

Crime and sense of Guilt in J M Coetzee's Disgrace

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Abstract

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

Keywords: - J M Coetzee, Crime, Guilt, Violence, Redemption, Isolation

Introduction

In "*Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State*" (1986), one of the essays in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992), J.M. Coetzee interrogates the problem of representing violence in literature. He observes that many South African authors, including himself, reveal "a dark fascination "with tortures and he contends that there are two reasons for their enthralment. The first is that "relations in the torture room provide a metaphor for relations between authoritarianism and its victims" . Here brute force, unlimited power, "legal illegality," operates to destroy the prisoner and break his resistance. Deprived of any rights, the detainee is utterly vulnerable to the oppressor's whim. The torture room, Coetzee writes, "Becomes like the bedchamber of the pornographer's fantasy, where, insulated from moral or physical restraint, one human being is free to exercise his imagination to the limits in the performance of vileness upon the body of another person". The second reason for authors' engagement with brutality is that the torture room "is a site of extreme human experience, accessible to no one save the participants". It is a place that fascinates writers because there is no other access to it than through the imagination. The novelist "creates, in place of the scene he is forbidden to see, a representation of that scene, and a story of the actors in it and how they come to be there". "The dark forbidden chamber," Coetzee continues, "is the origin of all novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state unwittingly creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation.

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

appropriately minor place for the petty secrets of the security system” .The issue is related to selecting an appropriate mode of writing. The historical conditions in South Africa have imposed a duty on artists to document oppression and to commemorate its victims. Realism, with its traditional concentration on the actual conditions of life, with its dedication to verisimilitude and its rejection of idealization, might appear appropriate for this aim. Realism, however, is not an unproblematic mode and produces difficulties that must be solved by authors.

Discussion

The aim of the paper is to examine J.M. Coetzee’s treatment of state-sanctioned violence in his fiction and to trace the strategies he applies in his books. The perspective of over three decades of his writing that we now have makes it possible to discern an evolution of his representations of atrocities and response to the dilemmas he has formulated in his critical essays on violence. The transformations include both the modulation of thematic interests related to violence and the modifications of textual devices applied by Coetzee. The works discussed in the paper – *Dusklands* (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) – do not exhaust the complexity of Coetzee’s explorations of brutality but they seem to illustrate important transitions in his oeuvre.³The interpretation given here proposes to trace trajectory lines discernable in Coetzee’s novels. After his analysis of the sources and manifestations of colonial violence and concentration on tortures and aggressiveness of the perpetrators in his first book, *Dusklands*, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee broadens his perspective and subjects to scrutiny the effects of tortures, both in the individual and the social dimension. He focuses on the victims of tortures with their suffering, pain and reaction to brutality, and on the moral devastation of the community in which abhorrent acts are carried out. *Age of Iron* marks another important shift that relies on his departure from the aggressive mode of writing and ostensible literary stylizations of the early novels towards more realistic narration that responds directly to the actual situation in South Africa. In *Age of Iron* Coetzee examines closely the growth of ethical consciousness of a person living in the times of apartheid during the States of Emergency. *Elizabeth Costello*, in turn, on the meta-fictional level, addresses the problem of the ethics of representation and the personal cost that artists involved in writing about atrocities pay. A recognizable feature of his fiction is Coetzee’s permanent theme of complicity of those who are not directly involved in the actual crimes but whom, on various levels, have their share in oppression and who must cope with their sense of guilt and shame. Reading his novels, one can hardly escape the impression that Coetzee, in particular in his early fiction, is scrutinizing and inspecting radical forms of representing aggressiveness. It is as if he were testing the ways to circumvent and miss, but very narrowly, the risks that depictions of violence entail. Needless today, his luminal strategies do not derive from his unawareness of the traps that such depictions set. Coetzee definitely has the courage to measure him against the hazardous terrain and never tires of searching for the means to express his ideas and to detect aspects of violence inaccessible from other perspectives.

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

But to say that Coetzee keeps away from serious political discussion and that he evades moral judgment of persecutions is to underestimate two important aspects of his use of literary modes alternative to realism: first, the critical force of non-realistic representations and, second, Coetzee’s artistic aims that are not free of political intent. Throughout his work he has been expressing his conviction that literature has the power to rival the political, and not merely to respond to it. He believes that art should not be used as a tool in immediate ideological strife in terms imposed by the political. To perform the task of rivalling history, Coetzee insists, literature must protect and preserve its independent status and delineate the fields of contestation on its own terms. Hence his passionate and spirited are involvement in maintaining literature’s autonomy. Sovereignty of literature is, in his view, the source of its enormous potential, of its power to stimulate not only resistance but

real ethical transformations. With such an understanding of art, Coetzee, throughout his work, has been looking for a medium with which he could address South Africa's anguish and oppose violence in meaningful ways.

Dusklands (1974), his first novel, pursues the aim of diagnosing the sources of colonial violence. Coetzee scrutinizes here the analogy between the brutality that characterized the Dutch colonization of South Africa in the eighteenth century and the aggressive spirit of the American invasion in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. The two stories in *Dusklands*, "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," respond to the oppressive forces of history that impressed themselves upon the social reality of South Africa and the USA – his homeland he decided to leave and the country he wanted to settle in. When he was departing from South Africa at the age of twenty one with the intention of "shaking away the dust of the country from his feet", he could not have anticipated that several years later, in America, he would be confronted with a political situation in some sense comparable to the one that had caused his emigration, that is use of violence as the state's legitimate method to reach its political aims. In *Dusklands* Coetzee schematizes convergence of the historical and the contemporary state-sanctioned violence and explores its relatedness to colonialism. He locates the sources of Western civilization's aggressiveness in the discourses of power that the civilized world produces about themselves to explain and maintain their dominant status. The work, underwritten by Hegelian master-slave dialectic, subjects to analysis the discourses of asserting will and power on the other. In Coetzee's focus are the imperial texts, that is ideologies, and hence the historical reality is not represented mimetically but produced as a linguistic construct. The pseudo-documents, imitative of the historical texts, by means of parody and pastiche recount atrocities committed in the periods. The story of production of Eugene Dawn's commissioned war propaganda report and Jacobus Coetzee's accounts of his pioneering explorations of South Africa are records of pervert brutalities, obscenities and cruelties committed against the subjugated other. Torture, mutilation, rape, extermination, sadistic practices, racial oppression, napalm bombings are narrated in dispassionate tone by the first-person narrators. The effect of this method is, as David Attwell observes, that Coetzee does not merely write about violence: his writings violent.

Conclusion

Coetzee's overt critique of West's treatment of violence and, at the same time, his ambivalence about the nature of evil and violence appear as a conscious and meaningful evasion that shows yet another aspect of representing violence. In the novel Elizabeth "is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed" . And later she adds, "I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into the forbidden places: risks, specifically himself; risks, perhaps all". What Elizabeth addresses here is the author's cost of fictional creation. The problem might be explained in terms of Coetzee's understanding of the process of writing. For Coetzee writing is "a matter of awakening the counter voices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those counter voices in himself". According to this conception, Jolly contends, "writing requires hosting the other, without knowing what the other maybe(come); and if the other becomes evil, then the self – even, or most particularly, the writing-self – may become the agent of evil" .In this perspective, perhaps, the metaphor of the torture chamber, of "the forbidden "Coetzee speaks about in *Doubling the Point*, might be read as the one of the artist who evokes, invokes and activates in himself the counter voices – the voices of the tortured and the torturer, of the oppressed and of the oppressor pornographer who penetrates the body of the victim with the intent of finding out the limits of human experience, of invading the victim, of possessing him As a result, in the process of creation, the artist may be led to territories that, due to their depraving and contaminating potential, he may – although reluctant to accommodate and come to terms with – fear to share with his readers. The problem appears as primarily of ethical nature – of the author's public responsibility for his representations of violence – but not slight, at this point, appears also the artist's personal risk of betrayal. In the contemporary voyeuristic culture where people watch others with curiosity, the writer who undertakes to pursue the truth and not merely entertain the reader exposes himself to the public eye when he lets the voices within himself speak with full force. And even though this artist does not write about his personal, individual experience, he lays bare his innermost self – his writing-self – and by so doing he offers himself to the public gaze. The effect is that he exposes himself in front of the readers, betrays himself and becomes utterly vulnerable.

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