

Père-versions of the Truth
The Novels of J. M. Coetzee

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Père-versions of the Truth
The Novels of J. M. Coetzee

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Contents

Introduction		9
<i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> (1980)		15
<i>Life and Times of Michael K</i> (1983)		37
<i>Foe</i> (1986)		65
<i>Age of Iron</i> (1990)		89
<i>The Master of Petersburg</i> (1994)		119
<i>Disgrace</i> (1999)		159
<i>Slow Man</i> (2005)		196
Autobiography as Fiction: <i>Boyhood</i> (1998), <i>Youth</i> (2002), <i>Summertime</i> (2009)		219
Postscript: <i>The Lives of Animals</i> (1999)		237
Acknowledgments		251
Bibliography		252
Name Index		257
Streszczenie		259
Zusammenfassung		261

He remembers Maximov's assistant and the question he asked: "What kind of book do you write?" He knows now the answer he should have given: "I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places. I follow the dance of the pen."

J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*

Introduction

Most of the novels of J. M. Coetzee are founded on the same structural principle: within the bounds of the narrative an empty space is introduced, an enigma that the narrative will try to unravel but by which it will be ultimately defeated. In his earlier novels, the confrontation between the enigma and the explanatory narrative is played out within the space of the colonial discourse, usually figured in the relation between a victim and a liberal representative of the colonial power abhorring the “everyday” methods of control used by the rulers. In fact, in Coetzee’s writing the inability of the subjugated to express themselves becomes progressively more and more acute: while the barbarian girl does not know how to answer the Magistrate because she does not know what he wants from her (*Waiting for the Barbarians*), in Michael K this inability becomes somehow “naturalised” as he is hare-lipped and “not clever with words” (*Life and Times of Michael K*), and ultimately Friday (*Foe*) is not able to speak because of the paradigmatic (and metaphoric) colonial mutilation of the cutting out of his tongue.

Within the context of the liberal novel discourse this attitude is quite familiar and can be subsumed under the Levinasian approach promulgated by the multiculturalist discourse as a novelistic version of the “respect for the other.” As the victim of colonialism is disadvantaged in all respects, not only being the subject of naked violence and cultural subjugation but also having no means of expressing his predicament (lack of intellectual “tools” to “give voice” to himself), the only respectful attitude towards the victim that the liberal writer can take is to try to present the unfortunate protagonist as the unsurpassable challenge that cannot be overcome by the discourse

of the novelist (ultimately the representative of colonising power). Thus the meaning of the victim remains inaccessible within such discourse, although it leaves its trace there, the trace that will always constitute a challenge. But this is not all, for within the context of such liberal attitude the irretrievable meaning of the victim does not only pose the inaccessible truth as the truth of pain of which it is impossible to speak by definition but this very impossibility seems to radiate a certain transcendence, a certain *human* universal, the properly existential meaning of what it is to be a human being, which can be summarised as “this fragile creature who can be hurt.”

In this context, after a series of “enigmatic” novels, Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* takes an unexpected step: from its narrative the central “inaccessibility” characteristic of the earlier novels vanishes and what appears in its place is the *split* colonised other: on the one hand, the actual violent insurgent against apartheid, on the other, the black alcoholic derelict. What is more, these two incompatible attitudes are confronted by a proper representative of the liberal discourse complete with the sanction of the ideal of “harmonious” humanity bestowed on her by her education – a retired university lecturer on the classics. And although *Age of Iron* is in many respects artistically inferior to its predecessors, or perhaps *because* it is inferior – that is, because the crucial antagonism in it escapes to some extent being aesthetically sublimated – the truth of the inaccessible other is put into a sharper focus: the chiasmus appears which illustrates why the other’s ineffable trace is only a ruse of the colonialist discourse.

In such a confrontation both the speakable and the unspeakable situate themselves on each side of the split. When the other appears in the form of the insurgent, the “humanist” discourse *knows exactly* what is the meaning of the message of the other (violent overthrow of power) but such message is within the liberal paradigm utterly incomprehensible (how can he sacrifice all that is “human” in him for “death-driven male constructions”). When the other is incarnated by the derelict, his meaning is incomprehensible (what is his dark secret which makes him live like that?), while his message is perfectly understood: he demands pity and human heart. One should note that only in the second case is something akin to the kernel of transcendence (amenable to be novelistically developed and amplified) hidden (the dark secret, the cause of becoming the victim), while the insurgent is taken to be utterly transparent – his motivations are all too obvious and therefore not amenable to becoming a subject of a “humanistic” novel, which would treat them as simplistic propaganda lacking in “human” truth, that is, in an existential di-

mension.¹ Yet, the choice encountered here is only twofold: either the truth of the black alcoholic, if it exists, has to be expressed in the language of the struggle (e.g. as dropping out of it), or his truth will become installed as a fascinating enigmatic image of the irretrievable secret in the familiar practice of “exoticising” the other, that is, projecting on him one’s own images of enjoyment, the substance inaccessible to the colonialist subject. In this sense, the mortally ill Curren (the former university lecturer), who has never been a believer, projects on Vercueil (the alcoholic) her clearly fantasmatic image of him as her guardian angel that will help her to the “other side.” It is a very telling image in the context of the liberal novel: Curren gets off on transcendence but only at second hand. In other words, one disavows transcendence (one is a “postmodernist”); the other, however, seems to have access to something substantial beyond one’s understanding; therefore by revering the other one reveres precisely the (empty because inaccessible) image of such transcendence. In effect, one ultimately enjoys one’s own reverence of the other’s transcendence by means of which one appears likable to oneself, since this image makes one “more” than one positively (substantially) is. In other words, this object/image, which is, properly speaking, nothing (the image of “something more/enigmatic in the other”), creates a lack in us (there is something in the other I cannot comprehend), yet this lack instantly turns into a surplus in the liberal discourse (I enjoy my reverence for the other’s enigma as what makes me properly “human”). The crucial point, however, is that the secret in the other is what I inserted into him in the first place to make him *interesting* for me in ways that, for example, the insurgent is not – he is treated as a misguided other who rather than wallowing in his substantial enigma has become thoroughly alienated from his substance by adopting the discourse of the master (violence) and returning it to him.²

A clear exposition of such obscenity of the discourse of the enigma is provided by Coetzee in *The Master of Petersburg*, which is tellingly taken out of the colonial space of ethnic difference and placed within the racially neutral discourse in which Dostoevsky has to confront his two “sons,” Pavel (his stepson) and Nechaev (a revolutionary who identifies himself with Raskolnikov before his “fall” into Orthodox Christianity). This time, what the stakes are behind the confronta-

¹ Of course, “propagandist” truths are not by definition excluded from the discourse of the novel, as the example of Brecht shows.

² The logic of “something enigmatic” in the other is, of course, the logic of Lacanian object *a*.

tion of the images becomes even clearer, since Dostoevsky's entire effort is spent on creating Pavel's image as the ineffably innocent victim (whose ultimate identification is Christ – the paradigm of an enigma) – in order to dissimulate his political engagement against the Father (God-Tsar-Dostoevsky) represented by Nechaev. What is more, such manipulation by Dostoevsky is only possible because Pavel is already dead and only as *dead* can his image be maintained as benign.

This truth having been registered on “neutral” grounds, the next novel can return to the colonial context and start with what it found in Petersburg, that is, with the image of the *jouisseur*. But not only that: what is superimposed on such an image is precisely the liberal discourse so familiar from the earlier novels, but because of such a superimposition the obscene smile of enjoyment lurks in its cracks. Thus, *Disgrace* is Coetzee's best novel precisely because it is least sentimental and least deluded. Although in *Age of Iron* the perverse enigmatising device was abandoned and the confrontation between the two incompatible figures of the other was posed, yet as soon as they were presented they became totally sentimentalised by Curren's melodramatic discourse which translated them into a lovable and unlovable other (the unlovable destroying and the lovable supporting “humane” identifications). In *Disgrace*, there is no victim on the side of the other and the moment it happens identification with the other becomes totally impossible for the liberal Lurie. Hence we encounter the limit of the liberal novel: the moment the victim disappears, and with him our exultation in our outrage, which is the ultimate support of liberal identification, we become confronted with the *monstrous and disgusting other* who thoroughly traumatises our discursive space since he does not seem to enjoy our liberal values. When there is no victim available on the side of the other, suddenly all the sentimentalising assumes its proper place, and rather than being spent on creating the space of the ineffable within the discourse, it is spent by Lurie on mourning himself and his victimised daughter. Yet the ultimate achievement of the novel lies in taking a step further and presenting a white victim, Lurie's daughter who has been raped by blacks, who does not accept the sentimentalising/aggressive discourse (two sides of the same coin) in which Lurie tries to explain away her reaction to their new place within the postcolonial space.

After what has been said above, the failure of *Slow Man* is not surprising. In it, Coetzee's usual manner of writing is taken out of the context in which it had been possible to stir its “compassionate”

and “universalist” overtones. That is to say, when the enigma was played out within a space of extremity, including subjective destitution as the outcome of torture, war, etc., the refusal to “explain” could be taken as a (or even *the*) narrative incarnation of respect for the suffering other, even if it sometimes smacked of capitulation before the inevitability of suffering in the hands of one power or another as belonging to human condition. However, when such circumstances are absent, all the “existential” implications seem to find their proper place and come back with a vengeance. In *Slow Man*, which takes place in safe Australia, the central “enigma” (or one of the two) is Rayment’s refusal to wear a prosthesis: he “inexplicably” declines to behave like other people and become “able” again thanks to such “unnatural” means, deriding his new “reduced” life and supporting his refusal in terms of saving his “honour.” Although Michael K could radiate a certain “grandeur” refusing to accept food offered to him within the space of colonial discourse and become in this way a sublime figure of resistance/truth for the medical officer as well as for the reader, this was possible only because of the very extremity of his situation and a careful manipulation of the allegorical and metaphorising context by Coetzee.³ When, however, this “estranging” framework is removed, we encounter nothing but a narcissistic caricature in which the underside of the “enigmatic” discourse comes more clearly to light – Rayment’s honourable fidelity turns out to be a fidelity to his idealised image of a man who lacks nothing, not even respect for the other. Without there being an extreme context of violence such identification with what is in him more than himself becomes nakedly ridiculous when it is incarnated in his repeated claims that without half of one of his legs he becomes *less human* – if one wants one more example of what the human truth stands for in this context, we have it here in a thoroughly indecent manner: the identification with one’s “natural” image of wholeness as immortality.

And to fill out this teleological scenario of Coetzee’s development as a writer – admittedly artificial, as all narratives of this sort have to be – we can add that although his first two books are aesthetic

³ In this sense all of the novels that will be analysed in this book are aesthetically successful (apart from *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man* which fail for reasons already mentioned); notwithstanding the questionable (because ultimately narcissistic) “humanist” attitude they represent, Coetzee uses his devices to produce “transcendence” very skilfully and the reader *is* manipulated into assuming the surplus of ineffable meaning.

failures (and for that reason not included here⁴), it is their deficiencies precisely that bear witness to what Coetzee had to refine out of existence in order to become a “mature” liberal writer. In *Dusklands*, the respectable other does not exist because for the protagonists of both narratives in the book the appearance of the other within their discursive space constitutes the ultimate catastrophe and it inevitably provokes the crisis, that is, dissolution of their identities (there is no benign image of the other, unless I insert in his place the unacknowledged image of myself). On the other hand, *In the Heart of the Country* presents us with the consciously ridiculous and artificial image of transcendence embodied by the Spanish speaking gods in their flying machines, for whom the whole process of writing by the protagonist is passionately staged and who provide her in turn with obscure injunctions and enigmatic truths (not surprisingly these “transcendent” truths are bits and pieces of the old “European” knowledge: Hegel, etc.). These two truths – there is no transcendence of discourse apart from violence, and the image of enigmatic truth is a stand-in for this violence – which the first two books unashamedly flaunted, prevented the sublimation necessary for the aesthetic achievement, which was the creation of the following scheme: a stable (because central) place is assigned to a signifier (of the victim), but the inclusion of it within the chain of other signifiers (which would provide it with meaning within the context of a given novel) is repeatedly denied, yet with simultaneous insistence that the ultimate meaning of the narrative is hidden precisely in this “withdrawn” signifier. It is clear that what we encounter here is precisely the logic of the master signifier whose truth is the enjoyment of some version of the Father, a *père*-version of liberal discourse.

⁴ One of the reasons of the failure seemed to be Coetzee’s as-yet “unsublimated” fascination with Beckett – which is especially noticeable in *In the Heart of the Country*. Beckett’s discourse is not very amenable to the inevitably political confrontations of the colonial-cum-familial discursive space.

Name Index

A

Adams, Henry 219
Arnold, Matthew 103
Attwell, David 26
Augustine 18, 180, 193, 221, 222

B

Badiou, Alain 240, 245
Becekett, Samuel 14, 60
Berger, John 208, 242, 243
Burke, Edmund 222
Byron, George Gordon 113, 170–
171, 189

C

Caesar, Julius 219

D

Defoe, Daniel 65, 67, 72, 80, 81,
84, 87, 220
Deleuze, Gilles 134, 174
Derrida, Jacques 192
Descartes, René 238
Dolar, Mladen 190, 192, 193
Dostoevsky, Fyodor 119–121, 126,
130, 133, 140, 150, 151, 156,
158, 220
Dovey, Teresa 26, 27, 32, 33, 37–
39, 44

E

Eliot, T. S. 61, 115, 226, 227

F

Fink, Bruce 52–56, 60, 137, 141,
142, 147, 161–164
Ford, Ford Madox 227
Freud, Sigmund 55, 73, 85, 128,
138, 139, 141, 142, 167, 168,
175, 180, 194, 200

G

Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand
247
Golding, William 125
Gordimer, Nadine 39–41

H

Hegel, G. W. F. 14, 78, 112–113,
166, 182
Heidegger, Martin 112, 182
Heraclitus 42–43
Hitler, Adolf 240, 241
Hughes, Ted 241–242

J

James, Henry 226, 227
Joyce, James 198, 225

K

Kafka, Franz 38, 39, 44–49, 177, 188, 234
Kant, Immanuel 165, 166, 168, 182–184, 222
Kierkegaard, Søren 108–109, 191

L

Lacan, Jacques 11, 23–25, 27, 52, 54–57, 64, 69, 75, 109, 126, 136–137, 141, 142, 146, 147, 161–163, 168, 173, 175, 178–180, 183, 191, 193, 225
Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe 240
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 45
Levinas, Emmanuel 9, 244, 259

M

Monteverdi, Claudio 190, 191
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 191

N

Nagel, Thomas 241, 242
Nietzsche, Friedrich 66, 186

O

Ovid 114, 115

P

Pound, Ezra 226, 227

R

Reik, Theodor 175
Rilke, Reiner Maria 183–184
Rousseau, Jean Jacques 90, 221–222, 233–235

S

Sade, D. A. F. de 61, 172, 173, 241
Shestov, Lev 156
Singer, Peter 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 243–246, 248

T

Tolstoy, Leo 220, 225

V

Voltaire 45, 46

W

Wagner, Richard 191
Wordsworth, William 159, 160, 161, 164, 165–167, 170

Z

Zupančič, Alenka 105, 108, 109, 168, 183, 188, 212

Ž

Žižek, Slavoj 23, 24, 70, 71, 109, 112, 141, 170, 174–177, 180, 182, 191, 194–195

Sławomir Masłoń

Père-wersje prawdy: powieści J.M. Coetzego

Streszczenie

Autor stawia sobie za zadanie ujęcie twórczości powieściowej J.M. Coetzego od innej strony niż większość krytyków ma w zwyczaju. Zwykłą praktyką, do której zresztą pisarstwo to zachęca, jest jego ogląd z pozycji „humanistycznej”, krytykującej nadużycia kolonializmu i konfrontującej przemoc z problemami egzystencjalnymi Człowieka na drodze do Prawdy i samorealizacji.

Mimo że w dzisiejszym świecie autorytet uniwersaliów, takich jak Człowiek i Prawda, został mocno nadszarpnięty, gdyż może być postrzegany jako zawsze służący czyimś interesom, wydaje się że Coetzee stworzył na swój użytek metodę pisarską, w której podstawowe cechy powieści humanistycznej mogą być zachowane, a która jednak stara się bronić przed zarzutami uwikłania w grę przemocy i interesów, pragnąc okazać levinasowski szacunek dla Innego.

Narracja powieści Coetzego zwykle oscyluje wokół pustego miejsca stworzonego przez autora w jej wnętrzu, wokół zagadki, którą powieść będzie się starała rozwiązać, ale przez którą w końcu zostanie pokonana. W jego wczesnych utworach spotkanie pomiędzy zagadką a objaśniającą narracją rozgrywa się jako konfrontacja ofiary kolonializmu z przedstawicielem liberalnej („humanistycznej”) części społeczeństwa kolonizatorów, przeciwnym używaniu przemocy. W późniejszych powieściach konfrontacja przenosi się coraz bardziej do wewnątrz dyskursu dominującego, jednak centralna „niewyjaśnialna” zagadka, jak i tematyka władzy i przemocy w stosunkach międzyludzkich, pozostają w ich centrum. (Wyjątkiem jest tu ostatnia powieść *Powolny człowiek*, która rozgrywa się w bezpiecznej Australii, jednak i ta narracja koncentruje się wokół swego rodzaju zagadki). Tego rodzaju konstrukcja pozwala na stworzenie innego rodzaju uniwersalium zwanego Innym, a posiadającego sprzeczne cechy. Jest On bowiem dla nas „pusty” (jego „życioświat” jest dla nas niedostępny), a zarazem niesamowicie „pełny” (niedostępna dla nas „etniczna substancja” stanowi o jego prawdzie). W ten oto sposób Prawda zostaje zrelatywizowana (jest inna dla każdej substancji etnicznej), to owa substancja staje się najwyższym dobrem, a więc Sprawiedliwością jako taką.

Analizie poddano kolejne powieści Coetzego (z wyjątkiem dwóch pierwszych, w których wspomniany wyżej mechanizm nie jest jeszcze dostatecznie wypracowany), a zawarte w nich przesłanki dyskursu humanistycznego są konfrontowane z wybranymi koncepcjami teorii psychoanalitycznej, w szczególności Jacques’a Lacana, oraz

ich polityczną aplikacją dokonywaną przez Slavoja Žižka. W ten sposób autor stara się pokazać polityczne, narracyjne i egzystencjalne konsekwencje postaw przyjętych przez bohaterów tego rodzaju współczesnionej wersji powieści humanistycznej. Mimo że motywują oni swe poczynania bezwzględnym posłuszeństwem Sprawiedliwości wyższej od każdego prawa (objawiającej się na różne częściowe sposoby jako szacunek dla Innego, honor itp.), w rzeczywistości czerpią narcystyczną rozkosz z takiego stosunku, jako że to uniwersalium stanowi eksternalizację ich obrazu samego siebie w modalności „transcendentalnej” – obrazu „pustego” tylko dlatego, że przekracza on wszelkie pojęcie, czyli właściwie będącego obrazem pełni (tu kryje się tajemnica pełni Innego), która unieważnia wszelkie granice i dlatego dostarcza najwyższej rozkoszy, nawet jeśli jest ona bolesna.

Slawomir Masłoń

Père-Versionen der Wahrheit: J. M. Coetzees Romane

Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser setzt sich ein Ziel, J. M. Coetzees Romane von anderer Seite als das die meisten Literaturkritiker tun, zu erforschen. Diese Werke waren meistens aus „humanistischer“ Sicht betrachtet, es wurden kolonialistische Missbräuche kritisiert und die Gewalt mit existentiellen Problemen des Menschen auf seinem Wege nach Wahrheit und Selbstverwirklichung konfrontiert.

In der heutigen Welt haben solche Universalien wie Mensch und Wahrheit stark an Bedeutung verloren, denn sie können als solche betrachtet werden, die jemandes Interessen dienen sollten. Trotzdem scheint Coetzee seine eigene schriftstellerische Methode entwickeln zu haben, die die wichtigsten Eigenschaften des humanistischen Romans erkennen lässt, doch in ein Gewalt- und Interessenspiel nicht hineingezogen werden und vor dem Anderen die dem Levinas ähnliche Achtung haben wollte.

Die von Coetzee in seinem Roman angewandte Erzählung schwankt meist rundum den darin geschaffenen freien Platz, rundum ein gewisses Rätsel, das der Roman zwar zu lösen versucht, doch von dem er schließlich überwunden werden muss. In seinen frühen Romanen ist das Zusammentreffen des Rätsels und der es erklärenden Erzählung eine gewisse Konfrontation des kolonialistischen Opfers mit dem Vertreter des liberalen („humanistischen“) Teils der Gesellschaft der Kolonisatoren, der sich gegen Gewalt erklärt. In den nächsten Romanen findet diese Konfrontation schon viel mehr innerhalb des vorherrschenden Diskurses statt, doch das „unerklärbare“ Haupträtsel und die die Macht und die Gewalt in zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen betreffenden Themen stehen nach wie vor im Mittelpunkt der Romane. Eine Abweichung davon ist der letzte Roman *Ein träger Mensch*, dessen Handlung sich im ungefährdeten Australien abspielt, obwohl auch diese Erzählung auf ein gewisses Rätsel gerichtet ist. Solch eine Werkstruktur erlaubt, eine weitere Universalie zu schaffen, nämlich das „Andere“, das über kontradiktorische Eigenschaften verfügt. Das Andere erscheint uns zwar „leer“ (seine Lebenswelt ist für uns nicht erreichbar) und „voll“ zugleich (seine für uns unerreichbare „ethnische Substanz“ entscheidet über dessen Wahrheit). Auf diese Weise obwohl die Wahrheit zwar gewissermaßen relativiert wird (jeder ethnischen Substanz entspricht eine andere Wahrheit), wird diese Substanz als solche zum höchsten Guten also zur Gerechtigkeit als solcher.

In vorliegender Monografie werden der Reihe nach alle Coetzees Romane (mit Ausnahme von den zwei ersten Romanen, in denen der oben genannte Mechanismus

noch nicht ausreichend herausgearbeitet worden ist) analysiert: alle darin enthaltenen Voraussetzungen des humanistischen Diskurses werden den ausgewählten Konzeptionen der psychoanalytischen Theorie, vor allem den des Jacques Lacans und deren politischen Applikation von Slavoj Žižek gegenübergestellt. Auf diese Weise versucht der Verfasser, politische, narrative und existentielle Folgen der Entscheidungen zu zeigen, die von den Helden der aktualisierten Version des humanistischen Romans getroffen wurden. Obwohl ihre Entscheidungen mit bedingungslosem Gehorsam der jeden Rechtes höheren Gerechtigkeit begründet werden, ziehen die Helden einen narzisstischen Genuss aus solch einer Beziehung, denn diese Universalie externalisiert ihr eigenes Bild in transzendentaler Modalität, das als ein „leeres“ Bild nur deswegen gilt, dass es jedes Vorstellungsvermögen übersteigt, also in Wirklichkeit ein volles Bild ist (hier kommt das Geheimnis der ganzen Fülle des Anderen zum Ausdruck), das alle Grenzen übersteigen zu können, den größten Vergnügen bereitet, selbst wenn es auch schmerzlich sein sollte.

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