He describes «various forms of the relationship between *reflexivity* and *historicity*» and reads Coetzee's work «as a form of situational metafiction».

Another prominent scholar, Dominic Head (2004: 19), argues that Coetzee draws on modernism to develop «his own brand of postmodernist expression», which is «both an extension of modernism, and a challenge to it», a challenge, «crucial to the dialectic of any ethically oriented postmodernism». In this sense, we may say that most of the monographs on Coetzee examine his fiction from an often contradictory postmodern perspective. One of the most important critical studies in recent years that focuses on Coetzee's stylistic experiments with the form of the novel is Patrick Hayes' *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel. Writing*

and Politics After Beckett (2010). For Hayes (2010: 3-4), «the crucial effect of Coetzee's prose lies in the way it tries to de-homogenize the concepts that differently positioned readers bring to the text, and thereby to hold open, and place in dialogue, divergent legacies of political thinking» and his «complex engagement with the form of the novel should be understood as an attempt to find a way out [...] that does not simply flatten literature into politics».

In what follows, I examine the wide variety of literary devices Coetzee employs in representation, grounding my study on Bill Ashcroft's (2001: 4-5) claim that

Positioning is, above all, a matter of representation, of giving concrete form to ideological concepts. Representation describes both the site of identity formation and the site of *struggle* over identity formation. [...] Today the means of representing cultural identity includes the whole range of plastic and visual arts, film and television and, critically strategies for *consuming* these products. Hence, transformation, which describes one way of viewing cultural identity, also describes the strategic process by which cultural identity is represented.

I intend to show that the choice of narrative techniques, perspectives and voices reflects the author's response to the themes he addresses in his fiction and the ethical questions he raises. These narrative strategies foreground the subjective constructedness of reality – present and past. Challenging the readers' expectations of the meaning of his narrative, Coetzee involves them into a unique experience of deciphering, interpreting, and in a way transgressing the limits of totalitarian ideologies. My criticism is motivated by the desire to prove that representation should be interpreted as a means for discursive positioning and that the transformative effect of Coetzee's fiction can be understood by effectively examining the creative and productive capacity of the narrative strategies he adopts.

2. Subjectivity: representation and form

Self-reflexiveness as one of the most significant features of postmodern metafiction clearly draws our attention to the subjectively constructed and subjectively interpreted narrative text. Coetzee's fiction enacts the contradictory relation between words and their referents, undermining the belief that narrative can represent reality in an objective way. He develops a new form of fragmentary text that offers multiple contestatory elements without providing

a reliable way out of what seems to be a trap of subjectivity. His cultural allegiance «involves working into fiction nothing less than the notion that language is a primary, constitutive element of consciousness and of culture at large» (Attwell, 1993: 10).

The division of his novels into fragments that often fracture the line of thought has a strong effect on the overall perception of his works, that are read as a chain of experiences rather than a story with a beginning and an end. Fragmentation also affects time and time sequencing. This narrative strategy is employed to a greater or lesser extent in all his novels with some variations. *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and *Slow Man* (2005) are divided into very short chapters. In both novels, fragments of narrative reflect the struggle of their protagonists to face an experience that threatens to destroy their lives. In *The Master of Petersburg*, a fictional Dostoevsky gets involved in a frenetic sequence of encounters with people who knew his stepson, Pavel, in an attempt to find out the truth about his death. At the same time through a series of brief and intensive sexual encounters with his landlady, Anna Sergeevna, he tries to find comfort. The chapters of the novel have short titles, in most cases they correspond to a character Dostoevsky meets in his search for the truth: «Maximov», «Anna Sergeevna», «Matryona», «Ivanov», «Nachae», «Isaev», «Stavrogin». The choice of titles increases the feeling of fragmentation and reveals the importance of this strategy for the understanding of the novel. Twenty chapters mark the steps of Dostoevsky's journey towards self-discovery. They resemble small pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that the protagonist has to assemble to get to the truth. The puzzle is a picture of his son's life, but it is also a picture of his own past and present. However, there seems to be always a missing piece that suggests the impossibility of completion and closure. The novel ends with Dostoevsky immersed in a kind of delirious writing, which is his salvation and his perdition.

He sits with his pen in his hand, holding himself back from a descent into representations that have no place in the world, on the point of toppling, enclosed within a moment in which all creation lies open at his feet, the moment before he loosens his grip and begins to fall. (Coetzee, 1994: 241)

By choosing to end the story with an act of creation, Coetzee blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality to show that the act of writing a text is an act of creating reality. In other words, he highlights the subjective constructedness of reality.

In the Heart of the Country (1977) is divided into very short, numbered paragraphs. Some of them are as short as one sentence, like chapter 125

that reads: «The cups have not yet been washed» (Coetzee, 1999: 71). Thus, the reader's knowledge about the events is produced by decoding a chain of thoughts and events. The structure does not suggest a natural process and a natural flow of thought. The sequence of narratives told by the protagonist, Magda, often seems chaotic, moving forward and backward in time and destabilizing our assumption that we can reach the truth. Derek Attridge (2004 *b*: 663) argues that

This simple device announces from the outset that we are not to suspend disbelief as we read, that our encounter with human lives, thoughts, and feelings is to take place against the background of a constant awareness of their mediation by language, generic and other conventions, and artistic decisions.

The destabilizing effect of fragmentation and subsequent numbering is especially felt on the time as a marker unifying the narrative. Time is suspended as experiences are told in the present tense, creating immediacy that shortens the gap between the protagonist and the reader. The breaking of the flow of time into short episodes results in a distortion of the natural perception of the development of the plot over time and offers an infinite number of interpretations. The reader is aware that by carefully tracing the correspondence between the illogical fragments and «reality», he is actively involved in the construction of Magda's world. The typographic experiment of numbering highlights the text's linguistic condition.

Another way of dealing with the complex textual model that reveals Coetzee's concern with representation and the rigidity of realism as a form are hybrid texts that foreground the necessity of diversity in order to avoid dual thinking sustained by power structures. His ideas on realism as a form of representation are clearly stated in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). In her first lecture, Costello claims that «Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things» (Coetzee, 2004 *b*: 9). The novel is a fine example of hybrid text, where narratives about the protagonist life, her trips and encounters with different people combine with her lectures. While Derek Attridge (2004 *a*: 194) assumes that Coetzee «had no long-term plan when writing early Costello pieces of combining them into something on a larger scale», Eckard Smuts (2009: 69) analyzes the novel focusing on «the implications for subjective authenticity of the limits imposed by the structural necessities of representation, and how Coetzee deals with the totalitarian propensities of structure by rendering his text self-reflexively aware of them». In his review of *Elizabeth Costello*, James Wood (2003: 15) claims that «The

frame story allows Coetzee to share ideas while obscuring his overt possession of them. That he chooses to read a fiction in a lecture hall rather than a lecture enables him to pose the unspeakable instead of talking about the impossibility of speaking it». I would agree with Smuts that the lectures allow the writer to address a wide variety of issues that vary from realism as a form, to «The Problem of Evil». In Lesson 4, «The Lives of Animals», Coetzee exposes the cruelty towards animals from a humanist perspective, challenging the reader's capacity to feel empathy by comparing the slaughtering of animals by the food industry to the death camps where millions of people were exterminated by the Nazis. By showing the reaction of Costello's audience to her lectures, Coetzee suggests that his ideas might meet a similar reaction by readers and critics. He manages to break the barrier between academic discourse and fiction and his description of Costello and her relations with her son, her most intimate story about being raped when she was a young girl, and, finally, her refusal to claim truth in «At the Gate» reinforce her arguments and help the reader understand her position.

Diary of a Bad Year (2007) is another brilliant example of hybrid text. It is a polyphonic structure that deals with multiple themes simultaneously. Each page is divided initially into two, then three spaces, separated by lines. In the upper part of each page Coetzee places a number of essays on topics such as «On democracy», «On terrorism», «On the slaughter of animals», under the common name «Strong opinions», essays, which a South African novelist named J. C. is writing for a German publisher. The second narrative line delineates J. C. 's thoughts and feelings about his relationship with his young and beautiful neighbour, Anaya. The text at the bottom of the page is Anaya's story of her relationship with Alun, her boyfriend, and also with J. C. Her storyline includes her comments on some of the issues addressed in the essays. In «Time, Narrative, Life, Death, and Text-Type Distinctions: The Example of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*», H. Porter Abbott (2011: 190) claims that

And though it is impossible to hear the texts literally as music, there are themes and motifs in the essays and in the two narrative threads that repeatedly chime or play off against each other in the three levels. Finding a non-textual analog like music is in effect a way of sidestepping the whole issue of identifying the text's dominant.

The structure is symmetrical, as the three texts run in parallel, but at the same time asymmetrical, as by placing the essays in the upper part, Coetzee privileges the argumentative text and highlights the opinions expressed there.

It is impossible for the reader to remain passive when faced with the choice of the sequence of reading. The choice to follow the conventional direction of reading, page after page, or to read the three storylines separately influences the interpretation of the importance of these multiple contrasting and complementing each other texts.

In *Dusklands* (1974), Coetzee exposes the process of ideological construction of historical narrative by showing that the nature of our knowledge is determined by the representation and interpretation of historical events. He juxtaposes fictional and documentary texts to emphasize the role of myth and mythmaking involved in the production of ideological beliefs that do not need any factual justification. The novel comprises two parts: «The Vietnam Project» and «The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee». In both of them the author exposes colonial self-representation by incorporating in the first part what seem to be documents based on facts. The second part parodies the claim of historical narrative for truth by contrasting Jacobus Coetzee's account of his journey with the appendix consisting of the «original» deposition of 1760 by Jacobus Coetzee. «The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee» is edited, with an Afterword, by S. J. Coetzee and translated by J. M. Coetzee. Teresa Dovey (1987: 18) argues that «J. M. Coetzee's stance as a translator of the three accounts of Jacobus Coetzee's journey is a means of drawing attention to the work of reconstruction going on here [...]». To support her argument she quotes Coetzee (in Dovey, 1987: 18), who claims that «just like the process of translation, the process of reading is a process of constructing a whole for oneself out of the datum of the printed text, of constructing one's own version of the poem». The motif of the translator as a metaphor of the power of discourse in creating history is also present in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) when the Magistrate translates for Colonel Joll the unfamiliar script written on the surface of wooden slips belonging to the people inhabiting the area «long before the western provinces were annexed and the fort was built» (Coetzee, 2004 a: 15). That moment reminds of Linda Hutcheon's (1992: 24) idea that «the only 'genuine historicity' becomes that which would openly acknowledge its own discursive, contingent identity». Our reading determines the way we acquire knowledge about history. That is what the Magistrate means when he tells Colonel Joll that

[The slips] form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of Empire – the old Empire [...]. (Coetzee, 2004 a: 122)

In «The Novel Today» Coetzee (1988: 3) himself makes a clear allusion to his understanding of history and its relation to his experiments with the form of the novel. He advocates for

a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history [...] a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words demythologising history.

3. Negotiating contradictions: representation and characters

One of the narrative strategies characteristic of Coetzee's fiction is its heavy reliance on characters rather than on plot. Such is the case of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Susan Barton in *Foe*, Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*. Works like *The Master of Petersburg*, *Slow Man* and *Life & Times of Michael K* are based on and constructed around their main characters. A brief examination of the techniques adopted by Coetzee to shape his characters situates them as the locus of creation of textual meaning.

In his article «Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J. M. Coetzee's Early Fiction», Derek Attridge examines the figures of «otherness», figures like the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Friday in *Foe*, and Vercueil in *Age of Iron*. He claims that to convey the idea that these figures «resist the discourses of the hegemonic culture» «Coetzee has used a variety of formal devices that disrupt the realistic surface of the writing, reminding the reader forcibly of the conventionality of the fictional texts and inhibiting any straightforward drawing of moral or political conclusions» (Attridge, 2004 b: 655). Most of his protagonists embody «otherness»; they are excluded and marginalized by society for some reason. He understands that the complexity of traumatic and post-traumatic experiences is difficult to represent, hence his characters are created within a space that maintains a fragile balance between representation and that which cannot be represented.

Thus, the starting point for the examination of Coetzee's characters should be the question of representation, its role in the construction of «truth» by the colonial power, and its role in the construction of the identity of the excluded «other». He shows that myths are based on the idea that stories can represent

reality and when society starts to doubt about this possibility, power discourse is undermined and eroded. A similar approach applies to the representation of his characters. As Linda Hutcheon (2002: 32) argues, «it is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but rather that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation – that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it».

In *Dusklands*, Coetzee is concerned with the ideologically biased language with which racial and gender alterity are represented. By exposing the constructedness of the identity of the «other», he reveals the cultural and social stereotypes behind the «objectivity» of power discourse. Endowed with the authority of discourse, Eugene, the mythmaker, describes the pictures of the victims of the American soldiers with cynical contempt:

One's heartstrings may be tugged by photographs of weeping women come to claim the bodies of their slain; a handcart bearing a coffin or even a man-size plastic bag may have its elemental dignity; but can one say the same of a mother with her son's head in a sack, carrying it off like a small purchase from the supermarket? I giggle. (Coetzee, 1983: 15-16)

In «The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee» the Hottentots are described in similar terms. Homi Bhabha (2006: 66) claims that «in the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image – missing person, invisible eye, Oriental stereotype – is confronted with its difference, its Other». Coetzee's characters are often traumatized and sometimes physically deformed, but he avoids unitary representation of the victim and offers a complex picture of tormented, alienated from society and increasingly isolated people.

Brian May (2001: 394) explores the significance of imperial and colonial bodies in Coetzee's early fiction and claims that the author creates characters whose bodies are not «critical, let alone creative», they «suffer a dissolution of the self». Characters like the barbarian girl (*Waiting for the Barbarians*), Michael K (*Life & Times of Michael K*), Friday and Susan (*Foe*) are enveloped in mystery and impossible to categorize. At times their motives and actions remain inexplicable for the reader. In the second part of *Life & Times of Michael K*, the medical officer who takes care of Michael K in a rehabilitation camp makes an attempt to understand him in order to help him recover, but the protagonist refuses to tell his story and to explain the motives for his acts. In a similar way, Susan chooses to reveal only those events of her life before her arrival on the island that align with the story she would like to see published.

By including references to Defoe's novel *Roxana* (1724), the author suggests that there might be some elements she hides from the reader, mysterious absence that remains unresolved. While Susan Barton seems to adapt reality to her story, Friday is forcefully muted, i. e. he is unable to tell the truth about his mutilation and about his relationship with Cruso. Like the Magistrate, who tries to decipher the marks of torture left on the body of the barbarian girl by questioning her, in a desperate attempt to obtain the missing part of her story, i. e. Friday's own account of his past, Susan Barton tries to communicate with him through music and dance and then tries to teach him how to write. Both fictional characters and readers eventually empathize with those in pain without necessarily understanding their motives, which is one of Coetzee's greatest achievements.

In a series of portraits Coetzee reflects on the image of the alienated person. He describes not only those discriminated for race or gender, like the barbarian girl (*Waiting for the Barbarians*) and Magda (*In the Heart of the Country*), not only those like the Magistrate (*Waiting for the Barbarians*) and Michael K, who decide to challenge the status that society has attributed to them, but also those, like Dostoevsky (*The Master of Petersburg*), Elizabeth Costello (*Elizabeth Costello*), and Señor C. (*Diary of a Bad Year*), who seem to have certain power and privilege. It is interesting to note that the last three characters are writers and by revealing their doubts and contradictions, their moral responsibility for the «other», their awareness of the power of discourse, and their refusal to position themselves within the binary logic of politics, Coetzee foregrounds the complex process of knowledge production. His characters also show writers as self-reflective and engaged in self-knowledge as part of the creative process.

Coetzee's protagonists frequently appear involved in contradictions, for they are not conceived as one-dimensional characters endowed with either negative or positive features. It is interesting to note that those characters with whom the reader empathizes are to a different extent unlovable. In *Disgrace* (1999), David Lurie, a professor at a university in Cape Town seduces and forces a young student of his to have sexual relations with him. Even later, when his own daughter is gang raped and he is beaten and humiliated by the perpetrators, he does not see his relationship with the young student as sexual harassment. It is his work at an animal clinic, where he witnesses vulnerability, suffering and despair, that transforms him. A different transformation occurs when the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* becomes gradually aware of the suffering of the prisoners and later he himself becomes a victim of torture. In *Foe*, Susan Barton has an ambiguous relationship with the slave Friday. She

is his master, but at the same time she intends to help him and reveal the truth about his mutilation. Magda (*In the Heart of the Country*), whose loneliness drives her to have sexual encounters with her servant Hendrik, develops a contradictory relationship with him based on uncontrollable desire, humiliation and violence. Similar to Susan's story, Madga's narration is full of gaps and contradictions that the reader has to interpret and solve. For one of the crucial moments of the novel – her sexual encounter with Hendrik – she offers two different versions and the reader is made to wonder which one is «true to reality». Coetzee reflects on the process of creation of reality through narrative and offers the reader the possibility to take an active part in this process. Sue Kossew (1996: 14-15) analyzes Coetzee's literary strategies that place the act of writing itself under interrogation. She claims that «This has obvious effects on choice of narrative structures, narrative voice, point of view and style» and as realism has been «associated with omniscience and patriarchy: provisionality becomes a more acceptable mode of discourse, and power is handed back to the reader» and that in a certain way this is «where post-colonial and postmodernist theories intersect». For her, «both writing and reading can, therefore, be seen as acts of resistance» (Kossew, 1996: 14-15).

4. Reformulating legitimation: representation and discourse

Intertextuality is a sophisticated narrative technique widely used in post-modern fiction. It has taken a variety of forms since the development of the concept in the late 1960s by Julia Kristeva. Generally speaking, it establishes a dialogue between texts, enriches and transforms the meaning of the original work and opens up the new text to an infinity of interpretations challenging the idea of a single legitimate meaning. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The novel has been read by most critics as a postcolonial and feminist response to dominant discourse. As part of her memoir, Susan Barton tells the story of Cruso and his mute slave Friday and the life the three of them share on a deserted island. A writer, Foe, helps her shape her memories to the taste of the potential readers. Naming the author of Susan Barton's memoir *Foe*, after Daniel Defoe, clearly points to the constructedness of reality and suggests that the reader does not have an access to the truth as, for him, reality exists only within the text and the text is the only reality he will know. Said that, there are several enigmas in *Foe* that have resulted in a great variety of critical studies and interpretations. Cruso, the master, does not seem to be interested in telling his own version of the story and the secret

of Friday's muteness remains unresolved, rendering Susan's story incomplete and unreliable. Rather than retelling the original story from the perspective of the oppressed, Coetzee offers his vision on the creative process itself, on the power, but also on the limitations of discourse. Coetzee's narrative does not aim at offering a different version of the same story, but at raising questions about whose discourse should be considered legitimate, given the fact that two of the characters remain silent, Susan decides to tell only some parts of her past omitting the truth about her daughter, her narrative is shaped by a writer, Foe, and, in the end, her voice is replaced by that of an anonymous narrator and is dissolved in the darkness of the ocean.

The Master of Petersburg is another interesting example of intertextuality. Coetzee's fictional character is called Dostoevsky and is a well-known writer. The author alludes through a complex web of connections not only to some life facts about the Russian writer, but also to some of his works. Fictional characters and historical facts blend to show that truth is out of our reach. *Elizabeth Costello* contains a number of references to authors and literary works. Costello, who like the protagonist of *The Master of Petersburg* is a writer, refers to a story by Franz Kafka about an ape that was taught to speak. This reference constitutes the base of her case against the claims of realism, as a narrative form, that it is a truthful representation of reality. Costello argues that «There used to be a time when we knew. We used to believe when the text said, 'On the table stood a glass of water'». «But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems» (Coetzee, 2003: 19). The story of Kafka's ape is later quoted by Costello when she advocates the value of hybridity as a form of resistance to uniformizing thought, an idea widely discussed and defended by postcolonial scholars. Kafka's story is not the only intertextual reference Coetzee relies on to expose the cruelty against animals and in favour of universal humanism as the highest ethical value. The most impressive and also the most criticized is the author's allusion to the Holocaust. Costello compares animal cruelty to concentration camps:

Denunciation of the camps reverberates so fully with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse that it is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison I am about to make. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals. (Coetzee, 2003: 64-5)

The reference to the Holocaust as a paradigmatic instance of suffering, as a measuring stick with which other experiences of massive violence are compared and contrasted has become frequent with the development of trauma studies.

An extraordinary example of the use of intertextual self-reference as a narrative device is Coetzee's *Slow Man*, where the author subversively introduces Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of his previous novel. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, this technique is taken to extreme and the section comprising a number of philosophical essays on topics that vary from Machiavelli and Kurosawa to boredom and compassion is entirely built on intertextual references. In this work, like in *Elizabeth Costello*, references legitimize and reinforce the «strong opinions» of their author.

A powerful device that foregrounds the ambiguous nature of discourse and its inherent ideological status is the introduction of unreliable narrators, whose contradictory stories involve the reader into an exploration of the factors that determine who you can trust and how you acquire knowledge. One of the techniques Coetzee applies in *Foe*, *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* is to describe the same event more than once, each time in a different way and the reader is left to wonder which description he should accept. Teresa Dovey (1987: 17) argues that

In *Dusklands* repetitions is adopted as a strategy, a strategy of subversion which, while the novel participates in the discursive field of historiography, allows it at the same time to deconstruct certain assumptions implicit in alternative historiographical methods, amongst these the concept of history itself.

Magda (*In the Heart of the Country*) is an interesting example of unreliable narrator, an example that needs a special attention. Magda «is not discursive – she is discourse [...] So entirely is Magda's consciousness constituted and circumscribed by words that often she seems to turn from agent, an 'I' who creates, into language's own passive creation, the objective 'me' bereft of all agency» (May, 2001: 394). Brian Macaskill (1994: 460) analyzes the «poetic of middle voice» and points out that

Coetzee writes Magda into being both «real» person and as paper entity, shaping her – and allowing her to shape herself – between the demands of verisimilitude valued by historical materialism and the discursive play practice by the poststructural theories of language.

The problem of authorship in *Dusklands* and *Foe*, the highly controversial vision of the creator of stories in *The Master of Petersburg* and *Elizabeth Costello*, and the description of narrators like Jacobus Coetzee (*Dusklands*) and Magda (*In the Heart of the Country*) as unreliable delegitimize the domi-

nant discourse and avoid dual thinking. In «'Miracles of Creation': Animals in J. M. Coetzee's Work», Josephine Donovan (2004: 89) examines Coetzee's choice of Elizabeth Costello to voice some of his strong opinions on the need for universal humanism and argues that »Yet, that he chooses as his mouthpiece so unauthoritative a voice suggests perhaps a realization of how marginalized and subversive her position is«.

Some of the most powerful characters that bring the stories of the oppressed to light are, in fact, silent. Friday (*Foe*), who is «represented, through the narration of Susan Barton, as unknowable» (Graham, 2002: 11), the barbarian girl (*Waiting for the Barbarians*), and Michael K (*Life & Times of Michael K*) remain a mystery to those, like Susan Barton, the Magistrate and the medical officer, who try to decipher the meaning of their silence. Instead of distancing the reader from these characters, what is gained is an empathic connection with them, awareness and recognition of their perspective. The empathic response that Coetzee's silent protagonists produce goes beyond understanding and compassion and is a deliberate choice of the reader to feel with the vulnerable and to stay out of judgment.

5. Broadening the scope of enquiry: representation and narrative frame

Coetzee's innovative approach to the temporal and spatial organization of his narratives marks a challenge to the notion of time as a fixed course of events and spatial dimensions as an objective reflection of reality. His narrative strategies disrupt the dependency between time and space and undermine the belief of the reader in the possibility of a rational perception of the world. The lack of stable time markers, causality, and sequence result in fragmentation and involve the reader into the powerful experience of interpreting the fictional world and imagining an alternative reality. In *Time, Space, and Perversion. Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995) Elizabeth Grosz (1995: 97) claims that

representations of space have always had – and continue to have – a priority over representation of time. Time is represented only insofar as it is attributed certain spatial properties [...] there is an historical correlation between the ways in which space (and to a lesser extent, time) is represented, and the ways in which subjectivity represents itself.

It seems to me that the narrative strategies Coetzee adopts to explore the relation space-time and its effect on the reader in many ways resemble Grosz's definition of this relation. *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* are two

examples of narrative where space is assigned a specific task in the representation of historical events related to American imperialism in Vietnam and Western colonialism. Coetzee analyzes the notion of borders – real and imaginary – between the empire and the land inhabited by «barbarians». Borders not only delimit territories but also relate to a strong sense of belonging that shapes the identity of oppressor and oppressed. Border crossings are depicted as acts of transgression accompanied by extreme violence. In the second part of *Dusklands*, Jacobus Coetzee undertakes a journey «beyond the Great River» that «forms the northern boundary of the land of the Little Namaquas» (Coetzee, 1983: 63). After his initial attempt to conquer Namaquas lands «peacefully», patronizing the local people and trying to buy their acceptance and respect, there is a confusion, then – tension and, finally, a violent clash between the two parties. As a result, Jacobus Coetzee is injured and looked after by those whose lands he is trying to invade. His feverish delirium reflects both his vision of colonization and the transformation he is undergoing under the effect of his contact with «otherness», his penetration into the «heart of darkness»:

In the wild I lose my sense of boundaries. This is a consequence of space and solitude. [...] I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through wilderness and ingesting it. Destroyer of wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. [...] I am a transparent sac with a black core full of images and a gun. (Coetzee, 1983: 78-9)

His encounter with «otherness» only increases, if at all possible, Jacobus Coetzee's contempt for Namaqua people and his belief in the invincibility of the colonizer. His journey into their lands, his second border crossing, is a brutal enactment of his most perverse imperialistic ideas of grandeur: «For months [he] had nourished [himself] on this day, which [he] had populated with retribution and death. On this day [he] would return as a storm-cloud casting the shadow of [his] justice over a small patch of the earth» (Coetzee, 1983: 101). Jacobus Coetzee's aggression on the Namaqua village parallels the torturing and massacring of Vietnamese people by American soldiers in the first part of the novel.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the construction of space is clearly politicized. A fortified outpost, inhabited by representatives of the empire, symbolizes the colonial power, surrounded by a territory inhabited by «barbarians». It is not difficult to identify the center/margin metaphor widely discussed by scholars involved in postcolonial studies. The «outside» is unknown, unknowable, absent from history and the Magistrate's efforts to decipher the poplar slips containing an ancient script prove futile. In «Border Crossings: Self and Text»,

Sue Kossew (2009: 62) argues that «where binaries and boundaries mark out difference and separate one entity from another with the certainty of conviction, the process of unsettling these certainties draws attention to the constructiveness of these divisions».

When the Magistrate decides to take the barbarian girl back to her people, he undertakes a long and dangerous journey involving border-crossing and a brief encounter with some representatives of the local tribes. His journey is the completion of his attempt to understand the «other» and to redeem himself after years of service to the Empire. The act of border-crossing and penetrating deep into the space marked for «otherness» is profoundly transformative. Unlike Jacobus Coetzee, the Magistrate's empathy with the suffering «barbarians» marks him for «otherness» in the eyes of the townspeople and he is humiliated and tortured on his return. Coetzee proves that «the relation of domination and subordination constituting oppression are more complicated than the occupation of fixed, stable positions of power and powerlessness or centrality and marginality» (Grosz, 1995: 209).

It is interesting to examine the domestic space that seems to represent the conflict between the inner and the outer space in some of Coetzee's novels. For Magda (*In the Heart of the Country*), Elizabeth Curren (*Age of Iron*), and Paul Rayment (*Slow Man*), it becomes a kind of prisonlike trap. David Attwell (2008: 229) suggests that

Place in J. M. Coetzee's writing is seldom just *home*, in any comfortable sense, nor is there the process of re-familiarization that one finds in so much postcolonial writing that answers metropolitan representations of colonial space. On the contrary, place in Coetzee is a site of epistemological dualisms, of failed self/other relationship, of incommensurability, of aesthetic destruction [...].

In the three novels mentioned above there is a sensation that the space the protagonists inhabit shrinks further to identify with their body, a body in pain. Their perception of the world is reduced to and determined by the subjective image they have of their own body; they are confined to a space that mirrors their body and are unable to close the physical and physiological gap between in and out. Magda feels her body is in a way incomplete and assumes that through a sexual intercourse with her servant she might «become a woman» and achieve completeness. Her desperate attempt to break free from the prison that her home and her body represent only increases her vulnerability and deepens her loneliness. Paul Rayment, whose leg has been amputated after a road accident, feels incomplete and considers that if he could prove his manliness

through a sexual encounter with a blind woman he meets in the lift of a hospital, he would be able to overcome his traumatic experience and get some relief. As a result, his poignant frustration re-emerges to show that this experience is only another enactment of his relation with the surrounding reality. Elizabeth Curren (*Age of Iron*) is suffering from cancer and is slowly dying in her home, alone and lonely, accompanied by a homeless man, who has taken shelter in her garden. Coetzee explicitly compares Elizabeth's house to her ailing body:

The house is tired of waiting for the day, tired of holding itself together. The floorboards have lost their spring. The insulation of the wiring is dry, friable, the pipes clogged with grit. The gutters sag where screws have rusted away or pulled loose from the rotten wood. The rooftiles are heavy with moss. A house built solidly but without love, cold, inert now, ready to die. (Coetzee, 1990: 13)

Spaces in Coetzee's novels and the spatial organization of his narratives overcome the limitations of language, challenge categorization, and induce the active involvement of the reader into the process of meaning creation.

6. Conclusion

In my analysis of Coetzee's works I have examined the narrative techniques that the author adopts to foreground the linguistic status of the reality represented in fiction. He allows the reader to participate in the textual game by interpreting the multiple and sometimes ambiguous meanings conveyed in his novels. His crafted prose breaks the limitations of discourse by challenging and exposing the impossibility of realism as a literary form to represent reality. His novels are based on personal, often traumatic, experiences and a close reading shows that although he addresses many of the issues related to colonialism and post-apartheid reality and exposes the power of discourse to influence social relations, he manages to resist the pressure to position his fiction within a polarized political and ideological context and opts for a humanistic approach to suffering and pain. Writing outside of a binary ideological system does not mean Coetzee's critical position is not consistent. The transformative power of his fiction is not in the direct relation between literature and politics, but in the creative force of the strategies used to represent those issues Coetzee addresses.

The act of transgression has a transformative effect on the reader, who in the process of creating imaginary and real worlds, aware of the problematic

aspects of the text and the complex relation between representation and referent, discovers new aesthetic forms of interrogating the signifying system that constitutes reality.

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