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Narrative authority in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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This paper explores the complex nature of narrative authority in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, set in an apartheid South Africa at a moment of extreme political crisis. At first glance, it seems as though Mrs. Curren's ability to comment on and judge the events of the Emergency is constantly undermined, as Coetzee appears to deliberately place her in a marginalized position that cannot claim any real authority over the events she witnesses. However, reading the novel through the critical lens of Coetzee's 1996 essay on Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*, it appears that in this novel Coetzee is in fact in search of a position from which one may tell the truth from the outside, without inserting oneself into the rivalrous binary of political oppression and resistance that implies an unavoidable taking of sides (i.e. that of Folly itself). In the end, however, Coetzee is forced to admit that this privileged position of objective truth-telling may not in fact exist, that it is only through the subjective discourse of storytelling – a discourse, however, that is no less authoritative for its being a wholly personal act of witnessing – that one can speak the truth. **Key words:** “ek-stasis”, authority, alterity, storytelling.

Benita Parry, in her contribution to the anthology *Writing South Africa*, criticizes J.M. Coetzee for his disengagement from the “politics of fulfillment” in his novel *Age of Iron* (Parry 1998: 162). She argues that by presenting the narrative in the voice of Elizabeth Curren, a white ex-academic speaking from a position of “entrenched cultural authority,” Coetzee fails to subvert the domination of European textual power in colonial discourse (Parry 1998: 151). For Parry, Mrs. Curren's voice is constantly associated with cultural supremacy, while the victims of subjugation in the novel are represented by a silence, a voicelessness that she finds disturbing (Parry 1998: 158). Coetzee is therefore guilty of repeating the very exclusionary colonialist gestures that he himself criticizes, of a silencing of the other that is the unfortunate norm in the chronicle of white South Africa (Parry 1998: 150,163).

The objections that Parry raises, while perhaps extreme, are important to consider in discussing the issue of narrative authority in *Age of Iron*. Terminally afflicted with cancer, almost entirely isolated from the historical reality in which she inches ever closer to death, Mrs. Curren does not appear qualified to pass judgments of right and wrong on either the black revolutionary movement or the brutally repressive policies

of a South African state in extreme crisis. Her denunciations seem to lack any real authority. Yet is this position outside of the conflict (though Mrs. Curren is at times only too present as a spectator at the scene of its enactment) one that is incapable of producing a valid judgment? Is the source of a judgment really the determining factor in its inherent truth value? This question of narrative authority is one with which Coetzee struggles throughout *Age of Iron*, and one to which it is difficult to locate a definitive answer within the text.

An informative departure point for an exploration of Coetzee's somewhat ambiguous treatment of Mrs. Curren's authority is an essay which appears in the collection *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, published nearly six years after *Age of Iron*. Here Coetzee writes about Foucault's unsuccessful attempt to return authority to the discourse of madness, of which he (Foucault) identifies two distinct types. One is given to rivalry and is "certain of its own righteousness," while the other is problematic in that it seeks a position that is external to both conflict and reason from which to pass judgment (Coetzee 1996: 93-94). Coetzee describes the second type of madness, the kind present in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, as "a kind of *ek-stasis*, a being outside oneself", in which one speaks the truth from a position (i.e. that of Folly) that does not know itself to be that of truth (Coetzee 1996: 95). Any assertion made in the name of Folly is inherently suspect to begin with, as is this position outside rivalry that Folly claims for itself. Indeed, Coetzee identifies an "inherent self-defeatingness" in Erasmus' text, showing how this external discourse, once it has achieved any sort of authority, is by default re-inserted into the discourse of political rivalry that it strives to avoid. As Coetzee puts it, in embracing the position of the fool "the power of that position reveals itself, the paradox dissolves, and the rivalrousness of the project is revealed (...) the little phallus grows, threatens the big phallus, threatens to become a figure of law itself" (Coetzee 1996: 98). (Here the "big phallus" refers to the phallogocentric discourse of reason, law, and rivalry.) The impossibility of this position, however, is not grounds for criticism as far as Coetzee is concerned. In fact, the position of *ek-static* madness that Erasmus posits is one that greatly attracts Coetzee. This (im)possibility of telling the truth from outside, of refusing to include oneself in the larger discourse of binary rivalries, is a central concern of much of Coetzee's fiction.¹

While the character of Mrs. Curren cannot simply be read as a reincarnation of Erasmus's Moira (Folly herself), Coetzee's essay can be profitably used to explore the questions of authority that *Age of Iron* raises in reference to its narrative voice. For example, the fact that Coetzee's narrator is a woman, as well as the fact that motherhood is one of the novel's central themes, tempts one to associate *Age of Iron* with the discourse of the "little phallus" (see Ravindranathan 2004). On the other hand, the fact that Mrs. Curren's narrative often seems consciously, if not physically, inserted into the historical reality of the Emergency, makes it difficult to argue that the "big phallus" occupies a position of merely secondary importance in the novel. More

central to the concerns of this essay, however, is Mrs. Curren's (already mentioned) position as spectator to the events of the Emergency and as mouthpiece for the Western literary/critical tradition, a position which it can be argued is not one of cultural authority, but of marginality. In reading *Age of Iron* through the lens of Coetzee's later essay, one should keep in mind Mrs. Curren's assertion that "there is madness in the air here" and attempt to figure out which kind of madness she (or Coetzee) refers to (117).

Mrs. Curren's physical remove from the urgent reality of the emergency state is clearly set-up early in the novel. By characterizing her letter as "words committed to the waves: a message in a bottle," she calls up the image of an island castaway, isolated from the rest of humanity (32). Apart from the tramp Vercueil, who goes and comes as he pleases, her only consistent connection to the outside world is the television, through which she peers as if "down a pipe" at the world outside (27). Yet Mrs. Curren knows that the state broadcasts she tunes in to, the ones that present "a land of smiling neighbors" while glossing over or simply omitting reports of violence and social unrest, cannot be trusted to give an accurate portrayal of external reality (54). Ultimately, as Mrs. Curren admits, she has access only to second-hand accounts of what passes in the townships: "What I know about events in Guguletu depends solely on what Florence tells me and on what I can learn by standing on the balcony and peering northeast; namely, that Guguletu is not burning today, or, if it is burning, is burning with a low flame" (39).

Events on the frontlines are seen in the distance and therefore the force of their real existence can hardly be present for Mrs. Curren. She may as well be watching them on the television. Admittedly, Mrs. Curren herself realizes that her position is almost hopelessly detached from the events of the real, acknowledging that she must fight constantly to "keep up a sense of urgency" (119). Similarly, when Mrs. Curren attempts to remonstrate with Mr. Thabane over the phone, her voice is described as "very tiny and very far away," implying its lack of impact on and authority over the issues it discusses (149). Mr. Thabane's seemingly innocuous comment emphasizes Mrs. Curren's marginality and puts her in her place, that of an outsider looking down the wrong end of a telescope. As she writes to her daughter: "it seems hardly possible to believe there is a zone of killing and degradation all around me. It seems like a bad dream" (119). Significantly, a dream is something that, while it may affect one as real as long as it lasts, is ultimately woken up from and therefore left behind when the light of day once again bathes life in its warm, comforting glow. A dream exists in reality only within the subconscious, not with the immediacy of concrete presence.

But does her admitted detachment from the events she describes and on which she passes judgment serve to neutralize Mrs. Curren's authority as an author? Or is Mrs. Curren's position, as Coetzee allows his readers to obliquely infer from her musings on Hesiod's age of iron, the only one from which to comment on "a time out

of time, heaved up out of the earth, misbegotten, monstrous"? (50). Can she be seen as occupying a position external to the primary, rivalrous discourse, the kind of position that Coetzee so admires in Erasmus' satirical text? Is she actually telling the truth "ek-statically," from the outside, perhaps all the while unaware that she is doing so? One is at least a little tempted to grasp at such an optimistic reading, as does David Attwell in his response to Parry's criticism of Coetzee. Attwell acknowledges the "tenuous historical position" in which Mrs. Curren finds herself, but points, as I have, to the suspension of historical time into which her narrative is allowed to insert itself, enabling her to give alterity the social density that Parry finds lacking in her reading of the novel (Attwell 1998: 175).

However, apart from the impossibility of this enterprise that Coetzee himself identifies in his treatment of Erasmus' project, such a reading of *Age of Iron* is called into question for two significant reasons. First, Mrs. Curren's cocoon-like state is shattered when she drives Florence to one of the squatter camps outside Guguletu and witnesses firsthand the violence that is being perpetrated in the streets. Furthermore, she is repeatedly unable to find words with which to denounce the injustice she bears witness to. Not only is she repeatedly left speechless, but the words she is eventually able to produce with her pen are hedged about with self-doubt. Even Mrs. Curren acknowledges herself to be a dubious source of judgment in this place and time.

Confronted with the reality of life in these camps, the reality of a life and death struggle being waged every day, Mrs. Curren is at a loss not only for answers, but for words themselves. When prompted by Mr. Thabane to speak of the things she has just witnessed, Mrs. Curren falters, replying: "These are terrible sights (. . .) They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now" (98-99). The words may exist, but they do not come readily from her mouth. In response to someone's comment that "this woman talks shit," all Mrs. Curren can do is agree, pleading with the crowd that "to speak of this (. . .) you would need the tongue of a god" (99). The image that such a phrase calls up, however, of the noble fields of Ilium transplanted onto the dirt streets of the township, is one that seems completely out of place when the woman who has created it is uncomfortable uttering the word "heroism," the very word that such a comparison calls for (165).² This is an example of the "liberal-humanist" posturing of which Mrs. Curren acknowledges herself guilty (85). There is no god there to speak the words that must be spoken. Thus the invocation of this classical image where it has no place seems simply to undermine any claim to authority made by a discourse rooted in Western literary tradition.

This misapplication of Western classical tradition is a recurring theme in *Age of Iron*. For example, when Mrs. Curren attempts to remonstrate with the young revolutionary John, she tells him: "if you had been in my Thucydides class (. . .) you might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in time of war" (80).

In addition to the obvious racial and financial impossibilities of this situation, Mrs. Curren ignores the fact that John could perhaps teach her something of what happens "to our humanity in time of war." By suggesting that what John has experienced so viscerally (indeed, she speaks to him as he lies in a hospital bed) can best be studied at a centuries-long scholarly remove is an absurdity. Coetzee recognizes this absurdity, as does John: "he knew and he did not listen, just as he had never listened to any of his teachers" (80). The suggestion in this scene is that, at least for the moment, the time for scholarship has given way to the time for action, the irony of this revelation is deepened by the fact that Thucydides himself was primarily a great man of action. It is Mrs. Curren who here transforms him into a detached observer of human nature. Moreover, the lesson that Mrs. Curren claims to read in Thucydides is without meaning in the context in which she speaks, saying: "it is a great pity when we find ourselves entering upon times like those. We should enter upon them with a sinking heart. They are by no means to be welcomed" (81). There is no comfort in these words, nor is there an exhortation to courageous action and self-sacrifice, only the banality of capitulation and resignation. Mrs. Curren's message of pity is indicative of withdrawal and a certain detached hopelessness, and as such is a perversion of what Thucydides should in truth be used to teach. How then can John be expected to learn from a classical tradition whose teachers offer nothing more than despairing misinterpretations? Mrs. Curren's recourse to classical Greece, far from identifying her with a position of cultural dominance, serves to undermine her speaking authority even further than her physical detachment from the political struggle has already done.

Mrs. Curren's repeated misapplication of Western cultural and literary paradigms to her South African surroundings suggests a peculiar failure of imagination on her part. Her interpretation of events is not essentially unimaginative; it is simply that her imagination seems consistently to lead her in the wrong direction, away from a direct confrontation with the reality she is struggling to come to terms with and towards a casting of events and persons in a light that only creates shadowy misunderstandings. In reflecting on the peculiar names of Florence's children, Hope and Beauty, Mrs. Curren observes that "it was like living in an allegory" (90). She forgets, however, her previous admission that the only reason she knows the girls by their allegorical names is that Florence "does not entrust me with the real name[s]" (37). Mrs. Curren's allegory is therefore empty, pointing not to any deeper meaning but to a lack of inclusion and comprehension on her part. It is also interesting to note that while Mrs. Curren can imaginatively transform Florence into the classical image of "a Spartan-matron," even that of the goddess Aphrodite, she must in the end admit that Florence, flanked even by the allegories of Hope and Beauty, would be singularly unimpressed by her proposed self-immolation (141).

How could it be that this act of symbolic suicide, an act which seems to be the most authoritative one open to Mrs. Curren, would still fail to impress Florence, and by

implication all African observers/judges? While self-immolation is not a classically Western trope, in its ties to an Eastern tradition it is still perhaps hopelessly removed from the South African context in which it would occur. Furthermore, if we continue to read Mrs. Curren's narrative as aiming at a kind of *ek-stasis*, then would not such a public act of political defiance negate that possibility altogether? Would not the spectacle of her burning body reinsert Mrs. Curren's discourse (both her written discourse as well as the symbolic discourse of her suicide) into the rivalrous binary in which one asserts one's own righteousness from the very heart of the conflict?

It seems that Mrs. Curren herself anticipates these or similar objections when explaining to Vercueil why she ultimately does not go through with the suicide. Making an analogy to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, she asks him:

These public shows, these manifestations – this is the point of the story – how can one ever be sure what they stand for? An old woman sets herself on fire, for instance. Why? Because she has been driven mad? Because she is in despair? Because she has cancer? I thought of painting a letter on the car to explain. But what? A? B? C? What is the right letter for my case? And why explain anyway? Whose business is it but my own? (114)

Unable herself to give a definitive explanation for this contemplated suicide, Mrs. Curren ultimately decides that death is a private matter, to be undergone and interpreted away from the gaze of the masses. Furthermore, she shies away from this public exhibition because it is not an act over which she can exercise complete authority. In offering her burning body to the public she will be giving them a symbol, but not one whose interpretation she can comfortably regulate. As the comparison with Hester Prynne's famous marking suggests, the ungrounded allegory of this hypothetically labeled act would give the observer (the reader) an interpretive freedom outside of authorial control. Mrs. Curren, then, apart from an obvious aversion to ending her own life, is reluctant to offer herself up in a manner that is not wholly on her own terms. She refuses to allow herself, even in death, to be swallowed back up by the phallogocentric discourse of binary political and social rivalry that self-immolation would inevitably fuel. By ultimately refusing to act without authority, refusing to insert herself (her death) into this realm of the "big phallus", Mrs. Curren may indeed preserve the tenuous claim to an authority outside itself that we see Coetzee toying with elsewhere.

Yet what authority does a failure to act, for that is what Mrs. Curren's rejection of public suicide ultimately is, command? And what of her failure to speak? Along with its invalidation through the misapplication of foreign cultural tradition, Coetzee also continues to show Mrs. Curren's narrative authority being undermined by a physical inability to speak. One such scene occurs when she visits Guguletu and confronts the white soldiers stationed there, soldiers who have presumably killed Florence's son,

Bheki. Wanting desperately to denounce their acts in some meaningful way, Mrs. Curren is at a loss for words, "bereft of speech," mute (105). In the end, all she can offer is a hollow warning that nothing can be "worse for your souls" than what these young men are doing, an admonition that carries no weight except for she who speaks it (107). As Mrs. Curren herself observes, she is living in a "time not hospitable to the soul," thus undermining her own appeal to such a concept as the basis for just action (130). Similarly, her words of caution to the white policemen: "I am watching you (...) I am watching everything you do," are not enough to stop them from killing John, the young revolutionary who has taken refuge in her backyard servant's quarters (153).³ Through this series of events, Mrs. Curren is portrayed as a mere spectator. She sees and records, but lacks the agency to act in any significant way. Even when present, she is still somehow removed from the events transpiring before her very eyes. Referring to this detached position, Mrs. Curren reflects that "to have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one, is, it seems to me, nothing" (163).

But could this vacuum in which Mrs. Curren feels herself located actually be the position of Folly, a position from which one speaks the truth without knowing it? Does the very fact that opinions in a vacuum carry no weight (as Mrs. Curren observes) keep them safe from that insertion into a rivalrous binary that Coetzee can be seen avoiding at every turn? Again, one is tempted to return to Coetzee's essay on Erasmus in order to locate some kind of authority in Mrs. Curren's narrative. After all, why would Coetzee want to present us with a narrative voice that lacks authority? Is he testing us, and if so are his musings on Folly the right place to look for clues to a possible answer?

David Attwell does not look to Coetzee's piece on Erasmus in his reading, but his interpretation of the novel's problems of authority does indeed counter much of what Parry has said. Attwell takes these reflections of Mrs. Curren's as indicative of what he calls 'polyphony without reciprocity,' recognizing that while Mrs. Curren's is the only voice present in the narrative, there is an unmistakable "self-consciousness about alterity" in *Age of Iron*. He sees Mrs. Curren making several efforts to "engage with what she understands to be the life-world and subjectivity of those who are socially distant from her" (168). Two of the examples that Attwell cites of this "effort to engage" with alterity are Mrs. Curren's visit to Florence's husband's workplace and her subsequent imagination of their life at home in the township. Her insistence that what she describes in a fictional account of their Sunday afternoon "must have happened" (43) is for Attwell an argument against "an alterity so radical that there are no grounds for intersubjective recognition" (Attwell 1998: 170). Attwell sees Coetzee asserting the ability of fiction to refuse to accept the dogma of absolute difference "which has been the bane of everyone's existence in South Africa" (Attwell 1998: 170).

Another instance of Mrs. Curren's conscious registering of alterity comes when she looks at an old family photograph taken in her grandfather's garden in 1918.

Remembering the garden, she is suddenly struck by the realization that the beauty she recalls with such nostalgia was not the work of her grandfather, but that of unseen hands. "If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully? Who are the ghosts and who the presences? 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?" (111) The native gardeners are not seen in the photograph, but their presence is something that the child of two may even then have been dimly aware of. These men hover on the boundary of this particular picture just as they hover around the edges of South Africa's idealized pastoral history.⁴ They represent the marginalized other with whom Attwell sees Mrs. Curren struggling to identify in *Age of Iron*. Yet can this moment qualify as an example of "polyphony" with or without reciprocity, or does it somehow fall short of even that? As she reflects at greater length on the photograph, Mrs. Curren lapses into the Latin text of one of the most famous melodies of the Gregorian chant:

Dies irae, dies illa when the absent shall be present and the present absent. No longer does the picture show who were in the garden that day, but who were not there (...) the fixing did not hold or the developing went further than one would have ever dreamed – who can know what happened? – 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 (111-112).

Skipping forward to the "day of wrath" on which absence and presence will reverse themselves, Mrs. Curren envisions a photograph in which the "occulted" existence of her grandfather's black workers will be restored, their claim to the land reinstated while their white masters fade away to the blurred edges of the frame. But what authority, one must ask, does this imagined restoration of presence possess? In acknowledging the work of occlusion that the original photograph does, can Mrs. Curren really be said to restore these marginalized figures to a place on the film of history? And even if she does succeed in returning them to our field of vision, how can these forgotten laborers, retrieved by her mind alone, be anything more than mute presences? What becomes of these native voices when their bodies are brought back from outside the rectangle and reinserted into our consciousness? And does this reclamation in fact rob these shadowy figures of their own *ek-static* position of judgment? If anything is certain here, it is that while Mrs. Curren is perhaps successful in awakening her reader to the presence of these occluded men, she cannot speak for them, cannot give voice to their judgment, whatever it may be. Attwell is right to see Mrs. Curren engaged in a constant searching after an "other," but the fact remains that her attempts at dialogue with this marginalized presence appear limited, incomplete. Her instinct is correct, but her approach (note again in her slip into Latin the recourse to a Western literary and religious tradition) somehow repeatedly misses the mark.

Perhaps the most forceful example that Attwell cites of Mrs. Curren's successful "commerce with alterity" is her act of writing herself into the final moments of young John's life before he is shot by the police in her backyard. She imagines a moment in which "we face, first he, then I, the great white glare" of the sun, and of the gunfire that snuffs out John's life. Interestingly, Mrs. Curren observes that "his eyes are open and mine, though I write, are shut. My eyes are shut in order to see" (175-176). Attwell interprets the paradoxical image of this blind writing as raising "Coetzee's emphasis on allowing writing to circumvent prevailing socio-economic conditions and to assert an alternative frame of reference," thereby judging Mrs. Curren's attempt to write John's last moments as a successful one (Attwell 1998: 171). There are other possible interpretations, however. For example, could Coetzee be suggesting that the act of creative imagination requires a sort of focus inward, a closing of the eyes to what is external to composition, but at the same time implying a certain blindness to the reality of this external world? In addition, it is important to note that this apparent moment of solidarity comes only in retrospect, after John is dead. This temporal distance, along with the fact that in life John repeatedly resists Mrs. Curren's attempts to reach out to him, makes it difficult to read this as a moment of shared consciousness. Mrs. Curren's (re)writing of John's final moments seems not to be an instance of successful identification with the other, but rather an imposition of her own consciousness of impending death onto this other.⁵

One may in fact read the text of *Age of Iron* as leading inevitably to the death of its narrator, as an act of writing that is meant to prolong the coming of death, but cannot defeat it altogether. The novel/letter ends with the image of Vercueil as the Angel of Death, locked with Mrs. Curren in a final embrace. "I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had" (198).

How does one read this passage? Is it simply Mrs. Curren envisioning the moment of her death and concluding her letter in the way that seems most appropriate, or is it possible that these final words are indeed spoken/written from a position beyond death? Could this in fact be the ultimate space of *ek-stasis*, a space outside of binary rivalries precisely because it is outside life itself? Speaking from a position beyond death, one would presumably be able to claim access to a higher truth than that possessed by any other discourse. Moreover, such an interpretation has significant implications for our reading of the rest of the text as well, since one may choose to read any number of other moments as recorded *ek-statically* once this possibility has been established. There are, however, certain problems with assigning Mrs. Curren this rather desirable narrative position. Mainly, if her text is really a letter that is meant to be sent on to a daughter in America, then such a posteriori additions can only be

made if Vercueil has not in fact complied with her request and mailed the letter. We do not know the fate of Mrs. Curren's letter because it is a detail that lies outside of the text we are given, a detail which could perhaps have been cleared up if its author did indeed continue to write after passing away. Taken most optimistically, then, this final passage appears to be no more than a glimpse of the *ek-static* position that Coetzee is so drawn to, a position which can perhaps be attained for a fleeting moment but in the end proves unsustainable.

In treating this question of narrative authority in *Age of Iron*, it seems to me that Michiel Heyns is closest to the truth in his 2002 article on "An Ethical Imperative in the Postcolonial Novel." Heyns sees Mrs. Curren (and by extension Coetzee) in the difficult situation of writing in an attempt to delegitimize the culture of which they themselves are part (Heyns 2002: 107). He reads Mrs. Curren's frequent inability to speak as a failure to comprehend the dueling "cultures of survival" that dominate the political landscape of her existence. She is unable to negate her own cultural ideology in order to come to terms with the cultural Other. Heyns focuses on Mrs. Curren's description of a time outside of time, "misbegotten and monstrous", as indicative of an ethical void that ungrounds the liberal-humanist notion of humanity in which her thinking is unavoidably rooted, claiming that the novel is quite aware of its narrator's limitations, but is unable to take us past them (Heyns 2002: 108-109). For Heyns, then, *Age of Iron* represents a work of ethical imagination, an "act of faith in the face of despair," in that it presents a world beneath good and evil (like Hesiod's age of iron), in which the ethical imperative of respect for the demands of the other is insufficient (Heyns 2002: 113).

It appears that Heyns is on the right track. Coetzee does indeed seem to be "testing the limits of the liberal-humanist engagement with suffering" on an intellectual level and finding this engagement somehow lacking (Heyns 2002: 109). Yet what other options are available to a writer like Coetzee, notoriously reclusive and un-political? It seems clear that Coetzee is not making a strong claim for the truthfulness or authority of Mrs. Curren's narrative, but he is far from denouncing her attempt to write herself into an understanding of what is going on around her (and despite of her). It is an effort that Coetzee would very much like to see succeed. In the end, however, he is forced to admit the inadequacy of speaking from the position of Folly, a position which knowingly, even laughingly undermines its own authority in the face of the horrific events of the Emergency, events whose condemnation cannot be open to mockery.

If authority does reside within any given discourse, then, it seems that for Coetzee this discourse must be that of storytelling. All ethical claims aside, Coetzee recognizes that the discourse of storytelling occupies a privileged position, allowing certain experiences to remain in an eternally-lived present instead of being the glossed over and filed away by historical discourse. As Mrs. Curren writes to her daughter:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air (. . .) It is my thoughts that you think, my despair that you feel (. . .) To me your sympathies flow; your heart beats with mine (103).

The object of storytelling is not to produce an objective record of events, but to transport the reader to a specific place and time, seen and experienced through a single consciousness. Mrs. Curren recognizes the authority that she claims in the very act of writing, not an authority over objective truth and historical reality, but an authority over her own story. This is not quite the position of Folly, for it recognizes its own place and makes its claim to truth quite explicitly. For Coetzee, the discourse of storytelling must refuse to be swallowed up by that of history, must maintain an autonomous position from which to transcend the binaries of historicist thinking and offer a faithful account of lived experience.⁶ Storytelling, as Coetzee conceives of it, consciously establishes its own rules, and therefore demands the right to be judged on its own terms. If we accept this position, Benita Parry's criticism becomes unfounded. In telling a story, Coetzee is not obligated to undermine traditional colonial discourse, is in fact perfectly free to refrain from overtly entering the forum of rivalrous socio-political debate if he so chooses. Read as an attempt to capture and pass judgment upon the events of the Emergency, we must admit that Mrs. Curren's letter can never be wholly successful. If, however, we read her letter as an exercise in storytelling, an exercise driven by the very personal encounter with an other which she is perhaps never fully able to come to terms with, then we cannot deny Mrs. Curren's narrative a certain authority. It is not the problematically delegitimized authority of the Western or European cultural tradition, but the authority of a marginalized, single voice, a voice whose admitted subjectivity paradoxically enhances the compelling nature of the text it produces.

Notes

1. See Samuel Durrant's essay on "Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J.M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning." Durrant argues that in texts such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* Coetzee actually engages apartheid by keeping a certain distance from its material, historical reality. His narrators are never fully inserted into their own narratives, existing instead as "figures of and for alterity," at the fringes of historical reality and therefore presenting the loss and suffering of apartheid as "untranslatable" and impossible to transcend through literature (Durrant 1999: 432, 434). By refusing to enter the *past-present* binary that allows one to exorcise the materiality of history, Coetzee offers only the possibility of "living through history" indefinitely (460).
2. Mrs. Curren herself acknowledges that "what the times call for is something quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism," but admits that this is "a word that, as I speak it, sounds foreign to my lips. I doubt that I have ever used it before, even in a lecture" (165). The "hero with his heroic status" is, as far as Mrs. Curren is concerned, no more than an "antique naked figure" who is out of place in the world about which she writes (166).

3. Mrs. Curren admits that when she tells John: "I won't let them hurt you, I promise", it is a lie. The truth is, as she herself confesses, that "he was lost, I had no power to save him" (152). Indeed, both Mrs. Curren's words and actions are equally ineffectual. She can do nothing more than watch and listen as John is killed.
4. For a discussion of the occlusion of black labor from the genre of the pastoral in South Africa, see Coetzee's introduction to *White Writing*.
5. Ravindranathan (2004: 8) agrees that "her *a posteriori* identification with John prior to his death is to no small extent informed by her consciousness of the proximity of her own death," adding that "an identification with the Other is enabled only via the fragility and liminality of the anticipation of death. It is difficult to view this as an authentic form of dialogue with the Other; it is, at most, self-reflexive".
6. For a longer discussion of the relation between the discourses of literature and history, see Coetzee's 1987 address, "The Novel Today," given at the *Weekly Mail* book week in Cape Town. Here Coetzee claims that literature must refuse to accept a supplementary relation to the discourse of history, that it must strive to "demythologize]" historical discourse and its traditional claim to primacy (Coetzee 1988: 3).

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