

"Cruciform Logic:" Mastering the Present

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

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DRAFT

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even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced

--J. M. Coetzee discussing his novel

Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said,

"The secret which the king hath demanded cannot
the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers
show unto the King. But there is a God in heaven that revealeth
secrets, and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar
what shall be in the latter days.

---Daniel 2: 27-8

Underlying all later, differentiated forms, however, there remains the basic Tale
Which expresses Being in flux. Time, then, would not be an empty container
into which you can fill any content, but there would be as many times as there
are types of differentiated content. Think for instance of Proust's *temps perdu*
and *temps retrouv*❖ as times which correspond to the loss and rediscovery of
self, the action of rediscovery through a monumental literary work of
remembrance being the atonement for loss of time through personal guilt--
very similar to cosmological rituals of restoring order that has been lost
through lapse of time.¹ [1]

---Eric Voegelin in a letter to Robert Heilman

This study began with admiration of long standing for the novels and essays, some
scholarly and some for a broader audience, authored by South African John M. Coetzee, who
received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003. He wrote five novels before apartheid ended in

¹ [1] Eric Voegelin in a letter to Robert Heilman, August 13, 1964 . Charles Embry, ed., *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin: A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2004), 223.

the early 1990s. The last of these was *Age of Iron* (1990).² [2] The questions I bring to Coetzee's novel of 1990 have to do with curiosity about public and private attempts at "mastering the present" that have arisen since Eric Voegelin's lectures in the 1960s, and since the time of his remarks to the effect that the recovery of reality in the wake of the German experience would entail placing "the events of the epoch under the judgment of the spirit," leading to "an act in which language restores itself through insight into its own character as expression of reality."³ [3]

Degradation of Language

Both Coetzee and Voegelin were familiar with the degradation of language. Coetzee's "Apartheid Thinking," explores apartheid's roots in attempting "the task of reforming--that is to say, deforming and hardening--the human heart."⁴ [4] Below, the deformation of the human heart, and then language, is presented by poet Christopher van Wyk:

"In Detention"

2 [2] J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 1990 (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). Hereafter, references to the novel will appear in the text as (AOI).

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, ""The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era," in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, Volume 12 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 4, 17.

4 [4] J. M. Coetzee, "Apartheid Thinking," in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 164. It should be noted that the context for this remark was Coetzee's suggestion that the churches recognized apartheid as a sin for this reason. The article first appeared in *Social Dynamics* in 1991.

He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself while washing
He slipped from the ninth floor
He hung from the ninth floor
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
He hung from the ninth floor
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
He hung from a piece of soap while washing⁵ [5]

--Christopher van Wyk

"Van Wyk's poem," writes Coetzee, "plays with fire, tap-dances at the portals of hell. It comes off because it is not a poem about death but a parody of the barely serious stock of

⁵ [5] Quoted in J. M. Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State," in J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 362.

explanations that the Security Police keep on hand for the media."6 [6] "In Detention," in effect, unmasks the deformation of language. In *Hitler and the Germans*, Voegelin referred frequently to Karl Kraus's "mastery of the present" through analysis of the same phenomenon. Kraus annotates and exposes the second reality created by the press (in italics), while remaining so firmly planted in the first reality that Voegelin declared, "reading Karl Kraus's *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht* is the duty of every German student who wants to have something to say in politics":

The press...chooses the simple definition, that a concentration camp is

a temporary curtailment of liberty with an educational aim.

But in many cases *one may also* speak of a *spiritual rehabilitation*.

Oh, one practically must. In Dachau it was even noticed that

the Communists, *who came to the camp in a grim mood*, after some time *learned to like good, patriotic songs again*.

. . . .

today the Communists are

quite different people from what they were when *brought* here.

. . . .

After an *educational cure* of a few weeks, they too will be different persons.

Sometimes one day is said to be enough. These people, obviously, cannot testify to this themselves--for one thing because they are not allowed to, and for another, because the psychic transformation which often occurs at a stroke not infrequently results in unconsciousness or at least an impaired memory, and because astonishment at unaccustomed things may result in speech disorders. But we shall content ourselves with the statement of the representative of the press that they received the distinct impression

6 [6] Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber," 362-3.

that *Germany has nothing to hide in this area either* and that the prisoners *have nothing to complain about*.

Everything goes like clockwork, sometimes dead on time.⁷ [7]

Voegelin's enterprise was philosophical, Coetzee's predominantly novelistic. In different historical settings, both are concerned with atrocity, diagnosis, recognition of deformative language, and the language of recovery. Coetzee's fiction is known for its resistance to interpretation:

He 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 text and inhibiting any straightforward drawing of moral or political conclusions. As a result, readers with strong convictions have sometimes found his novels insufficiently engaged with the contingencies of the South African situation, while Coetzee's own comments on his fiction and on the responsibility of the novelist have, if anything, added fuel to the fire.⁸ [8]

The difficulty, even for readers who find his literature to be fully "engaged" is that, as one critic has put it, "his novels understand his critics better than the other way around, anticipating their

⁷ [7] Karl Kraus, *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht* in "the Zohn translation with some changes", quoted in Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans* Volume 31 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 195.

⁸ [8] Derek Attridge, "Literary Forms and the Demands of Politics: Otherness in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," in Sue Kossew, ed., *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998), 198-9.

readings and objections."⁹ [9] On the other hand, Stephen Watson has observed that "almost all the initial difficulties of his novels vanish when one happens to have read the same books that he has."¹⁰ [10]

Coetzee is also a prolific writer outside the domain of fiction. His Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech of 1987 declared that, swamped with "truth by the bucketful," South Africa contained "too much truth for art to hold."¹¹ [11] In a speech the same year, later an article, called "The Novel Today," Coetzee defended the novelistic enterprise from the charge of "trying to escape historical reality" by proposing a "novel that occupies an autonomous place, that is what I call a rival to history." This in preference, Coetzee said, to "colonisation of the novel by discourse of history" or "supplementarity," alternatives he found unacceptable. ¹² [12] As Coetzee made these speeches, he was working on *Age of Iron*. Although his previous fiction was

⁹ [9] Ian Glenn, "Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and the Politics of Interpretation," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93.1 (Winter 1994): 25.

¹⁰ [10] Quoted in Sue Kossew, "Introduction" in *Critical Essays*, 9. This calls for a few remarks on Coetzee's intellectual biography. Coetzee is a scholar-teacher as well as a novelist. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, writing a dissertation on Beckett. Numerous critics have reported on Coetzee's ubiquitous intertextuality. See, for example, Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, with a preface by Nadine Gordimer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) 24, and Patricia Merivale, "Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee's Kafka," *Critical Perspectives*, 152-167. David Attwell stresses the "awkward consequences" of being known as a "learned author," but praises the resultant ability to "bring into creative tension the grandeur and skepticism of nineteenth-century philosophy, and the formal instability and inventiveness of the eighteenth-century novel." David Attwell, "Afterword," *Critical Perspectives* 213; 215.

¹¹ [11] J. M. Coetzee, "Jerusalem, Prize Acceptance Speech," in *Doubling the Point*, 99.

¹² [12] J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today," *Upstream* 6.2(1988): 2-3.

mostly set in South Africa , *Age of Iron* seems to be the most explicitly political of his novels to that time. *The Life and Times of Michael K* had obliquely addressed the problem Coetzee laid out in his speeches through the creation of the character Michael K, who embodies, in the words of another character, "how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it." 13 [13] Michael K is in history, we might say, but not of it. Just as Michael's constant allegiance is to the soil, as "somewhere far away the grinding of the wheels of history continues,"14 [14] Coetzee has maintained consistently that "my allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not with the discourse of politics."15 [15]

Given the priority of his aesthetic commitments, to what extent and how might *Age of Iron*, the story of a white female academic dying of cancer, embody a mastery of the present in apartheid South Africa ? J. M. Coetzee began to write *Age of Iron* in 1986 after the declaration of a State of Emergency in South Africa in 1985 and finished in 1989, before negotiations began gradually to dismantle apartheid in the 1990s. The emergency powers permitted detentions without charge and increased censorship both of the press and of the public. Writing "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State" in 1986, Coetzee noted "One can go about one's daily business in Johannesburg within calling distance (except that the rooms are soundproofed) of people undergoing the utmost suffering." Prisons in general and the Headquarters of the Security Police in particular could not be photographed, "as though it is decreed that the camera lens must shatter at the moment it is trained on certain sites, as though

13 [13] J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, 1983 (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 166.

14 [14] Ibid., 161.

15 [15] Quoted in Kossew, "Introduction," 6.

the passerby shall have no means of confirming that what he saw, those buildings rising out of the sands in all their sprawl of gray monotony, was not a mirage or a bad dream."¹⁶ [16] Thus *Age of Iron*'s protagonist Elizabeth Curren comes to life in what Coetzee calls, borrowing from John T. Irwin, the novelist's "tension toward" the "dark chamber," which is "the womb of art."¹⁷ [17]

"In these times, in this place": Kronos and Kairos

In "The Novel Today," Coetzee talks about the obstacles to using the discourse of history, "to explore, except clumsily and 'from the outside', the individual experience of historical time, particularly the time of historical crisis."¹⁸ [18] Elizabeth Curren, I would argue, is a novelistic experiment in the multiplicity of what we normally think of as linear--singular--chronological time. The novel's title, taken from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, references one dimension of time. Hesiod declares, "I wish that I were not any part/ of the fifth generation/ of men, but had died before it came,/ or had been born afterward."¹⁹ [19] In Hesiod's age of iron, children, like the young guerrillas of the South African townships, "grow gray on the temples," old before they can be children.²⁰ [20] Nemesis, Aidos, Decency and Respect flee earth for Olympus, "and all that

¹⁶ [16] Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber," 362, 361.

¹⁷ [17] Coetzee, quoted in "Into the Dark Chamber," 363.

¹⁸ [18] Coetzee, "The Novel Today," 2.

¹⁹ [19] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, in *Hesiod*, transl. Richard Lattimore (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), 39.

²⁰ [20] Ibid. The age of iron also recalls Dante's *Inferno*, where the Old Man of Crete stands, "the most elaborately worked single symbol in the *Inferno*." Dante, *Inferno*, transl. and with explanatory notes by John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, Mentor, 1956), 134.

will be left by them to mankind will be wretched pain."²¹ [21] Accordingly, struggling with the cancer that has invaded her bones, Curren remarks that her disease is "dry, bloodless, slow and cold, sent by Saturn," (AOI 64) in Greek mythology the god Kronos. It is worth pausing here to consider the dimensions of this remark, coming from the protagonist, a scholar of the classics. Kronos represents one kind of time, the time before the reign of his son Zeus. In Roman mythology, Saturn was associated with seeds and sowing. In a letter to her daughter, Elizabeth Curren describes the wasting disease "sent by Saturn" as seeds, then as "insect eggs laid in the body of a host, now grown to grubs and implacably eating their host away. My eggs, grown within me. *Me, mine*. Words I shudder to write, yet true. My daughters death, sisters to you, my daughter life. How terrible when motherhood reaches a point of parodying itself!" (AOI 64) She records the experience of an age of iron, but the times, as she lives them, are more nuanced than can be captured by Hesiod's periodizing litany of metals and clay.

To understand Elizabeth Curren's experience of time, we must look also to another god of time, in Greek mythology Zeus's son Kairos, the grandchild of Kronos. Kairos (in Roman mythology Tempus), represents the time that is fleeting, but charged with opportunity. There are thus at least two kinds of time operating in *Age of Iron*. First is a political interregnum, analogous to the disease "sent by Saturn" that wastes Elizabeth Curren. Another is the short, critical time she has left to unburden herself--of words and of shame. As Menon DuPlessis has noted, following Kermode, "with the emphasis no longer in the future, revelation seems to take its place in every present moment, in the time, not of *chronos* but of *kairos*, which is the season,

²¹ [21] Ibid., 42-3. It should be noted that a close reading of Hesiod's description of the age of iron reveals numerous parallels with the circumstances and details of Coetzee's novel.

a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end."22 [22]

In the oft-quoted definition of Gramsci,23 [23] interregnum describes a condition in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born," apt words, as critics have noted, for the time when emergency powers attempted to encircle the institution of apartheid in South Africa . In her private interregnum, Curren speaks of her cancer to Vercueil as "a child inside that I cannot give birth to." (AOI 83) Curren's daughter has left South Africa for the U.S. and is married now with children. "Don't call me back, mother," her daughter (nameless) has said years earlier, "because I will not come." (AOI 139) Curren has resolved that her daughter not know of her terminal diagnosis. The letter will not be sent until Curren has died. This will assure that the letter is untainted by hope for a response, or by seeming to beg, and above all that it will relate "my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place." (AOI 130) Although Curren longs for the embrace of her daughter, she fiercely believes that "love should flow forward, not backward. That is a rule, another of the iron rules. When an old person begins to plead for love everything turns squalid. Like a parent trying to creep into bed with a child: unnatural." (AOI 73)

Before Coetzee began to write *Age of Iron*, a group of theologians and others in South Africa prepared, in 1985, what would become known as the Kairos Document. The Document

22 [22] Menon DuPlessis makes this remark in the course of a discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in "Towards a True Materialism," in Kossew, ed., *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, 119.

23 [23] Quoted in Laura Wright, *Writing "Out of All the Camps": J. M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* (New York : Routledge, 2006), 7.

begins with the words "the Time has come" and "not only for apartheid but for the church."²⁴ [24] This statement recalls not only Martin Luther King's "myth of time" in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," but also the many uses of the word kai or kairos in the Bible. Finally it may remind us of the kairos referenced by Eric Voegelin in *Hitler and the Germans* in the context of his discussion of the "abyss of the evangelical church" and its misuse of the language of Paul in Romans 13.

The preface to the South African "Kairos Document" promised "an open-ended document which will never be said to be final." The explicit source for the term Kairos was Luke 19:44, which refers to Jesus' grief over the coming destruction of Jerusalem "all because you did not recognize your opportunity (KAIROS) when God offered it." "The church is about to be shown up for what it really is," with its divisions and differing theologies. This would compel an exploration of the three theologies the writers identified: The South African apartheid State Theology, the English-Speaking Churches' Church Theology, and a Prophetic Theology, yet to develop out of the present "Kairos, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action." (KAIROS ch. 1)

The State Theology, which has four elements, also involved a misreading of Roman 13 and, like Voegelin, raised the issue of context. The Kairos critique nearly duplicates Voegelin's comment that Romans 13:1-7 "is quite obviously directed toward persons in the Christian Community who misunderstood the freedom of the Christian under God as meaning that one no

24 [24] <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/official%20docs/kairos-document.htm>, accessed 7/24/09 .

longer has to obey the ethical order of society."²⁵ [25] The Kairos Document adds that "If we wish to search the Bible for a guidance in a situation where the State that is supposed to be 'the servant of God' (Romans 13:16) betrays that calling and begins to serve Satan instead, then we can study chapter 13 of the Book of Revelations..." (KAIROS 2.1) The second element of the State Theology was the conflation of law and order with justice. Its third element was "its own version of hell," the threat of "a tyrannical, totalitarian, atheistic and terrorist communist regime." The State theology's "own concrete symbol of evil" was the communist, a label applied-heretically--to "millions of Christians in South Africa ." The last element was "the name of God": "the god of teargas, rubber bullets, sjamboks, prison cells and death sentences"; "a god who exalts the proud and humbles the poor;" and "most revealing of all" the God invoked in the preamble to the apartheid constitution "who gathered our forebears together from many lands and gave them this our own." (Kairos 2.4)

The document's exploration of "Church Theology" revealed the church's "limited, guarded and cautious" critique of apartheid with an accent on reconciliation, justice, and non-violence. The Kairos writers argued that reconciliation--or peace--would require repentance before God, whereupon "we must be willing to forgive seventy times seven," but not before. (KAIROS 3.1) For justice, Church Theology always emphasized "individual conversions" to result in gradual reforms from the top down. The Kairos writers maintained that "God does not bring his justice through reforms introduced by the Pharaohs of this world." (KAIROS 3.2) Church Theology also failed to distinguish between force used by the state and force used in self-defense in its condemnations of violence. "Why are the activities of young blacks in the

²⁵ [25] Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 179.

townships," the Kairos writers queried, "not regarded as defensive?" (Kairos 3.3) The Kairos writers then addressed the question of "Church Theology" as a failure to analyze the social situation, rooted in "*the type of faith and spirituality* that has dominated Church life for centuries." The prevailing spirituality tended to overlook that the arena of change had to be essentially political in nature. Connected to this was the problem of seeing religion as "purely private and individualistic." In fact, they argued, "The Bible does not separate the human person from the world in which he or she lives. . . . or one's private life from one's public life."(Kairos 3.4)

Combating these two theologies, State and Church, would require a third: the "Prophetic Theology" put forth in chapter four, specifically "prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis." In "interpreting this Kairos (Lk 12:56) it is essential to see the situation not as a racial war but as "a conflict between two irreconcilable *causes or interests* in which the one is just and the other is unjust." This aligns "those who benefit from the status quo" against "those who do not benefit in any way" and enables a biblical analysis based on the presence throughout Old and New Testaments of the concept of oppression and tyranny: "A regime that has made itself the enemy of the people has thereby also made itself the enemy of God. People are made in the image and likeness of God and whatever we do to the least of them we do to God (Mt 25:49, 45)." In the end, the elimination of oppression will be "the most loving thing" for both sides. Hope drives the oppressed, "especially the youth" whose "bodies are broken but nothing now can break their spirit." The false hopes that animate the oppressors must be changed into a genuine "Christian message of hope." In the meantime, they write, "We must participate in the cross of Christ if we are to have the hope of participating in his resurrection." (KAIROS, ch. 4)

Chapter 5, "Challenge to Action," emphasizes activities of the church. "Services and sacraments have been appropriated to serve the need of the individual": the challenge, in accepting the Kairos offered by God, is to widen all Church activities to the public sphere, never forgetting "the message of the cross." (KAIROS 5.3, 5.6) "We see the present crisis or KAIROS as indeed a divine visitation," states the conclusion, emphasizing again as in the preface that "there is nothing final about this document." The Kairos document should be understood not "*as a final statement of the truth but as the direction in which God is leading us at this moment in our history.*" (KAIROS, conclusion).

Mastery of the present, the Kairos document suggested, would require what Voegelin calls mastery of the present in the sense of presence under God, recognition of the kairos offered by God, and participation "in the cross of Christ," through the political action of groups. While Voegelin's analysis, more of the Germans than of Hitler, found the path to diagnostic tools in groups and institutions--the legal system, education and the writing of history, evangelical and Catholic churches--he emphasizes that recovery of reality must begin with the disposition of the individual toward matters of the spirit.

Estrangement and Recovery

Voegelin's analysis of the German University suggests, among other things, that the realization of education as construction of the *Bildung*, designated as a private and highly individualistic activity, is a virtual guarantee of public deformation that will, in turn, deform private life. The symptoms of deformation are to be sought and found in the language of deformation that reaches from philosopher to preacher to historian. All embody, in one way or another, the loss of language as an expression of reason in the classical sense. Thus, to a large

extent, Voegelin's article on what it means to confront the past in Germany focuses on the recognition of the language of second reality. He is particularly hard on guilt as a form of recovery, in part because of its complicity with information, which we find in the totally inadequate "descriptive history." One does not need to stoop to the level of declaring Hitler outside the range of "traditional concepts and moral categories," the particular historiographic poverty with which Voegelin tars P.E. Schramm.²⁶ [26] One can simply, mistakenly, imagine that "the trust in the German universities [could] be reestablished through a description of the behavior of the professors and students of the Third Reich," i.e., that "the most exact reconstruction of the past" will banish guilt.²⁷ [27] Voegelin suggests that, although not socially dominant, the German literary response to the pneumopathology of German society has succeeded both with diagnosis and, in the case of Thomas Mann, with pointing the way to recovery. It is with the personal *lamentatio* that we actualize the "beginning of return" and recognize through a restoration of language both our capacity for estrangement from the divine and "the dignity of the hope to be delivered from the estrangement," metaphorically configured, respectively, in the Ecce Homo stance and the *imago dei*.²⁸ [28]

In Coetzee's language, a secularized sacrament of confession is simply not going to get the job done. In 1985, Coetzee surveyed the insufficiencies of confession by examining works of Augustine, Rousseau, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. The principal problem is neatly caught in the

²⁶ [26] Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 115.

²⁷ [27] Voegelin, "German University," 6.

²⁸ [28] Ibid., 17.

paradox implicit in the statement "The end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself."

Coetzee draws particular attention to Dostoevsky's skeptical view of Rousseau and Montaigne:

Because of the nature of consciousness, Dostoevsky indicates, the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception. True confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self or from the dialogue of the self with its own self-doubt, but from faith and grace²⁹ [29]

Age of Iron

Although Coetzee had expressed misgivings about confession in his historical survey of 1985, his novel *Age of Iron* emerged over the next four years as an extraordinary fictive confession in the form of a valedictory letter. Elizabeth Curren, a retired professor of classics writing to her daughter, is surely at no loss for words. Yet an effort to find words dominates the story she tells of her numbered days. Instead of yielding to the hands of nurses--"It is their hands above all that I find myself craving" (AOI 74)--Curren's hours of writing and wrestling with increasingly debilitating pain are punctuated by intense encounters with people who, unlike her, are not beneficiaries of apartheid. They have their own sort of language and silences: the homeless Vercueil, who becomes an important part of her final days, responds to her first offering of coffee and food by spitting: "not upon me but before me, where I could see it, inspect it, think about it. His word, his kind of word. . . . A word, undeniable, from a language before

29 [29] J. M. Coetzee, "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985), in *Doubling the Point*, 291.

language." (AOI 8) Curren's desire to nourish her daughter from afar has become a desire to offer "words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to take in in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb." (AOI 9) Even so, there is a word she cannot bear to countenance:

The country smolders, yet with the best will in the world I can only half attend. My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body. An ignominious occupation, and in times like these ridiculous too. . . . Most of the time I am careful to hold the letters of the word apart like the jaws of a trap. When I read I read warily, jumping over lines or even whole paragraphs when from the corner of an eye I catch the shadow of the word waiting in ambush. (AOI 39)

While avoiding one word, and seeking others with which to tell her truth, she must continually defend herself against those she imagines as interlocutors: "You do not believe in words," she says to one, ". . . can't you hear that the words I speak are real? . . . They are not Yes, they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it, in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled." (AOI 145)

Elizabeth Curren's cancer, as she maintains repeatedly, is the shame of apartheid writ small. It is terminal cancer that compels her engagement with truth-telling and the search for truth sends her to the township Guguletu so that she will have a truth to tell. At Guguletu, she looks upon the dead body of her housekeeper's son Bheki and is challenged to find words for the crime of Bheki's murder. She refuses to be hurried:

"There are many things I am sure I could say, Mr. Thabane," I said. "But then they must truly come from me. When one speaks under duress--you should know this--one rarely speaks the truth."

. . . .

"Then let us hear what you have to say! We are listening! We are waiting!"

....

"These are terrible sights," I repeated, faltering. "They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now."

"This woman talks shit," said a man in the crowd.

"To speak of this"--I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path--"you would need the tongue of a god." (AOI 98-99)

As she navigates warily among the classics, avoiding binary oppositions like "yes" and "no," touching occasionally the medicolonial discourse of illness, her letter dwells on, or among, a cluster of words that will speak her pain and shame to her daughter: love, iron, truth, blood, trust, doll, mother.

As Coetzee has pointed out, Curren's authority derives from two sources "the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics."³⁰ [30] Death, as she observes with irony, will finish her before the hated ministers of apartheid are removed: "The disgrace of the life one lives under them: to open a newspaper, to switch on the television, like kneeling and being urinated on. Under them, under their meaty bellies, their full bladders. 'Your days are numbered,' I used to whisper to them once upon a time, to them who will now outlast me." (AOI 10)

³⁰ [30] Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 250.

Curren has very little time left. In this time, as Coetzee observes, "in the light, or in the shadow, of my aftersense of the book"

a contest is staged, not only in the dramatic construction of the novel but also within Elizabeth 's--what shall I say?--soul, a contest about having a say. To me, as a writer...the outcome of this contest--what is to count as classic in South Africa --is irrelevant. What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position. So: even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced.³¹ [31]

The contest does not endow Curren with an ability to speak convincingly to others: a lesson on Thucydides fails to impress Bheki's friend John, another guerrilla teenager from Guguletu, but Curren employs the classics tentatively in an interrogation of her own life and dying.³² [32]

When she dies will she see Bach, "the fat man in heaven?"(AOI 25)³³ [33] Is the homeless Vercueil, who appears the day she is told her cancer is terminal, an angel of death? A guide (Virgil)? A ferryman across the Styx ? Does her whiteness consign her forever to limbo?

Attached by a fierce love to this "world of wonders," (AOI 55) her encounters range nevertheless from the merely nasty--drunken Vercueil asleep on her toilet--to Dantean scenes of horror, in the

³¹ [31] Ibid.

³² [32] It is worth noting that Coetzee's essay on the development of the apartheid ideology by Geoffrey Cronjé mentions that while he was a professor of sociology, his hobby was classical literature. J. M. Coetzee, "Apartheid Thinking," 164.

³³ [33] Bach is the chief figure in part II of Coetzee's essay, "What is a classic?" in J. M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), 8-16. The essay was first given as a lecture in 1991.

burning township where Bheki has been murdered, and later in her own yard, where police kill his comrade John.

At the beginning of the letter, if the word love is directed solely to her daughter and explicitly excludes John, who "is nothing to me," (AOI 65), the letter gradually confronts the "cruciform logic" that unless she loves "the unlovable," the teenage guerrilla John, she cannot authentically love her daughter.

Not wanting to love him, how true can I say my love is for you? For love is not like hunger. Love is never sated, stilled. When one loves, one loves more. The more I love you, the more I ought to love him. The less I love him, the less, perhaps, I love you. Cruciform logic, which takes me where I do not want to go! But would I let myself be nailed upon it if I truly were not willing?" (AOI 137)

This obstacle is linked to the shame she feels about South Africa and cancer and the

desire for redemption: "I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know." (AOI 136)

Writing of Hitler and the Germans, Eric Voegelin points up the forgetting of "cruciform logic"--the nature of the Corpus Mysticum and the presence under God implied in the words of John Donne: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind."³⁴ [34] It is not clear why or when Curren begins to have this insight. It is by no means the mystic leap described by Bergson, in which love "does not yield to the attraction of its object; it has shot

³⁴ [34] Quoted in Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 153.

beyond and reached humanity only by passing through humanity."³⁵ [35] When the sullen John cannot even compose a lie about where his home is, Curren's response, "poor child" (AOI 147), carries a world of meaning. Because the older generation has entrusted the struggle against apartheid to the young, there are "children scorning childhood, the time of wonder, the growing time of the soul. Their souls, their organs of wonder, stunted, petrified." (AOI 7) In an age of iron, says Hesiod, the relationship of children to parents is ruptured.³⁶ [36] Curren's housekeeper Florence has responded to her question about the children's lawlessness--"Why do you allow this?"--by saying there are no more mothers and fathers any more. Curren responds, ". . . you wash your hands of them and they turn into children of death." "Can parents be recreated once the idea of parents has been destroyed within us?" she wonders. (AOI 49-50)

When Curren first meets John, she is repelled; he is a child who is not a child, and she tells Florence that she cannot take in every endangered refugee from the township. "I did not like him. I do not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any trace of feeling for him. . . . He is one of those boys whose voices deepen too early, who by the age of twelve have left childhood behind and turned brutal, knowing." (AOI 78) Yet when John is seriously injured by policemen, she staunches the flow of blood until help comes: "Because blood is precious, more

35 [35] Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* 1932 transl. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Breton, with W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 39.

36 [36] In an alternative reading, Graham Huggan says "humanist myths of the family...are mercilessly debunked." Graham Huggan, "Evolution and Entropy in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, 194.

precious than gold and diamonds. Because blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together: lent, not given: held in common, in trust, to be preserved: seeming to live in us, but only seeming, for in truth we live in it." (AOI 63-4) The insight is unstable. She later complains to Florence : "You leave me alone to take care of your son's friend. Why must I be the one to take care of him? (AOI 65)

Cruciform logic also points up the paradox embedded in the word "trust." "Because I cannot trust Vercueil," writes Curren, "I must trust him." (AOI 130) She comes to rely on Vercueil for many things, but Curren must trust him, above all, to post the letter to her daughter in America after she has died. Although he has reluctantly agreed to do it, his marginality, his volatility, and his name (implying, in Afrikaans, concealment and deceit)³⁷ [37] make trust difficult. "Between taking the package and not taking it the difference is as light as a feather," resting only on "the slightest breath of trust, obligation, piety left behind when I am gone." (AOI 130) Still, a relationship develops between them. After first attempting to shoo him away from his cardboard encampment in her alley, she offers him coffee and food. At first he spits the coffee at her feet and tosses the food to his dog, but he gradually spends more time indoors. He helps her with her car, a relic that will only start when pushed.

37 [37] This possible meaning of Vercueil's name in Afrikaans has been noted by numerous commentators, for example David Attwell and Benita Parry in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolley, eds., *Writing South Africa : Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Graham Huggan adds that in French, the name Vercueil connotes "worm" and "coffin." Huggan, "Evolution and Entropy," 202.

Vercueil is intrigued by, and eager to help with, Curren's plan to finish "a life that isn't worth much anymore." "Trying to work out what I can get for it" (AOI 114) she plots to coast her burning car into government buildings at the end of a steep avenue, committing suicide. On the other hand he urges her to call for her daughter. "She will come," he says. If Curren, a woman of "iron," maintains her silence until the posthumous letter, her daughter, he claims, "will not forgive you." (AOI 74). Surly in their first encounters, he gives up bits of his past and begins to ask leading questions. "Such a pleasure," writes Curren, who is lonely (AOI 76).

The word "mother" is associated with a large range of events, memories, images, and emotions and, chiefly at the outset, with the word "love." Before the impasse of the "cruciform logic," Curren believes that her impulse to nourish Vercueil, a stinking drunk, is born of the natural desire to "be full enough to give and to give from one's fullness: what deeper urge is there?" (AOI 7) The desire begins with mother's milk--"shrewd was death's aim when he chose my breast for his first shaft [AOI 8]--but beyond that is the abundance Curren enjoys as a white beneficiary of apartheid. Her strongest recollection of her own mother is a story her mother had told of sleeping under her family's ox-wagon and being alarmed by the movement above her: was it the wagon wheels or the stars that were moving? Should she warn someone? A troubled sleep ensues and when she awakens, "all is as it was before." Curren's letter dwells more than once on her mother's story-that-is-not-a-story. Curren has considered this unseen locale of her mother's memory, merely an overnight stop on the family's annual Christmas visit to the shore, a sort of "navel" that connects her to the earth: "I have held on to that story all my life. If each of us has a story we tell to ourself about who we are and where we come from, then that is my story. That is the story I choose, or the story that has chosen me. It is there that I come from, it is

there that I begin." (AOI 120) But as she writes about the story she finds that the memory has ceased to conjure its magic and believes if she were to go there the place would mean nothing.

Under Examination in the Court of Florence

Although in this age of iron "there are no more parents and children," the mother image is still strong. Florence, who is on vacation when, on the same day, Curren gets the news that her cancer is terminal and Vercueil arrives, is the mother of the young rebel Bheki. She also has two daughters, "Hope at her side and Beauty on her back." (AOI 141) Curren does not know their real names. The fantasy of a meaningful death by suicide founders on this image: what would count, Curren wonders, as a meaningful death to Florence? Not the self-indulgent self-immolation of an old crone. "Under examination in the court of Florence" for ten years, Curren rejects the purchase of meaning with suicide, but not without a struggle to understand and explain her sense of guilt, charged with the sense of *kairos*, to Vercueil: "What I cannot get over any more is that *getting over*. If I get over it this time I will never have another chance *not* to get over it. For the sake of my resurrection I cannot get over it this time." (AOI 126) But suicide is not the answer:

The truth is, there was always something false about that impulse, deeply false, no matter to what rage or despair it answered. If dying in bed over weeks and months, in a purgatory of pain and shame, will not save my soul, why should I be saved by dying two minutes in a pillar of flames? Will the lies stop because one old woman kills herself? (AOI 141)38 [38]

38 [38] Teresa Dovey has described this as "one of the fundamental concerns of Coetzee's writing as a whole: how *not* to sell himself or attempt to redeem himself; how to describe the horrors enacted on black South Africans in the name of white South Africans, without succumbing to the false impulse to construct an identity founded on self-castigation or

"Once Upon a Time I was Alive"

Curren's mother is crucial to another memory, this time called up by a photograph from Curren's own childhood. In the picture the child Elizabeth is held back by her mother from moving toward the camera. The dying Elizabeth of the present reads this frozen episode as the child's premonition that the camera will reveal a truth: that the child Elizabeth is a doll and will live a doll-life. The child, she muses as she gazes at the old photo, is trying to grab the camera to suppress this truth. As the picture is snapped, the crab that will eventually consume the doll from the inside escapes and enters her body.

Have I ever been fully awake? I might as well ask: Do the dead know they are dead? No: to the dead it is not given to know anything. But in our dead sleep we may at least be visited by intimations. I have intimations older than any memory, unshakable, that once upon a time I was alive. Was alive and then was stolen from life. From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I. (AOI 109)

Curren's disturbing fancy that she is a doll yields to an intuition that this picture and all others like it have, over time, become "negatives." They are pictures of what is not there: workers who must have paused for the picture-taking, South Africa's victims stepping aside while its beneficiaries are recorded for memory.³⁹ [39] Invisible, they are the ones leading the

immolation." Dovey, "J.M. Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice," in Kossew, *Critical Essays*, 27.

39 [39] Coetzee's use of images, dreams and photographs in his fiction enhances the capacities of fiction. Nancy Partner writes, "Fiction carried and continues to carry the most persistent and serious of human impulses: to know beyond the opaque surfaces of other lives and the distracting

"life of honorable labor" (AOI 141) that would count for something "in the court of Florence" (AOI 142) and, too, in Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In this photograph we find an echo of Curren's cryptic remark to Vercueil that she herself, rather than her daughter, is "the exile." (AOI 76) "White liberals," as Coetzee wrote in "Apartheid Thinking," "who diagnosed apartheid as a form of hubris or madness, and by denouncing it as such distanced themselves from it, were ultimately, in this reading, attempting little more than to distract attention from their continual material complicity in the exploitation of black labor," in effect from their lives as dolls.⁴⁰ [40] Black South African writer Mongane Wally Serote was more explicit on this issue (in an interview conducted by Rolf Solberg): "If you look at South Africa as a country, you will find that the whites pretended to be Europeans, and just by having committed such grievous crimes against humanity, they were in exile from humanity."⁴¹ [41] Distancing herself from apartheid, while still living within its benefits, distances Curren from a life of honor. When the young guerrilla John flinches at her touch, she reflects that "though it does me no good, I flinch from

chaos of quotidian event. To the extent that reality eludes quantification and extends beyond photographable surfaces, knowledge limited to what can be supported by conventional evidence will never feel satisfying. The imaginative push through the impermeable membrane of other minds and lost actions will always be a movement toward truth, not fantasy." Curren's exploration of the photograph, in this instance, represents in microcosm the enterprise of truth-telling in fiction. Nancy F. Partner, "Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions," in Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner, eds., *A New Philosophy of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 28. The symbolic importance of photography in *Age of Iron* also recalls the prohibitions on photography that existed under the States of Emergency in South Africa.

40 [40] J. M. Coetzee, "Apartheid Thinking," 163.

41 [41] Mongane Wally Serote, "Interview," in Attridge and Jolley, eds., *Writing South Africa*, 185.

the white touch as much as he does; would even flinch from the old white woman who pats his hand if she were not I." (AOI 79).

"What Men Live By"

In exile imposed by what Voegelin terms "a disease of the spirit," Curren seems intuitively to realize that "more need she the divine than the physician." 42 [42] This recognition clearly issues in the language of love and trust, but also focuses on the meaning of Vercueil's appearance in her life. As befits his name, his meaning is hidden, but Curren often wonders if he is an angel of death.⁴³ [43] Yet her first impression is that he is "not an angel, certainly. An insect, rather, emerging from behind the baseboards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs." (AOI 14) His final embrace of Curren, from which "there was no warmth to be had" ends the letter/novel. Without dwelling on the implications of this ending⁴⁴ [44] I would like to explore the allusion connected with Curren's provisional casting, when he first enters her life, of Vercueil in the role of angel: the Tolstoy story that she reads, "not the famous cancer story, which I know all too well" (AOI 14) but "What Men Live By," the story of an angel and a

42 [42] Voegelin quoting from *MacBeth* in "German University," 7.

43 [43] Vercueil has been interpreted in many ways by critics, often as an angel. See, for example, Benita Parry, who maintains that "the verbal abstinence of the drunken and incontinent Vercueil, who means more than he says, is appropriate to his metaphysical status as the unlikely incarnation of an annunciation." Benita Parry, "Speech and Silence in the fictions of J. M. Coetzee," in Attridge and Jolley, *Writing South Africa*, 153.

44 [44] which include, as Derek Attridge has mused, the possibility that Vercueil has murdered Curren. Attridge, "Trusting the Other: Ethics and Politics in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93.1 (Winter 1994): 68.

shoemaker.⁴⁵ [45] In this story, a disobedient angel is banished by God and charged with learning "three words:" "What there is in men," "What is not given to men" and "What men live by." (WMLB 354) The words are revealed to him in the course of six years' work in the home of a shoemaker and his wife, who take him in as an act of kindness. At the end of this time of exile, when he has learned the last word, the shoemaker's wife asks him to explain the three times he has smiled in their presence. The first time, when he has just come to them, is a response to the shoemaker's and his wife's compassion: their charity is not given out of abundance, but in spite of poverty. What there is in men, therefore, is love. After a year, the angel smiled again, when he saw another angel of death behind a wealthy man who had ordered a sturdy pair of boots from the shoemaker. "It is not given to men to know what they need for their bodies": not "boots for his life," in this case, but "soft shoes for his death." (WMLB 357, 359) Finally, the angel smiles again when he sees the orphaned children he had tried to protect by disobeying orders from God to take their widowed mother from them. God insists that the angel finish his task and the angel is exiled to life on earth. After six years with the shoemaker and his wife, the orphans appear with a woman who rescued and raised them. Thus the third smile is a recognition of what men live by: "not by what they do for themselves but because there is love." (WMLB 359) What men need to know is what is necessary not just for themselves but for all, and that necessity is love, which is God. The angel is forgiven and wings his way to heaven.

The Tolstoy tale turns on the cruciform logic of love, forecast by eight epigraphs from John I. The first of these is John I 3:14: "We know that we have passed from death unto life,

45 [45] Leo Tolstoy, "What Men Live By," in *The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy* Vol. XII, transl. Leo Wiener (New York : AMS Press, 1968, 327-355. Hereafter cited in the text as WMLB.

because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death." (quoted in WMLB, 327) Elizabeth Curren ponders the afterlife and the possibilities of redemption even as she clings to life. Her desire to be saved is at first linked with escape from the historical environment across "the one border they cannot close, I thought: the border upward, between the Republic of South Africa and the empire of the sky. Where I am due to travel. Where no passport is called for." (AOI 23) She ponders the possibilities of life after death. Will it be "a place to which you bring nothing but an abstract kind of clothing and the memories inside of you, the memories that make you"?(AOI 25) Or like standing room on a bus: "Promiscuous contact. Forever under the gaze of others. An end to private life"? (AOI 30) Later, she reflects that her life began with "a childhood of sleep, prelude to what was meant to be a life without trouble and a smooth passage to Nirvana:" But now,

"If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first threshold of the underworld. White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. White our color, the color of limbo: white sands, white rocks, a white light pouring down from all sides. Like an eternity of lying on the beach, an endless Sunday among thousands of our own kind, sluggish, half asleep, in the earshot of the comfortable lap of the waves. *In limine primo*: on the threshold of death, the threshold of life. Creatures thrown up by the sea, stalled on the sands, undecided, indecisive, neither hot nor cold, neither fish nor fowl. (AOI 92)

As it unfolds her letter has become more brutal in its truth-telling: "There is something as terrible as it is admirable in that will of yours," she writes to her daughter, "in the letters you write in which--let me be candid--there is not enough love, or at least not enough of the love-yielding that brings love to life." (AOI 139) Still later, as she contemplates and interprets a

photograph her daughter has sent--the two grandchildren in life preservers of "rubber or plastic or something in between,"--she wonders,

Why is it that this material, foreign to me, foreign perhaps to humankind, shaped, sealed, inflated, tied to the bodies of your children, signifies so intensely for me the world you now live in, and why does it make my spirit sink? But since this writing has time and again taken me from where I have no idea to where I begin to have an idea, let me say, in all tentativeness, that perhaps it dispirits me that your children will never drown. (AOI 194-5)

Curren imagines her daughter "flinging the page away...in disgust." She clarifies""Do I wish death upon my grandchildren?. . . . By no means do I wish death upon them. The two boys whose lives have brushed mine are in any event already dead." (AOI 195)

No, I wish your children life. But the wings you have tied on them will not guarantee them life. Life is dust between the toes. Life is dust between the teeth. Life is biting the dust.

Or life is drowning." (AOI 195)

Resonant in these late reflections of Curren's letter is not cruelty, but the wisdom of Tolstoy's angel as he learns "what is not given to men,": "It was not given to the mother to know what her children needed for life. It was not given to the rich man to know what he needed for himself." (WMLB 359) It is the angel's wisdom, speaking through Curren, that makes a last request on behalf of Vercueil: "There is no need to be sorry for me. But spare a thought for this man left behind who cannot swim, does not yet know how to fly." (197-8) Through doubt and pain, cruciform logic has held.

In the introduction to J. M. Coetzee's *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005*, Derek Attridge has noted that "if there are gleams of transcendence in Coetzee's novels, they are not only hints of a possible justice, but of justice animated, as well as tested, by a more obscure demand that the word 'spiritual' can only gesture towards--a demand already adumbrated, from Dostoyevsky on, by his formidable European predecessors."⁴⁶ [46] In *Doubling the Point*, David Attwell asked Coetzee about the ending to *Age of Iron* and its possible meaning for Elizabeth Curren: was "the promise of absolution" reflected in "the pact she enters into (or allows herself to fall into) with her Angel of Death, the derelict Vercueil"? Ever wary of colonializing discourse that might compromise the freedom of the novel, Coetzee replied, "the end of the novel seems to me more troubled (in the sense that the sea can be troubled) than you imply. But here I am stepping onto precarious ground, or precarious water; I had better stop. As for grace, no, regrettably no; I am not a Christian, or not yet."⁴⁷ [47]

In 1991, Coetzee maintained that "apartheid will remain a mystery as long as it is not approached in the lair of the human heart."⁴⁸ [48] Elizabeth Curren's sense that even as a child she had become a doll instead of a human being is a novelistic diagnosis of the heart's deformation by ideology. But the novel also offers a meditative anamnesis that more than hints at grace and the recovery of reality under God. Coetzee, as wary of the heart-speech of confession

⁴⁶ [46] Derek Attridge, "Introduction," in *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005* (New York : Viking Penguin 2007), xiv.

⁴⁷ [47] J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 250.

⁴⁸ [48] Coetzee, "Apartheid Thinking," 164.

as he is of colonializing discourses, is still deeply indebted to the refining, difficult Christianity of Dostoyevsky. It is in the heart, even a deformed heart, that cruciform logic must be confronted.
