

**THE USE OF THE FEMALE VOICE  
IN THREE NOVELS BY J.M. COETZEE**

**THESIS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates J.M. Coetzee's use of the female voice in In the Heart of the Country, Foe and Age of Iron, and is based on the premise that Coetzee's position as a male author using a female voice is important for readings of these novels. Although the implications of Coetzee's strategy are examined against the theoretical background of feminist or gender-related discourses, this study does not attempt to claim Coetzee for feminism, nor to prove him a misogynist. Instead, it focuses on the specific positional and narrative possibilities afforded by Coetzee's use of a female voice.

Chapter One comments on the fact that Coetzee's strategy of "textual cross-dressing" has not been given much critical attention in the past, observing that research on South African literature has largely been limited to studies of racial and colonial problematics. This introductory chapter mentions that the different female narrators in Coetzee's novels articulate aspects of a discourse in crisis, resulting in profound ambivalence in their representation.

Chapter Two observes that the female voices in Coetzee's novels invoke the textual illusion of a speaking/writing female body, and explains that this is useful in expressing aspects of what Coetzee refers to as the suffering body. Although Coetzee appropriates a female narrative position and employs certain subversive textual elements associated with "the feminine", attempts made by certain critics to label Coetzee's writing as *écriture féminine* are rejected as highly problematic. Instead, the study contends that the femaleness of the narrators relative to "masculine" discursive power enables Coetzee to perform a critique of power "from a position of weakness". Furthermore, the presence of certain "feminine" elements within these narrators suggests Coetzee's affiliation with characteristics derided within phallographic discourses, and becomes a strategic means of fictive self-positioning, of figuring his own position as a dissident.

Chapter Three is a study of In the Heart of the Country, and proposes that Magda is represented as a typical nineteenth century hysteric. Her hystericised narrative is linked to certain avant-garde narratives, such as the *nouveau roman* and "New Wave" cinematography, both cited by Coetzee as influences on the novel. Furthermore, the novel provides insight into the ambiguous role of the hysteric and dramatises the position of the dissident: on a discursive level Magda's narrative is subversive, and yet in terms of social "reality" her revolt is ineffectual.

Chapter Four addresses the issue of author-ity in Foe, and draws on Coetzee's affiliation with Susan Barton, the struggling authoress, whose narrative reveals the levels of power and authority operating within novelistic discourse when she asks "Who is speaking me?". The study observes that Foe also performs a critique of the power-seeking project of liberal feminism, as the novel sets Susan's quest for authorship against the background of a more radical "otherness", that of Friday.

Chapter Five asserts that Age of Iron exploits the ethical possibilities of a maternal discourse. Tracing parallels between images of motherhood in psychoanalytic feminism and in Age of Iron, this chapter argues that Krísteva's theory of abjection is relevant for a reading of Elizabeth Curren's position as a mother who has cancer. The childbirth metaphor as it appears in Age of Iron becomes an alternative and profoundly ethical way of figuring the process of novel writing.

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**ABBREVIATIONS**

In addition to standard abbreviations recommended by the MLA, the following abbreviations are used in this thesis in order to indicate book titles:

<u>AI</u>	<i>Age of Iron</i>
<u>DP</u>	<i>Doubling the Point</i>
<u>HC</u>	<i>In the Heart of the Country</i>
<u>LA</u>	<i>The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories</i>
<u>SAPW</u>	<i>South Africa and the Politics of Writing</i>
<u>S/TP</u>	<i>Sexual/Textual Politics</i>

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## CHAPTER ONE

**The Female Voice: Questioning Power from a  
Position of Weakness**

It is through my eyes that you see; the voice in your head is mine.

- Elizabeth Curren, in Age of Iron

## I

To date, J.M. Coetzee is the author of three novels that employ a female narrative voice. In spite of his evidently deliberate appropriation of a writing that conjures up the illusion of a speaking/writing female body, little attention has so far been given to Coetzee's apparent narrative and textual "cross-dressing".

Part of the reason for this, I suspect, has to do with Coetzee's position as a white writer in South Africa during the years of apartheid. Teresa Dovey, in an introduction to the 1990 J.M. Coetzee bibliography, points out that many scholars read the novels as representing a generalised view they have of the situation of white South Africans. She quotes Neil Lazarus for example, who claims that in its "obsessional quality of life", Coetzee's writing offers "just what we might expect to find in a body of literature that represents the white South African experience" (Dovey 6).<sup>1</sup>

In South Africa, the prominence of political issues has limited much research on South African literature to racial and colonial problematics; a preoccupation with the politics of race

has tended to deflect attention from the often more subtle issues of gender as manifest in discourse and representation. Zoe Wicomb, in an essay entitled "To Hear the Variety of Discourses" (1990), notes an inclination in South African political discourse to place "gender on the backboiler while mighty matters of national liberation are dealt with" (54). Until recently, this tendency has been symptomatic of the critical commentary on Coetzee's fiction. Sheila Roberts, in her 1986 critique of In the Heart of the Country, observed that while most previous commentators had focused on the colonial and racial relationships in the novel, few had concentrated on "the protagonist's bondage to an inflexible patriarchal culture" ("Feminism and Humour" 1).

The momentous political events of 1990, which included the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in February, can, in retrospect, be seen to have had an impact on the politics of gender in South Africa. In her 1991 preface to Women and Resistance in South Africa, Cherryl Walker noted that whereas in the past there had been almost "total indifference to the idea of women's studies within the academic community" (xi), as the defeat of apartheid became a reality, more serious attention was given to "the relationship between women's and national liberation" (xiii-xiv). Today, there seems to be an increasing awareness of the relation between gender issues and the cultural situation in South Africa. Barbara Bowen, for instance, writing a foreword to the recently published South African Feminisms, notes how there has been a "complicity between apartheid ideology and



the patriarchalism of nineteenth century Calvinism" (x), tracing a link between the policy of racial separation and phallocratic epistemology (xi).

Cecily Lockett observed in 1990 that "after a slow start", feminist writing and criticism were beginning to be accepted within the South African academe (3). Referring to the "Women and Gender" conference in Durban in 1991, Cherryl Walker noted that women's and gender studies were "experiencing something of a lift-off" (xiii). Publications such as South African Feminisms are testimony to the fact that the nineties have ushered in a variety of diverse and nuanced approaches to feminist and gender issues in South Africa. As Barbara Bowen points out, South African feminists have a complicated and difficult terrain to negotiate - theory and practices need to be developed which acknowledge different levels of oppression, such as those associated with sex, race and class, without blurring the boundaries between them too easily (x). Not surprisingly, international feminism has greatly influenced emerging debates and its relevance within the South African context has been a subject of contention.<sup>2</sup>

Internationally, feminist and gender-related theory has drawn attention to the importance of discourse analysis in so far as it reveals subtle systems of power that validate certain representations while rendering others taboo or invalid. Although feminism is a broad and dynamic enterprise which by no means consists of a single approach or voice, in all its forms it is

primarily concerned with exposing, challenging and undermining phallogentric power.

Coetzee claims that his novels set out to "question power... from a position of weakness" ("The Almighty Pen" 12). His female narrators write from marginal and disempowered positions in relation to oppressive masculine systems of power: Magda subverts her masterful father's "Law"; Susan Barton challenges Foe's masculine authority; and Elizabeth Curren rejects various patriarchal discourses of nationalism. Although, as Ian Glenn points out, Coetzee is "an academic widely read in feminist criticism" (130), there has been comparatively little emphasis on the contribution of gender-related or "feminist" discourses to his novels. As this study will show, Coetzee's literary aims do overlap with those of certain feminist approaches.

There have been an increasing number of critics who have noticed and commented on Coetzee's relation to academic feminism. Some, for instance, have suggested that Coetzee's use of a female voice is related to a "feminine" writing style or *l'écriture féminine*. Michael du Plessis claims that In the Heart of the Country embodies a "textual enunciation of femininity" (119), and Susan Van Zanten Gallagher proposes that the novel exhibits the stylistic features of *écriture féminine* (107). Similarly, Peter Morgan suggests that Susan Barton's narrative in Foe expresses a *philosophie féminine* (83).

As a novel which noticeably engages with various aspects of the feminist debate, Foe seems to have attracted a larger

proportion of gender-orientated criticism. Gayatri Spivak, a self-professed Marxist, deconstructionist and feminist, has used Foe to illustrate that "feminism (within 'the same' cultural inscription) and anti-colonialism (for or against racial 'others') cannot occupy a continuous narrative space" ("Theory in the Margin" 168); while Teresa Dovey has examined the way in which certain aspects of post-modern, post-colonial and feminist discourses intersect in Foe, and has drawn attention to the novel's implied critique of liberal/realist feminism (LA 356).

Pamela Dunbar suggests that Coetzee's "undermining of the feminist programme" in Foe may set him up for criticism from realist feminists (109). This seems to be an accurate observation: Nina Auerbach criticises Coetzee for not being able to write "women who live" (37), and Kirsten Holst Peterson disparagingly suggests that Foe represents "an elaborate dead end" for feminist readings (243). Josephine Dodd, examining the closing scene of Foe, has severe criticism for Coetzee's appropriation of Adrienne Rich's imagery, suggesting that his use and ultimate silencing of the female voice in Foe is nothing short of a "patriarchal trick of simply boring women into submission" (338).

Considering the development in gender-orientated critical responses to Coetzee's novels, it is quite surprising that the latest critical anthology on Coetzee's writings, Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee (edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson), has very little to say regarding Coetzee's appropriation

of a female voice. An exception to this is Benita Parry's essay "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee" where Parry identifies *two different discourses of the body*, performed by those who are outsiders or marginal to patriarchal culture and language. The first of these would belong to what Parry calls "protagonists of silence" (45). Common to these characters is not only a complete or partial lack of words, but an association with sexual impotence and even asexuality (45). Michael K lacks sexual desire and remains mother- rather than father-orientated; Friday's tonguelessness suggests "a more hideous mutilation" which is castration; and the uncommunicative Verceuil is imagined by Elizabeth as sexually impotent (45). The silence and asexuality of these characters, Parry notes, has been read as emblematic of their "homelessness" in and resistance to the phallogocentric order (45).

According to Parry, however, the silences of such figures as the "Hottentot" or "Bushman" in Dusklands, the barbarian girl in Waiting for the Barbarians, Michael in Michael K and Friday in Foe perpetuate colonialist modes of silencing such as those identified by Coetzee himself in the White Writing essays (52).<sup>3</sup> Parry argues that despite their seemingly transcendent states, these portrayals of silence are denied the verbal authority granted to Coetzee's female narrators, who, she claims, are exponents of a second type of bodily discourse, representing "the body as agent of language" (48).<sup>4</sup> Unlike the culturally subordinated figures in Coetzee's novels who are silenced, Parry

notes, Coetzee's female narrators speak or write from culturally authoritative positions, even while they express their antipathy towards the patriarchal system in which they find themselves (48).

Parry's argument draws attention to the complex set of power relations represented in Coetzee's novels. In the case of the female narrators, a tripartite structure may be observed - a female voice is used to invoke a discourse or a position that is marginal to a "father" discourse of power, and yet the female narrators reluctantly occupy positions of authority in relation to culturally subordinated "others". Parry, however, misinterprets the significance of the silence assigned by Coetzee to those who are culturally other. Michael Marais has pointed out that for Coetzee, silence takes on a meaning different from what it usually would in colonial or post-colonial fiction. Marais acknowledges that whereas silence "is usually" read as "the ancient language of defeat" (Salman Rushdie, quoted in Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire" 75), for Coetzee, silence is a "counter-strategy" which allows the other to express its alterity in relation to systems of power (75).

Parry is also not entirely correct when she claims that all Coetzee's female voices "explicitly represent the body as agent of language" (48). As I will demonstrate, not all Coetzee's female narrators articulate a bodily discourse to the same extent, and yet the narrative voices of In the Heart of the Country, Foe and Age of Iron do conjure up the illusion that it

is a specifically female body which says/writes "I".

David Attwell, who is responsible for two of the most comprehensive studies on Coetzee to date (J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing and Doubling the Point), writes the "Afterword" to Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee. He contends that this anthology, the first collection of essays on Coetzee published together, represents the establishment of Coetzee's reputation as a major novelist (213). Contemplating possible directions for Coetzee criticism in the future, Attwell notes the first obvious possibility is that of the "feminine narrators", acknowledging that this area has not been sufficiently examined (215). Attwell notes that "feminist readings of Coetzee have been slow to develop, perhaps because Coetzee seems in an immediate way to be a powerful ally of feminism" (215). Although I would agree with Attwell's suggestion that there are "feminine" elements represented in Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren which possibly express Coetzee's "self-positioning" in relation to various discourses of power (215), I must assert that their disempowered position is more or less a result of their *femaleness*. The presence of a specifically *female* body is invoked through the use of a *female* voice. For the sake of clarity, a distinction needs to be made between "female" and that most problematic term, "feminine".

## II

A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine.

-- Virginia Woolf

While "femaleness" and "maleness" are obviously a matter of anatomical difference, the terms "feminine" and "masculine" refer to characteristics that are culturally associated with being anatomically female or male. For this reason, whereas every culture has identifiable males and females, it is very difficult to make generalised definitions of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" across cultural boundaries, a point that Spivak makes when she criticizes First World feminists for imposing their definition of femininity and women's liberation onto third world women ("French Feminism in an International Frame").

Patricia Elliot accurately asserts:

gender/sexual difference is the more or less successful production of a relation between anatomical sex and a set of socially produced, mutually exclusive characteristics designated masculine and feminine. (5)

Femininity, then, is what it means to be female in a society or culture in terms of roles, associations and systems of representation. However, one should realise that cultural definitions of sexual difference usually work to separate "femininity" from "masculinity" in terms of binary, mutually

exclusive categories dictated by patriarchal culture. Because sexual difference is defined from within a phallogentric viewpoint where male sexuality is taken as the normative standard, there is a tendency to construct an "other" female sexual difference as precisely the inverse or mirror-image of masculinity, an inclination observed by Luce Irigaray in "Speculum of the other woman".

Literary theorists studying gender-related issues have asked if there is a connection between gender identity and textuality, whether an author's anatomy somehow manifests itself in his/her text. An article, "Do women do it better?", appeared in GH magazine recently with a section entitled "Can you tell the sex of a book?" This section presented the reader with six book extracts, two of which were by men and four by women, and challenged the reader to guess who the authors were (GH 95). Such a task is obviously riddled with complications. In order to speculate how a writer of a certain gender identity would write, the reader would, at some level, have to assert how a male or female author *should* write. Although there are certain biofeminist critics who argue that women are more likely to use certain biologically determined images or metaphors as a result of their female anatomy, Elaine Showalter points out that in its preoccupation with the "corporeal ground of our intelligence", feminist biocriticism can become prescriptive and forget that "there can be no expression of the body that is unmediated by linguistic, social and literary structures" ("Feminist Criticism"



338).

But what if one knew the sex of an author? What relevance does the gender identity of a writer have, now that post-structuralism has questioned the notions of coherent self and authorial presence? As Toril Moi asks, "What can 'identity', even 'sexual identity' mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?" (S/TP 49). Nonetheless, texts do not exist in isolation, and few would dispute that an awareness of an author's sex can change one's reading of a text. Consider the classic case of Olive Schreiner, who originally published The Story of an African Farm under a male pseudonym. Cherry Clayton points out that when readers in Victorian England discovered that Ralph Iron was in fact "a vulnerable and ardent colonial girl", the text suddenly had an "added charm" and was "more remarkable" for having been produced by a young woman ("Introduction" 8).

Despite claims to the contrary, it *does* matter who writes. In terms of metaphors, for example, a female author using the metaphor of pen as phallus to describe her writing would necessitate a different reading from a male author's use of the same literary trope. Similarly, as Susan Stanford Friedman points out in "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor", a male author's use of the childbirth metaphor to describe his process of "giving birth" to a text would have different readerly connotations to a female writer's description of her text as "progeny" (80).

There are those who claim that a text itself can have a

gender identity, independent of its author. These exponents of *écriture féminine* propose that "masculine" and "feminine" refer to textual effects or writing styles that are marked by "masculine" or "feminine" qualities. To identify elements in a text as "feminine", however, more often than not reverts to stereotypical notions of femininity as it is defined from within a patriarchal society - the feminine as the inverse/opposite of masculinity. Although attributed to so-called "French feminists" such as Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, *écriture féminine* is an American coinage, an often crude generalisation and simplification of psychoanalytic feminist theory, imported and translated from the French. As Moi has pointed out, theory written in French can be misleading in translation, particularly with regard to the French word *feminin*, which is the only adjectival form of *femme* (woman), meaning both "female" and "feminine" in translation (S/TP 97). In chapter two of this study, I will contend that the glib use of the term *écriture féminine* is more misleading than useful.

What then of the term "feminist"? This, like the use of gender-related metaphors in writing, would have different meanings depending on whether it were a male or female who was "being feminist". Importantly, as Toril Moi points out in "Men Against Patriarchy", although men can be feminist, they cannot occupy the same position in relation to patriarchal power structures as women (183).<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Felman noticed as early as 1975 "the increasing number of women and men alike who are

currently choosing to share in the rising fortune of female misfortune" ("Women and Madness" 3). In her 1991 introduction to Feminist Literary Criticism, Mary Eagleton comments on how "feminism is experiencing a flurry of male attention" (17), and observes that recently "the 'problem' of men has rumbled through feminism" (5).

Moi argues that the issue is not whether men are "feminist" or not, but whether they "take up a recognizable anti-patriarchal position" ("Men Against Patriarchy" 184). Coetzee's critique of masculine authority and systems of oppression, his tactic of questioning power "from a position of weakness" through the female voices in his novels, may be seen as allied with the feminist quest in what Peggy Kamuf describes as its aim to "expose the masks of truth with which phallogentrism hides its fictions" ("Writing Like a Woman" 286).

However, male textual and critical cross-dressing does not always evoke positive responses from feminist critics. In an article entitled "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year", Elaine Showalter investigates, with much suspicion, "the sudden cultural appeal of serious female impersonation" (120). Addressing the way in which certain male literary theorists have migrated towards feminism, Showalter's article is written with a sceptical attitude - she claims that for the most part, this move is motivated by the recognition that feminist literary theory offers male theorists a convenient mixture of "theoretical sophistication" and "political

engagement" (117). Showalter accuses the drag act of "virulent misogyny", labelling it as "caricature" and as insulting to women (121-22).<sup>6</sup> She quotes Spivak, who is also wary of the motives of "straight white male intellectuals" who have appropriated a feminist viewpoint. Spivak warns that "feminism in its academic inception is accessible and subject to correction by authoritative men" (quoted in Showalter 118).

Being a novelist and literary/cultural theorist, Coetzee would appear to be one of the "straight white male intellectuals" who has appropriated, not only a female voice, but also various aspects of academic feminism.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, speaking/writing from a female perspective allows Coetzee a certain amount of freedom to respond to and even to criticise specific feminist positions. Although the case could be made either way, there is nonetheless a point where the debate whether Coetzee is a "feminist" or a "patriarchal wolf in feminist clothing" becomes uninteresting, even vaguely absurd.

It is not the aim of this study to claim Coetzee for feminism, nor to prove him a misogynist. To subsume his novels under a political cause such as feminism would be to ignore the subtlety of other factors relevant to Coetzee's use of the female voice. I attempt to avoid such a reductive reading, and for this reason the chapters of my study which examine the novels rely on close textual analysis, thereby, I hope, opening up an area of debate by allowing the novels to "speak for themselves". The aim of this study is to observe what emerges from Coetzee's fictions

rather than to impose upon them some pre-conceived schema. My focus will be upon the *specific positional and narrative possibilities afforded by Coetzee's use of a female voice*. The extent and purpose of Coetzee's appropriation of certain aspects of feminist discourse will be examined in relation to this.

Whereas the term "appropriation" has pejorative connotations if used in an accusatory way, I would agree with Moi's comments in the section from her "Men against Patriarchy" entitled "Appropriating feminism: feminism and other struggles":

... in the global context today, oppressive sexual power relations are not always the most important (in the sense of the most painful) form of exploitation. While feminists have crucial insights to bear on other struggles... feminism is not a global discourse addressing all possible forms of oppression and exploitation. It is paradoxical... to denounce "male" appropriations of feminism for other struggles in terms which make us sound as if we want to appropriate all other struggles for feminism instead. (185)

Seen in the light of this argument, Coetzee's "male appropriation" of a female speaking/writing voice and various aspects of feminist theory has another dimension which relates specifically to Coetzee's position as a writer within the South African context.

## III

In his collection of essays grouped under the title White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa, a meditation on the literature produced by whites in South Africa, Coetzee writes of the post-1948, "neocolonial" period in South African history in which a party of Afrikaner nationalists attained power and implemented a policy of racial inequality and separation. He describes this period as one in which South Africa became cut off from Europe, in which moral ties were severed (11). According to Coetzee, the resultant "uneasiness" of this colony, now home to "the dubious colonial children of a far-off motherland", becomes a major factor in the writings of white South Africans (11). White writing in South Africa, Coetzee explains, "is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African" (11), and expresses the anxiety inherent in a displaced white identity.

Coetzee also notes the difficulty experienced by English-language poetry in reading/writing the African landscape, a feature that displays "a historical insecurity regarding the place of the artist of European heritage in the African landscape... an insecurity not without cause" (62). Coetzee's observations regarding a fundamental "unease" or "insecurity" in the psyche of white writers in Africa evidently also refer in some ways to himself as a writer.

In an interview with Stephen Watson in 1978, Coetzee stated his view of the contemporary South African situation as "only one

manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism" (quoted in Watson 13). David Attwell, in an introductory section to Doubling the Point, comments on the effect of the South African scenario on Coetzee's writing, maintaining that Coetzee "implicitly reflects on an encounter in which the legacies of European modernism and modern linguistics enter the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid" (3). He adds that Coetzee's concern is with "the nature and crisis of fiction writing in South Africa today" (4).

Coetzee's fiction, a response in many ways to this South African "crisis of fiction writing", is also the result of a more personal position, or, as Attwell puts it, a "self-positioning" in relation to aggressive discourses of power (such as those of colonialism and Afrikaner nationalism), and to the English liberal "culture of letters" within which he finds himself. Although an Afrikaner by descent, Coetzee occupies a marginal position in relation to Afrikaner culture, claiming that no Afrikaner would consider him an Afrikaner (DP 341). At the same time, Coetzee has an extremely ambivalent relation to the Anglo-South African academic tradition, a colonial tradition which he feels regressively tries to recapture the spirit of "Little England" (209).

Coetzee is an academic who has studied and taught both within South Africa and abroad (at the University of Texas and the State University of New York), affording him a critical perspective on the South African situation. Coetzee in fact, is a

classic case of the dissenting intellectual - significantly, his novels reflect the "self-positioning" of his own dissidence.<sup>8</sup> As I will show in the chapters that follow, Coetzee's use of a female voice in In the Heart of the Country, Foe and Age of Iron becomes an important strategy for both figuring a *crisis of authority in discourse* and expressing his marginal and dissident position in relation to various types of authority.

#### IV

There is always a voice in a story; at the very least, what is said presupposes someone who has said it.

- Claire Kahane, Passions of the Voice

Claire Kahane's observation that "there is always a voice in a story" may seem a renunciation of (or even a reaction against) post-structuralist theories that reject the presence of an author in a written text. However, arguing that words are related to audition, even when written, Kahane claims that if they are not spoken, they are "heard" within what she refers to as the "third ear" (xiii). Quoting Garrett Stewart, she writes that "inner audition need not in any sense subscribe to the myth of an originary Voice before the letter" (xiii). Thus, written words somehow create the illusion of voice, of presence, and in the case of homodiegetic narrators such as those used by Coetzee, the words create the illusion of character, of a speaking/writing body, even as these very "characters" or narrators may draw



attention to their own fictionality in a anti-illusionistic manner.

It is fairly significant that, in the case of In the Heart of the Country, Foe and Age of Iron, the words we read produce the illusion of a female voice, as if they arise from a specifically female writing/speaking body. The fact that it is a male author who is producing such an effect warrants a detailed analysis of this strategy. Coetzee is obviously not the first male writer to use a female voice. Molly Bloom's voice, her breathy "yes I said yes I will Yes", cannot fail to conjure up the "melonsmellonous hemispheres" of her "ample bedwarmed flesh" - her desire-infused, living, breathing, menstruating female body. Molly is praised by Kristeva for her *jouissance* (Desire in Language 151), an untranslatable French term loosely meaning "lack of lack", or "abundance", usually used in reference to female sexuality. And yet Molly, Joyce's "darling" (Henke 244), is the production of a male author. This ultimately prompts us to read Molly for her qualities as "a female projection of the male psyche" (234) rather than as an incarnation of female sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren may also be read as "female projections of a male psyche". However, unlike Molly Bloom who represents the feminine as ostensibly fertile, maternal and life-affirming, there is a noticeable "unease" or *ambivalence* inherent in Coetzee's female voices, an ambivalence partly related to the "crisis" of fiction writing in which Coetzee

finds himself.

In the Heart of the Country is the first of Coetzee's novels to use a female voice. As I will argue in Chapter 3, Magda's female anatomy, her "lack" of the phallus, becomes a way of figuring her position in relation to phallogentric power. Through Magda's position, Coetzee performs a critique of the power relations inherent in the *pere-version* (father version) of patriarchal Afrikaner discourse. His use of a female voice and supposedly "feminine" stylistic elements may be read, not as a manifestation of *écriture féminine*, but as an expression of "self-positioning". This "self-positioning" suggests Coetzee's affinity with qualities derided in a strongly patriarchal, authoritarian Afrikaner culture, qualities that can be associated with "femininity". Coetzee chooses the voice and narrative of Magda in order to figure his own dilemma as a writer in South Africa and as a dissident intellectual.

As Teresa Dovey has noted, in In the Heart of the Country one can observe the influence of Lacan.<sup>10</sup> Dovey's Lacanian approach, however, is quite evidently pre-feminist: she focuses on aspects such as the mirror stage and the oedipus complex in her analysis of Magda, ignoring what appears to be Coetzee's pre-empting of later feminist readings of Lacan. Furthermore, critical commentaries on the novel have apparently failed to notice that Magda is in many ways represented as a typical nineteenth century female hysteric, and that her hystericised narrative implicitly undermines the discourse of mastery. For

Lacan, the hysteric is innately subversive, she presents a challenge to the discourse of the master - and yet Coetzee's Magda is represented as accomplishing nothing, her monologue disintegrates into a strange incommunicable "Spanish" towards the end of the novel. The *ambivalence* of the hysteric as a subversive figure (is she subversive or conservative?) is represented in Magda, who, despite attempts to overthrow her father's power, remains subservient to him, even while her narrative disrupts the discourse of the paternal law.

Significantly, there is a relationship between Magda's hystericised narrative and certain avant-garde narratives, such as "New Wave" cinematography and the *nouveau roman*, both of which have been cited by Coetzee as influences on the novel (DP 59). As Claire Kahane points out in Passions of the Voice, during the early twentieth century, hysteria had become both a trope for modernism and "formalised as a poetics" that could represent the fragmented and divided subject of modernism (xv). Hysteria, Kahane claims, metaphorically and formally articulated the modernist "anxiety about 'feminine' vulnerability and self-fragmentation that would be exacerbated by the Great War and its mass deconstruction of the illusion of male heroism" (xv). Hysteria, among other things, is itself "a discourse in crisis", and Magda's subtly portrayed hysteria gives expression to a "crisis of authority in the voice", a feature exhibited in the case of all Coetzee's female voices.

In Foe, this crisis becomes a matter of author-ity - Coetzee

uses the figure of a struggling female authoress in order to take on broader issues that have to do with a crisis of authority in novelistic discourse, in the tradition of the novel itself. "Who has the authority to speak/write for whom" becomes the unresolvable question when Susan Barton asks "Who is speaking me?" (*Foe* 133). Whereas Magda's female anatomy had been a trope for her "lack" within a phallogentric power system, Susan Barton's writing does not invoke a female body to the same extent. Susan's disempowered state is the result of her female position as authoress in relation to the male author, Foe. Susan, however, can and does metaphorically assume literary power through her appropriation of the male author's "pen as phallus". Importantly, there is a direct engagement with feminist literary theory in *Foe*, evidently a result of Coetzee's exposure to certain feminist writings. Susan's assumption of literary power through her usurpation of the male author's literary tools is clearly a reference to the female writer's "anxiety of authorship" described in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a seminal feminist text by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

Again, as with Magda, a female character is represented ambivalently. This, however, happens on a number of levels. Firstly, Susan Barton wishes to recover her lost daughter, to be a mother. At the same time, however, she wants to assume masculine literary power and become "father to her story". Susan Barton wants to be both procreator (mother) and creator (author), roles that Susan Stanford Friedman claims are set aside as

mutually exclusive by patriarchal society (75). On another level Coetzee's actual treatment of Barton is ambivalent: he expresses his identification with her as the "unsuccessful authoress" in relation to Foe ("The Almighty Pen" 12); but the novel is also a critique of the power-seeking aims of a certain feminist project represented by Susan Barton's narrative, a critique which necessitates a certain amount of distance between Coetzee and his protagonist.

Although Age of Iron is generally taken as Coetzee's departure into realism and humanism, I will show in Chapter 5 that instead of being a complete break with the concerns of his earlier novels, Age of Iron may be read as Coetzee's consolidation of various aspects of the female voice. Metaphors of childbirth latent in In the Heart of the Country and Foe spill over into Age of Iron and become a strategic means by which Coetzee can describe the process of writing without becoming caught up in the problem of authority. If the "pen as phallus" metaphor explored in Foe connotes authority and dominance, the childbirth metaphor becomes a way of proclaiming the autonomy of the text, liberating it from closure and "death". The possibilities of the childbirth metaphor as articulated by a female voice would appeal to Coetzee - in an interview with Tony Morphet in 1987, Coetzee protested vehemently at being placed in any position of authority, including in relation to his novels ("The Almighty Pen" 12).

The childbirth metaphor as it appears in Age of Iron is

reliant on the textual "illusion" that it is a female body who writes of childbearing. Like Susan Barton, Elizabeth Curren is a mother, but whereas Susan's narrative challenges masculine power from a female "position of weakness", Elizabeth's voice conjures up not only a female position, but also a female maternal body. As "an academic widely read in feminist criticism" (Glenn 130), Coetzee must have been familiar with psychoanalytic feminist theorists, and with the debates produced by these theorists surrounding the notion of motherhood. Elizabeth's maternal discourse at times has all the attributes of a Cixousian "feminine economy", and yet even this representation of the feminine as nurturing mother is not without ambivalence. In the fallen and abject state of South Africa where ideals have been corrupted by violence and scepticism, Elizabeth Curren is a mother who has cancer. Significantly, it is her breast that Death has chosen for "his first shaft", and the tumours that devour her from within are described as grotesque children.

Coetzee moves from a Lacanian exploration of subjectivity in Heart of the Country via the figure of a hysteric, to a critique of the liberal and realist concerns of Anglo-American feminism in Foe, to an apparent affiliation with aspects of psychoanalytic feminism in Age of Iron. My study of Coetzee's use of female narrators has a structure determined by an engagement with theory followed by an analysis of these three novels. Chapter Two is largely theoretical, examining the implications of Coetzee's strategy as a male author using a female voice. Chapters Three,

Four and Five deal with the novels themselves, in a direct attempt to investigate Coetzee's use of the female writing/speaking voice.

Endnotes:

1. As Dovey notes, these sorts of generalised comments are possibly more interesting for what they reveal about a certain conception of the South African situation than for any detailed analysis of the novels (Dovey "Introduction" 6).
2. See Cecily Lockett's "Feminism(s) and Writing in English in South Africa" and Jill Arnott's "French Feminism in an South African Frame". Lockett contends that "post-structural feminism derived from the French models" (10) has limited relevance to the realities of race and gender oppression in South Africa, suggesting that "American feminism with its humanist and pragmatic concerns" is a more appropriate approach (11). Arnott, however, uses Gayatri Spivak's essay "French Feminism in an International Frame" to argue for the relevance of post-structuralist feminism in terms of Third World political realities (78).
3. In Age of Iron, a novel where racial others are not silenced, Parry accuses Coetzee of "ventroloquizing" the speech of the dominated ("Speech and Silence" 41). It seems that Coetzee, as a white writer, cannot win: either he is charged with silencing the countervoices in his texts (61), or else he is condescendingly "speaking for the other" (41).
4. Towards the end of her essay we discover that the main problem Parry has with Coetzee is that he is not a black female -- she suggests that only the writings of black women can provide an authentic critique of racism and patriarchal oppression existing in male-dominated articulations of the black literary tradition ("Speech and Silence" 56).
5. Moi makes a parallel here between feminism and the struggle against racism: "Men can be feminist. But -- and this is crucial -- they cannot be women. The parallel here is to the struggle against racism: whites can -- indeed ought to be -- anti-racist, but they cannot be black" ("Men Against Patriarchy" 183).
6. Showalter has a point here -- one has only to think of the representation of women in recently popular movies celebrating the drag-act (such as Dustin Hoffman in Tootsie, or the Australian production of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert) in order to confirm a relation between the drag-act and misogyny.
7. It may appear strange that although Coetzee has not thus far engaged with feminism directly in his theoretical writings, his novels seem to contain many references and links to various feminist texts. This characteristic, however, is typical of Coetzee -- in Doubling the Point he speaks of the difference between theoretical and novelistic discourses. The



latter, he suggests, allows him greater freedom to explore his encounter with theory (DP 60).

8. A link can be made here between Coetzee's position as a dissenting intellectual and the notion of "the coloniser who refuses" as mentioned in Stephen Watson's essay "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee". Using the concept of "the leftist coloniser" from Albert Memmi's The Coloniser and the Colonised, Watson notes the impossibility of Coetzee's position as a dissenting coloniser, linking this to the futility inherent in the predicament of Coetzee's protagonists (23).
9. Had Molly Bloom been written by a woman, there would be a difference in our reading of her. This is not to say that a woman writer would have necessarily produced a more "realistic" representation of femininity, merely that Molly would then be interesting for what she signified as the projection of a female, as opposed to a male, psyche.
10. As David Attwell points out, Coetzee's essay on Nabakov, "Nabakov's Pale Fire and the Primacy of Art" (1974), quotes Lacan in a discussion of the aggression displayed by Nabakov's characters (DP 29). I take this as evidence of Coetzee having read Lacan by the time In the Heart of the Country was underway. Coetzee has also acknowledged that, for him, Lacan is a "seminal thinker" (29).

## CHAPTER TWO

## Fictive Self-positioning

## I

In an attempt to explain Coetzee's use of the female voice, Benita Parry claims that the female narrators "explicitly represent the body as agent of language" ("Speech and Silence" 48). I have already mentioned, however, that although the female narrative voices in Coetzee's novels invoke the presence of a female speaking/writing body, not all these female voices articulate a *bodily discourse*.

Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren, at various points in their narratives, all infer that their stories proceed from a female body. Magda refers to her female anatomy when she describes herself "as a sheath, as a matrix, as protectrix of a vacant inner space", and says that she is "not unaware that there is a hole between [her] legs that has never been filled, leading to another hole never filled either" (HC 41). Susan Barton's narrative very rarely makes reference to her body and yet, on her journey to Bristol, Susan puts on a man's clothing and hides her long hair, "hoping to pass for a man" (Foe 101). This incident of cross-dressing indirectly draws attention to the presence of her female body, a body which apparently must be disguised for her own survival. Susan's act of hiding her body may be read as emblematic of the way in which she must renounce her femaleness

in order to assume the role of "father to her story". In Age of Iron Elizabeth Curren's voice repeatedly calls attention to the presence of her female body. She writes of bearing a child from her body, questioning whether this is "the same for a man" (69), and refers to the termination of her menstrual cycle: "for twenty years I have not bled" (59).

It is, however, the female voices of In the Heart of the Country and Age of Iron that most strongly articulate an explicitly *bodily discourse*. In the narratives of Magda and Elizabeth Curren, the body is alluded to as "agent of language". Magda says that the language she recognises is made up of body gestures and tonal variations:

I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformations of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded... That is why my words are not words such as men use to men. (HC 7-8)

Elizabeth Curren describes the words in her narrative, in her letter to her absent daughter, as "drops" of her body:

I render myself into words and pack the words onto the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. (AI 8)

There is evidently an overlap between these enunciations of

a bodily language and the femaleness of the speakers. In opposition to the language of her father, Magda claims for herself an alternative or "other" language, that is not made up of "words such as men use to men" (HC 8). Her affinity with a language of the body that is beyond analysis or recording, echoes the debate regarding a "feminine language" surfacing at the time during which the novel was written.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth's desire to transform herself into words which will nourish her daughter is closely related to her femaleness, to her status as a mother. Her bodily discourse is, more specifically, a maternal discourse.

The body, as it appears in his fiction, is never far from what Coetzee refers to as "the suffering body" (DP 248). In Doubling the Point, Coetzee says that, retrospectively, he sees "a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected" in his fiction, and this standard is the body (248). Speaking specifically of Friday's body, Coetzee explains that the body "becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt" and "the proof that it is is the pain it feels" (248). The suffering body persistently claims authority: "Its power", Coetzee contends, "is undeniable" (248).

In Foe, it is Friday, not Susan Barton, the female narrator, who represents a bodily mode of being. Friday, however (unlike Magda and Elizabeth), does not articulate a language of the body. Instead, his presence in the final section of Foe signifies a space outside of language, a place where "bodies are their own signs" (Foe 157). As Coetzee points out, although Friday cannot

speak, he "does not disappear, because Friday is body" (DP 248). In common with that of the barbarian girl in Waiting for the Barbarians, Friday's body bears the marks of its suffering: his tongue has been cut out, he has possibly been castrated, and the anonymous narrator at the end of the novel sees a scar about his neck, "left by a rope or chain" (Foe 155). Through these marks, Friday's body itself becomes a sign to be decoded.

When Magda and Elizabeth Curren articulate a bodily discourse, it is not only to evoke a female body, but also to draw attention to the suffering body. In both cases, this suffering is linked to the female voice. From the beginning of In the Heart of the Country, we are made aware of Magda's physical pain. She tells that she is "the one who stays in her room... fighting migraines" (1). Her bodily pain is represented as closely related to her emotional anguish: "I am a torrent of sound streaming into the universe, thousands-upon thousands of corpuscles weeping, groaning, gnashing their teeth" (10). Magda's hysterical conversion<sup>2</sup> links her pain to her femininity: hysterical symptoms "have the body as their theatre" (David-Menard 1); and hysteria, a predominantly female affliction, was, from its earliest definitions, associated with femininity (Felman 2).

In Age of Iron, Elizabeth's poignantly represented physical suffering is the result of cancer. She describes an "attack" of pain "hurling itself upon [her] like a dog, sinking its teeth into [her] back" (9). Metaphorically, her cancer is linked to her

female position as a mother - images of pregnancy are used to express her suffering. For instance, Elizabeth describes her cancer as a child which she cannot give birth to (75). In In the Heart of the Country and in Age of Iron, the employment of a specifically female voice plays an important role in expressing aspects of "the suffering body".

As an author who is deeply concerned with the issue of the body and its representation, Coetzee has used a female narrative voice and exploited the possibilities of a speaking/writing female body in three of his novels. And yet, Coetzee is a male writer. What would be the implications of a man creating the fictional effect of a female voice and conjuring up the presence of a female body? Does it matter at all that Coetzee himself has a male anatomy? Michael du Plessis, in his essay "Bodies and Signs", which deals with two novels by Coetzee and Wilma Stockenstrom, argues that "one must in no way confuse the body of or in a text with the body of a presumed author" (119). Du Plessis proposes that the fact that Coetzee is male is "irrelevant", and that "the anatomy of an author cannot determine the destiny of a text" (119).

Du Plessis' argument evidently arises from his reading of what he refers to as "the French feminists" (125). In his interpretation, the theories of writers such as Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva displace the issue of gender away from body of an author and onto the "body" of the text. He claims that both Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country and Stockenstrom's The

Expedition to the Baobab Tree exemplify "a textual enunciation of femininity" (119) and that these novels contain elements of language which are somehow "feminine", regardless of the sex of their authors (121).

Some important issues are raised by this argument. Du Plessis maintains that "femininity" may be innately present within a literary text, and that this "feminine" mode of writing is subversive by nature (120). I contend, however, that whereas it is possible to identify elements in a text as "feminine", the nature of this "femininity" needs qualification and critical examination.

Furthermore, Du Plessis seems to be referring to Barthes' articulation of "the death of the Author" when he argues that Coetzee's gender is irrelevant to a reading of In the Heart of the Country (119). It appears, however, that the author cannot be quite so easily banished: later in his essay, Du Plessis reveals that he cannot forget Coetzee is a man writing as a woman, and refers to In the Heart of the Country as an instance of "gender ventriloquism" (127). In the following sections of this chapter, I will firstly argue against the usefulness of labelling Coetzee's fictions as examples of *écriture féminine*. Secondly, I will contend that Coetzee's position as an author is by no means irrelevant to the reading of his novels. I hope to demonstrate that neither theories of authorial intention nor the effacement of the author from a text can structurally account for the complex relation that exists between an author and the body of

his/her writing. This study aims to examine the way in which Coetzee explores aspects of his own positioning through the female voices in his fictions.

## II

At times, Coetzee's novels not only involve narratives that apparently emanate from a female voice, they also employ allegedly "feminine" elements - attributes culturally associated with femaleness - in their stylistic and technical construction. These "feminine" elements would include features such as "gaps" and shifts in narrative time, various levels of indeterminacy and fluidity, as well as hallucinatory fantasies that would defy "reasonable" explanation. In In the Heart of the Country, Magda re-narrates different versions of the same story, her monologue is broken by gaps in her memory, there are confusing shifts in time. These elements all contribute to a sense of indeterminacy at the level of narrative. "Gaps and absences" seem endemic to her specific language and she describes her sentences as "gaping with boredom" while her voice "cracks and oozes" (8).

Theorists investigating the intersections between sexuality and textuality have drawn attention to a certain type of writing that displays subversive elements associated with femininity. This experimental and avant-garde writing has since been problematically referred to as *l'écriture féminine* in some American commentaries. The manner in which this term has been



applied to Coetzee's fictions by certain critics, however, is both clumsy and inappropriate.

Michael du Plessis and Susan Van Zanten Gallagher have both made a case for the way in which Magda's narrative in In the Heart of the Country resembles what Du Plessis refers to as "a textual femininity" (118) and what Gallagher asserts is "*l'écriture féminine* as defined by French feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva" (107). Gallagher writes that Magda's narrative "employs the repetitive structure, double voices, abrupt shifts and open ending of *écriture féminine*", and that Magda "attempts to write the body" (107). Although these commentaries bring the issue of a textual femininity into the foreground - an important step in Coetzee criticism - I would argue that they do not sufficiently qualify the term "feminine" and do not engage critically with the concept of *écriture féminine* which the novel supposedly enacts.

Perhaps Gallagher is too glib in her analysis. The term *écriture féminine* has never actually been "defined" by either Irigaray, Cixous or Kristeva. Cixous and Kristeva in fact both warn against defining a feminine style of writing. Cixous claims that, if it exists at all, this writing cannot be defined or theorised ("Laugh of the Medusa" 253). In an interview with Verena Conley in 1984, Cixous directly addresses the question of a "feminine" writing, pointing out that the term is "a dangerous and stylish expression full of traps, which leads to all kinds of confusions" (quoted in Cornell 36). She contends that her work

aims at breaking down inflexible conceptual frameworks, including the terms "masculine" and "feminine". Instead, Cixous speaks of a writing said to be masculine or feminine (36), steering away from prescriptive definitions of masculinity or femininity. Kristeva at times refutes the term *écriture féminine* altogether. In an interview with Francoise van Rossum-Guyon in 1977, she asserts that "nothing in women's past or present publications seems to allow us to affirm that there is a feminine writing (*écriture féminine*)" (quoted in Moi, *S/TP* 163).

Both Gallagher and Du Plessis refer to Kristeva and Cixous in particular as "the French feminists". Kelly Oliver, however, in her intensive study of Kristeva, points out that this monolithic term is by no means unproblematic. Oliver demonstrates that since the late 1970's, when their writings were first translated and published in America, Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray have been grouped together in what Toril Moi has referred to as "The Holy Trinity" of French feminist theory (Oliver 16).

Referring to "the French feminists" as Gallagher and Du Plessis do only serves to perpetuate this "Holy Trinity" and ultimately glosses over the complex theoretical ground negotiated by Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray. Such an approach results in gross oversimplification for the sake of representativeness, often misinterpreting or ignoring what each theorist is saying on an individual level. Du Plessis, for instance, writes that "all the French feminists try to sidestep the Symbolic order", citing

Kristeva as an example of this (125). However, in an article published in 1979 for the Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse, Kristeva in fact warns against a feminism which tries to denegate the Symbolic (Kristeva Reader 10). Du Plessis' attempt to locate a fixed viewpoint representative of "the French feminists" is particularly inappropriate in Kristeva's case, as the theoretical territory in which she operates is constantly being changed and re-assessed. Kelly Oliver has argued that Kristeva continuously and deliberately revises her position, oscillating between the priority she accords to the "Semiotic" and the "Symbolic" (Oliver 11).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, as Oliver argues, to classify Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray as "French feminists" is to perform a double misnomer. To begin with, although Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray may write in French, these theorists were not born in France and regard themselves as outsiders to French society and culture. Irigaray was originally from Belgium and Cixous was born in French occupied Algeria, where she spent her childhood (164). Born and raised in Bulgaria, Kristeva's experience in Paris was also that of an outsider - Barthes refers to her as *L'étrangere* which translates as "the strange, or foreign, woman" (qtd in Moi S/TP 150).

More importantly, however, neither Kristeva, Irigaray nor Cixous has an unproblematic relation to feminism (Oliver 164). All three theorists are sceptical of a feminism based on liberal and bourgeois values. Luce Irigaray refutes the term "feminism",

saying that it is a word by which the social system labels the struggle of women (164) and Cixous rejects a form of feminism that demands power within the present patriarchal system (Moi S/TP 103). In "Women's Time", Kristeva distances herself from what she refers to as two generations of feminism, both of which, she claims, are power seeking ideologies which attribute "woman" with cultish or religious value (Kristeva Reader 194).

Peter E. Morgan seems to be the only critic who reads Foe as articulating "feminine" literary effects or *écriture féminine*. His essay, "Foe's Defoe and *La Jeune Née*: Establishing a Metaphorical Referent for the Elided Female Voice", is, as the title suggests, a rather overly enthusiastic alignment between "Coetzee's project" and "Cixous' project" (87). Although one cannot accuse Morgan of misleading generalisations since he does not attempt to use Cixous as representative of "French feminism", he does assert that Cixous "attempts to embody *écriture féminine*" (82), without apparently being aware of her troubled position on this issue. Furthermore, Morgan seems to be confused about the potentially deconstructive aspects of Cixousian theory. He quite unproblematically blends "Cixous' project" with Susan Barton's liberal feminist attempts to attain power and authority in Foe (93).

Drawing on the images of women in The Newly Born Woman by Cixous and Catherine Clement, Morgan unconvincingly argues that Susan Barton is "a sorcerer, a hysteric, a displaced person, an everywoman" (87). He elaborates that, through its uncertain

narrator, fluid metaphors and transitions, Foe expresses the tentative state of a "philosophie feminine" (82). He apparently fails to notice that these aspects of Foe can only really be observed in the final section of the novel.

Although Foe is a story told by a female narrator, in the dreamscape that forms part IV, the "I" appears to refer to a narrator of unspecified identity and gender. While parts I, II and III are structured so as to show a development in Susan's authorial power and her attainment of a somewhat troubled selfhood, part IV seems to renounce the notion of a coherent self and the concept of the author as origin. Not only does this section, as I will argue, allude to the notion of "the death of the Author" and "the birth of the reader", it also appears to be the most "feminine" in terms of style, although this femininity needs some qualification.

Alice Jardine, who has coined the term "gynesis", claims that the "feminine" is a certain mode of writing which has subversive potential. This writing, she argues, unsettles fixed meanings, it is:

... a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives' own "nonknowledge", what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a "space" of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as feminine, as woman... (15)

Gynesis moves the issue of "woman" away from a fixed authorial

identity based on anatomy, towards a writing effect that is supposedly "feminine" (Eagleton 10). This writing effect, according to the theory of gynesis, destabilizes the notion of a coherent self.

There are, however, problems inherent in this concept of a "feminine" writing. In "Women's Time" Kristeva not only criticises "liberal feminists" who struggle for equality with men, she also calls into question the valorisation of "feminine" difference. She points out that the endorsement of "feminine" textual elements perpetuates the reduction of woman to "a modality in the functioning of language", to a position of inferiority and marginality (Oliver 134). Kristeva also contends that a radical veneration of "the feminine" as that which is opposed to the "phallic sign" can all too easily sink into "an essentialist cult of woman", into an "obsession with the neutralising cave... the negative imprint of the maternal phallus" (Kristeva Reader 11).

In an essay from White Writing entitled "Farm novel and Plaasroman", Coetzee demonstrates that he is aware of a trend which attempts to read femininity in a text, but that he is also alert to the dangers of this valorisation of a feminine "other":

Our craft is all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterites. Only part of the truth, such a reading asserts, resides in what writing says of the hitherto unsaid; for the rest, its truth lies in what it dare not say for the sake of

its own safety, or in what it does not know about itself; in its silences. It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn. (81)

While both Kristeva and Coetzee draw attention to an act of reading that endorses "feminine" textual effects as subversive, they also expose the problems inherent in such a strategy. Because "femininity" is always and already culturally defined, its presence in a text is dependent on this definition rather than being, as Du Plessis claims, "ineluctably inscribed" (121) within the text. In a patriarchal culture, femininity is necessarily "other", and there is the possibility that a radical "worship" of the feminine would merely invert phallocentric ideology and become another form of supremacy.

Although the term *écriture feminine* is highly problematic when used to venerate "femininity" within a text, there may, as Jardine points out, be subversive elements within a text which can be associated with what is culturally defined as "femininity". This link, however, was not originally made by feminism, but instead has been appropriated from the post-structuralist equation between "femininity" and "non-essence" or the destabilisation of fixed identity. As Toril Moi points out, a post-structuralist "feminist" approach would argue that the humanist integrated self is representative of phallocentric ideology, having at its centre the concept of "Man" and as its model the self-contained phallus (Moi S/T P 8). In her

introduction to Sexual/Textual Politics, Moi draws on the theories of Kristeva in order to argue that Virginia Woolf's writing contains subversive elements (linked to "the body" and to the pre-Oedipal mother) which unsettle the text, challenging fixed meanings and the notion of a unified self. Moi claims that in this way Woolf's writing is truly "feminist" (18).

If Coetzee is a writer who both employs a female voice and exploits certain elements associated with the "feminine" in his fictions, then some investigation of the relationship between "femininity" and writing is necessary, particularly in terms of its subversive and deconstructive potential. The following section briefly attempts to trace this link and also foregrounds the issue of the author's relation to his/her text.

### III

Barthes opens his famous essay, "The Death of the Author", with a description quoted from the short story "Sarrasine" by Balzac. The particular sentence Barthes chooses to stress involves the description of a castrato disguised as a woman: "This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings and her delicious sensibility" (167). Barthes, of course, uses this sentence to extrapolate that we will never know "who is speaking thus", that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (168). Significantly, Barthes continues:



"Writing is that neutral, composite oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (168). According to Barthes in this essay, writing destroys identity and origin, and defies the Freudian dictum "anatomy is destiny". Through the depersonalising medium of writing, it is possible for a castrato to "become" a woman - it is possible to masquerade as some sort of essential other.

Significantly, "The Death of the Author" opens with a question of the "feminine". What is at stake here is not only the issue of writing, but also the status and meaning of "woman". The Balzac sentence apparently sets up an essential femininity, but, as Barthes shows, this "philosophy of woman" (167) is in fact *inauthentic* - not only do we know that the "woman" is actually a castrato, but, according to Barthes, there is no author to authenticate the statement. In this context the meaning of "woman" is somehow elusive and indirectly linked to the effacement of the author.

Behind Barthes's essay lie the tactics of deconstruction and particularly Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of self-presence.<sup>4</sup> In Of Grammatology (1967), Derrida points to a metaphysical dualism that underlies Western philosophy, a dualism in which "spoken" language is privileged and treated as primary, whereas "written" language is regarded as derivative or secondary. The "natural bond" between sound and sense, voice and origin, Derrida exposes as a delusion, apparently engendered by a

tradition which represses "a feared and subversive writing" (Norris 29). Writing is subversive because it destroys the notion of pure self-presence, it is an "alien and depersonalised medium, a deceiving shadow which falls between intent and meaning" (28). According to Derrida, writing is alien, other, the repressed and even "the feminine". As Christopher Norris points out, Derrida makes a strange metaphorical link between Nietzsche's image of woman - "her seductive distance, her captivating inaccessibility, the ever-veiled promise of her provocative transcendence" - and writing as "the non-truth of philosophy, the dissolver of concepts" (71).<sup>5</sup> Derrida goes so far as to refer to himself (albeit playfully) as being perhaps "the first psychologist of the eternally feminine" (72).

Julia Kristeva, who arrived in Paris in 1966, the year in which Lacan's Ecrits and Foucault's The Order of Things were published, was very much part of the development of early post-structuralism.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Kristeva is suspicious of the term *écriture feminine*, she does, in Revolution in Poetic Language (1974), allude to "semiotic" elements within language, which are associated with the infant's earliest memory of the rhythms and pulsations of the maternal body. According to Kristeva, these "semiotic" impulses are dialectically opposed to "symbolic" elements, which are identified with syntactical structure and grammatical order. In the case of certain avant-garde writers and poets (she mentions Lautreamont, Mallarme and Joyce), these spasmodic forces are allowed more expression and thus "erupt"

into the text, producing an effect that resists intelligibility or rational explanation. Linguistically these subversive impulses can be read as gaps, narrative breaks, shifts, fantasies and apparent lack of logical construction (Moi S/T P 162). They are linked to the body and particularly to a "space" within the maternal body that Kristeva refers to as the *chora*.<sup>7</sup>

In A Lovers Discourse (1978), Barthes proposes an eroticised or sexualized theory of the text. He draws attention to the way in which certain elements in language elude the mastery of reason or any paternal law that might be detrimental to the pleasures of reading (Norris 72). In his article, "A (Sub) Version of the Language of Power", James Wohlpart suggests that there are two levels on which In the Heart of the Country may be read. He claims that the first reading, which involves the "story", demonstrates "a lack of radical political agenda" (221). In other words, Magda fails to transcend her position, to subvert the dominant ideology. On what he refers to as "a higher level", the level of "narrative technique", Wohlpart proposes that the novel achieves "a true political thrust" - it enacts what Barthes refers to as a "writerly" text, presenting indeterminacies in the narrative and thereby allowing the reader to participate in the creation of its meaning (224).

Wohlpart's evidently post-structuralist reading of In the Heart of the Country posits that there are elements in the novel that elude or subvert mastery, creating "a true dialogue of equality" between the reader and the text (224). Although

Wohlpart does not link the subversive narrative technique of In the Heart of the Country to femininity, it is hardly surprising that certain writers have appropriated Barthes "sexualisation" of the text and the allegedly "feminine" status of Derrida's *écriture* in terms of what may loosely be referred to as feminism.

In "Sorties", for instance, Helene Cixous draws on Derrida's observation that human apprehension works in terms of binary oppositions where the second or "feminine" term is always secondary and "other". Cixous proposes that the two terms of the binary are not a co-existent couple, but a "universal battlefield" where "Death is at work" (64). She claims that she is urgently looking for "a kind of desire that wouldn't be in collusion with the old story of death" (78). As a way out of these patriarchal binaries, Cixous proposes an "ethics of difference", based on Derridean *differance*. *Differance* translates as both "difference" and "deferral" (Moi S/TP 106), and is used by Derrida to describe the system of signs that make up *écriture*. According to Derrida, *écriture* endlessly *defers* meaning, and thus questions systems of representation and undermines claims to ultimate "truth". Cixous appropriates this notion of *écriture* when she urges her readers (particularly her female readers) to write, to break down the systems of representation that bind them in subordinate positions or in positions of mastery. In terms of gender, Cixous seeks to affirm women's positive *difference*, linking "woman" to images of "the good mother" who, she cautions, functions as "a metaphor" rather than as a reduction of the

feminine to maternity ("Laugh of the Medusa" 252).

During the course of this study, I have found remarkable parallels between Coetzee's fictions and the writings of Kristeva and Cixous, particularly in the case of Age of Iron, the last novel to date in which he uses a female voice. Coetzee, not unlike Kristeva and Cixous, reacts against traditional or "master narratives" and chooses to write experimental, vanguard texts. Like Kristeva, whose essay on dissidence reveals that she has lost faith in collective political action (Kristeva Reader 8), Coetzee admits to being deeply suspicious of political language, of "masses of people" joined around a common cause (DP 394). This unease is expressed in Age of Iron, where Elizabeth Curren rejects the Afrikaner politicians' speeches, with their "deadening closes" (8), and the "death-driven" ideal of "comradeship" (137).

Reflecting on the nature of writing, Elizabeth writes: "Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death" (106). This statement may be interpreted in two ways. At the level of the "story", Elizabeth is going to die, her letter will end, and therefore death is literally the last great foe of her writing. On a metafictional level, however, Coetzee is suggesting that writing, and particularly his fictional project, defies the "deadening closes" of power and the "death-driven" logic of patriarchal binaries. This very closely parallels Cixous' vision of writing. I have already mentioned that in "Sorties" she performs a critique of

binary metaphysics and proposes "a way out" based on the "difference" stirred up by writing. In "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous aims to show that "writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other... undoing the work of death" (254).

Age of Iron also engages with an "alternative" discourse of motherhood, exploiting different aspects of "the mother" also explored in the work of Cixous and Kristeva. As I will argue in Chapter Five of this study, Elizabeth Curren in many ways articulates a version of Cixous' "feminine" or "gift" economy, based on the figure of "the good mother". Kristeva's notion of abjection, however, is closer to the profound ambivalence that marks Elizabeth's narrative and is probably more relevant to Elizabeth's representation as a mother who has cancer. Kristeva's theory also serves to explain the way in which Elizabeth's maternal discourse is abjected by various forms of dominant discourse.

Although at some stage Coetzee must have been exposed to continental theory, including the writings of Kristeva and Cixous, my study of his fiction is not an attempt to trace genealogical influences. Nor do I wish to imply, like Gallagher, Du Plessis and Morgan, that his novels are better examples of *écriture féminine*. The links between Coetzee, Cixous and Kristeva reveal similarities in aspects of their ethical vision and also connect the *positioning* of these writers. I use the term "positioning" in order to stress that this is a self-conscious

manoeuvre - these writers are aware of and exploit their situation as *dissidents*, opposing themselves to power structures at an ideological level. I will return to the importance of this point later in this chapter.

David Attwell, in his afterword to Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee, suggests that Coetzee uses the female voice in order to express and explore his own "self-positioning" (215). This positioning involves a "fictive" act, meaning that it takes place in a very specific discourse - that of novels. As Catherine Stimpson points out, a male writer "cannot speak, except fictively, of, for, to and from the female" ("Ad/d Femininam"). Coetzee's use of the female voice, then, is partly an enactment of *fictive self-positioning*. As Ian Glenn points out in "Game Hunting in In the Heart of the Country", although Magda is not a character in the realist sense (122), she does operate as an alter-ego for Coetzee, allowing him to explore his position as a writer (128).

From a post-structuralist viewpoint, however, the term "fictive self-positioning" could be a paradox. In his novels, Coetzee is obviously writing fictively, and not in the form of direct autobiography. If, within this fictive space, he is using avant-garde elements which would deconstruct the notion of fixed identity, then to what extent may Coetzee's own identity or position be read as relevant in a study of his fiction? Is it a mistake, as Perry Meisel concludes, "to insist on the coherence of self and author in the face of a discourse that dislocates or

decentres them both" (quoted in *Moi S/TP* 18)?

The question would ultimately be whether one could associate Coetzee's "self-positioning" at any level with the positions of his characters or with qualities which they possess. According to Barthes and Foucault, the author should ultimately be effaced from his/her writing. And yet, as I will argue, even in the theoretical undertakings of these critics, the banishment of the author is not absolute.

In his article "Bit by Bit", John Sturrock points out that "even in his laboratory phase, when he was jubilantly dissolving Balzac in an acid bath, Barthes didn't in fact insist that the Author-figure be banished altogether from the scene" (6). Sturrock demonstrates that Barthes, in his book Sade, Fourier, Loyola, still refers to the author as "site" and "source" (6).

Foucault's essay, "What is an Author?", examines "the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it" (115). In a similar vein to Barthes, Foucault proposes that writing is "an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears" (116). Foucault points out that, like the concept of "man", the idea of the author is historically specific rather than timeless or unquestionable. An author, Foucault argues, is a merely a "function" within a certain type of discourse. An author's name does not only have the indicative function of day-to-day usage, it is more like a "description" (121), and has a classificatory function, grouping together a number of texts in order to separate them from others (122).



Although Foucault is suspicious of "the absolute nature and creative role of the subject" and advocates a future space where discourse would operate without needing an author, he paradoxically adds: "But the subject should not be entirely abandoned" (137).

In The Death and Return of the Author, Sean Burke responds to Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, and convincingly argues that the concept of the author most powerfully asserts itself when it is thought absent or pronounced "dead" (6). Without reverting to a humanist defence of the author or a rejection of post-structuralist theory, Burke draws attention to serious inconsistencies in the arguments of those theorists who so adamantly deny that a writer's life has any relevance to an interpretation of his/her work. Burke suggests that Paul de Man, for instance, may have had very personal reasons for dispensing with the notion of authorship.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, Burke argues that "the authorial subject returns, the autobiographical disrupts, enhances and displaces aspects of their work" and this, he adds, "takes place almost instantaneously with the declaration of authorial departure" (7). In his conclusion, Burke examines the relationship between critic and author, claiming that the death of the author emerges as a blind-spot in the work of these post-structuralist writers. He argues that critical theories, which are all more or less "a reduction of the idea of text to a clear uncluttered field" (173), are ultimately confounded when

faced with the concept of the author. In its attempt to provide a universal theory of the author - or of the author's absence - literary criticism cannot account for the complexity of the issue or the many differences between authors. In the case of the author, critical theory therefore "cannot withstand the practice of reading" (173). As Burke asserts: "the promulgation of textual theory can no more elude the question of the author than contain it" (173).

Helga Geyer-Ryan, in "Literature and the Ethics of the Other", proposes that although literary texts "constantly summon the faces of their authors", the face itself is simultaneously appealing and impenetrable, it is "an inscription of an import for which no code exists" (3). Geyer-Ryan uses the notion of the "face of the other", developed by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, in order to argue that the style of text is also an inscription which "witnesses the impact of otherness" (3). The alien trace of the other person, of the other "text", can ultimately never be recuperated: "the author of a literary text might be dead, whether literally or metaphorically, but the faces conjured up by the work live on as the other of the text" (3-4). Drawing on Kristeva's Strangers to Ourselves, Geyer-Ryan points out that the heterogeneity of the other (in this case the author) is increased by the psychoanalytic perception of a split subject who does not even know himself/herself (3). Perhaps it is this irretrievable alterity that confronts us when we read and confounds theoretical incorporation.

Within feminist literary criticism itself, there is little consensus regarding the concept of the author. The double-bind between the Barthesian will to escape authorial tyranny and the "knowledge" that a novel does gesture in some way to an authorial identity has posed a major problem for feminist theory. Gynocriticism, a term coined by Elaine Showalter, dedicates itself to writing based on female experience and therefore insists on the importance of a female signature. The advocates of gynesis, however, regard the gender identity of an author as irrelevant, and instead search for "feminine" effects within the text itself. Peggy Kamuf's paper, "Replacing Feminist Criticism", questions realist feminism's "unshaken faith in the ultimate arrival at essential truth through the empirical method of accumulation of knowledge, knowledge about women" (59). Kamuf thus rejects theories of biological determinism and would evidently rather that feminist theory address itself to aspects of textual production that put the "feminine" into play.

In an exchange with Kamuf at a Symposium on Feminist Criticism in 1981, Nancy K. Miller argued that although the author has apparently been killed off along with 'man', "society did not wait for the invention of man to repress 'woman'... and the 'end of man' in no way precludes the reinscription of woman as Other" (64). In response to Foucault's question "What matter who's speaking?", Miller answers that it does matter to women "whose signature - not merely their voice - has not been worth the paper it is written on" (68). She contends that post-

structuralism "authorises the 'end of woman' without consulting her" (68).

It would appear that the issue of authorship, the manner in which a literary text apparently gestures to a figure "behind" it, is also problematic for Coetzee. Although he claims that "in a larger sense all writing is autobiography" and refers to writing as an "enterprise of self-construction" (DP 17), Coetzee is extremely pained by any attempts to place himself, in a personal capacity, in relation to his novels. In an interview with Andre Viola concerning Age of Iron, Coetzee refuses to comment on the personal circumstances behind the novel (6). Coetzee is also well-known to evade questions dealing with authorial intention in his fiction. Because of his unwillingness to talk about his novels, and his evasiveness when pressed to do so, Coetzee has been dubbed "the invisible man" by journalist Margaret von Klemperer (11). There is no doubt that Coetzee has severe objections to interviews by journalists concerning his novels, comparing these to "courtroom interrogations" (DP 65).

Doubling the Point, the collection of essays and interviews edited by David Attwell, is a remarkable publication in that Coetzee actually does speak about his fiction.<sup>9</sup> In one of these interviews with Attwell, Coetzee defends his evasiveness and the distance he sets up between himself and his novels. He says that his concerns as a novelist differ from those of the interview genre, which attempts to draw out the truth through speech. For himself as a writer, he claims, "truth is related to silence, to

reflection, to the practice of writing" (65). Coetzee's proposal that "speech is not a fount of truth but a pale and provisional version of writing" (65) apparently echoes the Derridean argument undermining the primacy of speech. Similarly, his refusal to speak about his novels, his insistence that they "speak for themselves", could be related to the deconstructionist effacement of the author as source or origin. This strategy may also be interpreted as evasive and defensive. Coetzee claims that he does not regard himself as a public figure, that he dislikes the violation of privacy in the typical interview (DP 65). As I will demonstrate in this study, however, Coetzee's refusal to occupy a position of power in relation to his fictions is motivated by profoundly ethical concerns, and the female voice plays a strategic and important role in expressing these concerns.

I mentioned earlier that there are definite parallels between the ethical vision of J.M. Coetzee and the viewpoints expressed in the work of writers such as Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous. These affinities, as I will demonstrate, can be linked to the positioning of these writers, intellectuals who occupy dissident and marginal positions in relation to the cultures in which they find themselves.

#### IV

I have already mentioned the problem inherent in classifying Cixous and Kristeva as "French feminists" since neither of these

writers are actually French. Kristeva and Cixous were foreigners in France, and, in both their cases, this situation was a formative influence on their work. As a German-speaking Jew, Cixous was exiled from her place of birth by the Algerian War (Cornell 31-32). Born in 1937, her Jewishness was set against the rise of totalitarian regimes, the nightmare of the Nazi concentration camps. Reading Etty Hillesum and Paul Celan, Cixous proposes that "Jews and poets are exiles", and that she is doubly an exile (Conley 103). Exile becomes an issue of "not belonging", and this, Cixous suggests, is an integral part of being a writer (104).

Kristeva too claims to be "speaking the language of exile" (Kristeva Reader 298). "How", she asks, "can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity? Writing is impossible without some kind of exile" (298). Roland Barthes noted that Kristeva was always foreign to the academic scene she was in, and that this contributed to her radically subversive attitude to the new semiology (Kristeva Reader 3). As Toril Moi points out, Kristeva had an Eastern European educational background which afforded her a critical position in relation to the structuralist trends in Paris during the 1960's (2). Moi notes that Kristeva's experience was marked by her "strangeness" both as a foreigner in Paris and as a woman in male-dominated theoretical territory (3). This exiled and marginalised position, as Moi asserts, was one of the major formative elements of

Kristeva's career.

Coetzee has himself been something of an exile. In the final interview in Doubling the Point, he speaks retrospectively, in the third person, about his perception of his own "story".<sup>10</sup> He tells of his desire as a young man to "shake the dust of [South Africa] from his feet" (393). Coetzee adds that in Britain and in the United States, he had not felt homesick, he merely felt "alien" (393). This sense of "alienness", he infers, was not a result of being "alienated" in a strange country, it was a feeling that went "further back in time" (393). He describes "a sense of being alien" which went "back far in his memories":

His years in rural Worcester (1948-1951) as a child from an Afrikaans background attending English-medium classes, at a time of raging Afrikaner nationalism, a time when laws were being concocted to prevent people of Afrikaans descent from bringing up their children to speak English, provoke in him uneasy dreams of being hunted down and accused; by the age of twelve he has a well-developed sense of social marginality. (393)

Coetzee suggests that his early experience of "social marginality" confirmed his sense of being outside a dominant or "core" culture (DP 394). Although he was born into an Afrikaans family, Coetzee's parents were apparently "Bloed-Sappe", liberal Afrikaners who supported General Jan Smuts and remained uninvolved in the nationalist movements of the day (Malan 20).

Coetzee's education was largely in English, as he obtained honours degrees in English and mathematics at UCT, and studied literature and linguistics abroad ("Chronology" 15). On the other hand, however, his Afrikaans heritage possibly increased his affinity with other Afrikaner intellectuals who had imported avant-garde or modernist discourses, enabling him to access these in his own writing (Wade 203).

As a result of his background, Coetzee is also something of an outsider to both English and Afrikaner culture, a position that affords him a critical and dissident relation to both Afrikaner nationalist discourse, as well as to the glorification of "Little England" symptomatic of Anglo-South African English studies (Wade 202-203). Magda's, for instance, is a female voice within a rigidly patriarchal Afrikaner culture: although In the Heart of the Country is written in English, the dialogue sections of the novel were originally written in Afrikaans. This disjunction between the language in which Magda thinks/writes and the language of her culture suggests that she is both part of and an outsider to this culture, possibly reflecting Coetzee's own position.

In an article published as an editorial in *Tel Quel* (1977), entitled "A New Type of Intellectual: the Dissident", Kristeva states that the figure of the dissident is a "spectre" which haunts Europe (Kristeva Reader 295). She suggests that in contemporary Western society, the inevitable situation of the intellectual, "the unemployed of the future", is one of



homelessness. This homelessness is closely related to the "dissident function" of the intellectual (294).

According to Kristeva, the intellectual, whose realm is that of the discursive, has an awareness which comes from being an "outsider" to society - he/she calls into question the "safety mechanisms" of society, but at the same time is subject to self-scrutiny (perhaps what Foe in Coetzee's novel refers to as "the endless trials of doubt"). This crisis in identity, Kristeva argues, makes the dissidence of the intellectual all the more radical (295). She isolates three types of dissidents: Firstly, there is the rebel who actively attacks political power, but whose strategy only perpetuates systems of power and mastery. Secondly she writes of the psychoanalyst, who necessarily challenges religious discourse. As a third type of dissident, there is the writer who "experiments with the limits of identity", whose texts are fields of "play" where the law is "overturned, violated and pluralised" (295). As an afterthought, she mentions a fourth type of dissidence, "sexual dissidence", implying that to be a woman is to be "in exile" or marginal in a very specific way (296).

Like the intellectual Kristeva describes, Coetzee operates in the realm of the discursive. His position of "alienness" in relation to dominant culture and discourse makes him acutely sensitive to the "crisis of fiction writing" in his country. His dissent, however, takes the form of experimental and subversive fiction writing in which his protagonists express a "crisis of

authority in discourse". The "sexual dissidence" of women mentioned by Kristeva also serves to shed light on Coetzee's use of a female voice; as the "femaleness" of Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren operates in order to show their "sexual dissidence", their "displacement" within a phallogentric social order. As David Attwell suggests:

Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren are all displaced figures who resist pre-existing and more dominant modes of address, seeking to define themselves in worlds not of their own making. (Afterword 215)

If Coetzee benefitted in some ways from his neither-English-nor-Afrikaans identity, and from his position as a dissident intellectual, he cannot escape the political marginalisation and impotence that comes with his situation. In the face of the aggressive discourses of Afrikaner nationalism and emergent Black militant movements, white English-speaking intellectuals were completely marginalised and either seen as weak and effeminate "bleeding heart" liberals or accused of paternalistic colonialism (Wade 198).

Stephen Watson has pointed out that in South Africa after 1948, the English speaking intelligentsia was increasingly "left out in the cold" (26). Interestingly, Watson uses images of *degeneration* in order to describe an intelligentsia divorced from an active social role: "Deprived of a role, an intelligentsia, like any other social organ, decays and begins to exhibit every type of morbid symptom" (26). In this analysis, the figure of the

degenerate intellectual is opposed to men and women who perform an active role in society. As I will demonstrate, the notion of degeneracy may be linked to certain "feminine" elements represented in Coetzee's female narrators, suggesting that, through the female voice, Coetzee dramatises and consciously demystifies his position as a "degenerate" intellectual and writer.

In "Blood, Taint, Flaw, Degeneration", a chapter from White Writing in which he examines the "poetics of blood", Coetzee attempts to trace the ideas associated with blood and degeneration that may have influenced Sarah Gertrude Millin, whose work, Coetzee claims, is obsessively preoccupied with blood (WW 139). Pointing out that the notion of blood as "locus of life and identity" is as old as civilization, Coetzee traces what he refers to as a "vocabulary of degeneracy" (145). He observes that nineteenth century Science employed the notion of degenerate blood and a version of Social Darwinism in order to explain the social problems within an increasingly industrialised society, and in order to justify the idea of superior and inferior races (142-145). There was the impression that in the struggle for survival, there were "pure" men, "strong, unreflecting barbarian types who 'make' history", and other "degenerates", men who were physically weak, intellectual, "watered down" and ineffectual (145).<sup>11</sup>

Coetzee points out that the rapid changes in nineteenth century Europe did not only usher in an ideal of industrial

progress; there was also the idea that Europe was becoming diseased and decadent (WW 141). Among those regarded by the "objective" eye of Science as "degenerate elements" within this society were the figures of the hysteric and of the "decadent artist" (WW 142). As I will argue in Chapter Three, Magda is represented as a hysteric, linking her "femininity" to her degeneration. Magda's degeneracy as a female hysteric enables Coetzee to dramatise his own position in a country where the intelligentsia had apparently lost its social function (Watson 27), and where his fiction has been seen as "too learned, too intellectual" (Glenn 121), even decadent.<sup>12</sup>

In In the Heart of the Country, Magda warns that she might not be "a woman with red blood in her veins". Her meditation here runs as follows:

A woman with red blood in her veins (what colour is mine? a watery pink? an inky violet?) would have pushed a hatchet into his hands and bundled him into the house to search out vengeance. A woman determined to be the author of her own life would have not shrunk from hurling open the curtains and flooding the guilty deed with light... (62)

This passage may be read on many levels, three of which I will discuss here. On a literal level, Magda is articulating a Hamlet-type crisis, saying that she does not have the gumption to take control of her life but is instead distracted into a maze of dithering by her own thoughts. On another level, as Glenn suggests (125), she could be referring to her own textuality,

telling us that she is not a real woman but a textual one made of "watery ink".

There is, however, an instance in the novel where Magda speculates on the degeneracy of her lineage (HC 23), suggesting that on another level she could be a articulating Coetzee's own position as an intellectual in a culture that values the "red-blooded barbarian", the man (or woman) of action, as opposed to the "degenerate" watered down intellectual. This distinction within the novel is also figured in the representation of Magda's father and grandfather, the "red-blooded barbarians" whom she imagines galloping up to the farmhouse one day, "pistolled and bandoliered", instituting "a reign of brutishness" (HC 46). Through this representation of Magda's father and grandfather, Coetzee performs a critique of the unreflecting and unethical "brutishness" so typical of "full-blooded men".

Age of Iron also draws on this "vocabulary of degeneracy", but, as I will argue in Chapter Five, through Elizabeth's voice the notion of degeneration linked to "femininity" takes on another dimension. Susan Sontag's "Illness as Metaphor" mentions the metaphorical association between cancer and "degeneration", noting that not only is cancer a disease where the body is corrupted from within, but, like hysteria, it is also a disease associated with the "degenerate" and affluent middle classes (14). Kristeva's theories of abjection are particularly relevant to the concept of degeneration as it appears in Age of Iron.

In Powers of Horror (1980), her response to the writings of

Celine, Kristeva notes the presence of abjection in the human psyche. In terms of the psychological development of the subject, abjection stems from a struggle to separate from the maternal body (Oliver 56). Abjection is an attempt to distance oneself from something that threatens identity - the abject both fascinates and disgusts: "it makes you want to vomit" (Oliver 55). In contrast to the blissful borderlessness of Cixous' "feminine" economy based on the good mother, the abject is associated with "the abject mother"; it excites disgust, horror and terror, precisely because it does not respect borders. Kristeva writes that abjection "is an extremely strong feeling...it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so" (Powers of Horror 135-136).

As a mother who has cancer, Elizabeth's "devious discourse" (AI 75) is not only degenerate, it has been "abjected" by two "death-driven" versions of the-law-of-the-father, these being the Afrikaner nationalists and the power-seeking Black militants. Elizabeth describes both of these *pere-versions* as "the new Puritans", who are "suspicious of all that is idle, roundabout, yielding" (75). The abjection of "feminine" or "maternal" elements, it appears, inevitably occurs within extreme totalitarian and phallocratic ideologies. M.J. Daymond has mentioned that, in South Africa, apartheid has been based on Self/Other structures (xxii), suggesting that the discourse of racial separation and the maintenance of "pure" racial identity

relies on the exclusion, rejection and even abjection of all that is "other". This "other", as it appears in such cultures, becomes linked to the concept of degeneracy and to a threatening "femininity".<sup>13</sup>

As David Attwell suggests, elements associated with "femininity" are represented in Coetzee's female narrators, allowing him to figure and to enact his own dissent from various types of societal and discursive power (Afterword 215). In the case of Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren, these features of femininity are usually derided, suppressed and even abjected within patriarchal ideology. Coetzee, as a writer, exploits the possibilities of cast out, ambivalent and dispossessed elements in order to subvert the authority of the father's law.

In this chapter I have indicated the problematics inherent in labelling In the Heart of the Country or Foe as *écriture féminine*. A more useful approach in the case of In the Heart of the Country would be to assess the link between "femininity" - what it means to be female in a particular society/culture - and what I have observed as Magda's *hysteria*, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. Chapter Two examines both the way in which Magda is represented in/through the narrative as a hysteric and elaborates how this position results in the "hystericisation" of her narrative.

Endnotes:

1. In "This Sex which is not One", published in French in 1977 (the same year as In the Heart of the Country) Luce Irigaray proposed the notion of a specific woman's language or "womanspeak". Irigaray writes that *le parler femme* is a language between women, but that "it cannot be meta-spoken" - its grammar cannot be recorded.
2. As I argue in Chapter Three, the representation of Magda's physical symptoms reveals her status as a hysteric, as does the fragmented, disjointed nature of her hystericised narrative. Hysterical conversion was a term used by Freud and Breuer in their early studies on hysteria, and refers to the way in which hysterical fantasies and fears are acted out within the body.
3. Oliver claims that this oscillation can be read as a mirror of the dialectical oscillation between semiotic and symbolic inherent in the language Kristeva describes (11). For Kristeva, this is also linked to the oscillation between self and alterity, between identity and difference (12).
4. It is apparent that Barthes was familiar with Derridean theory before he wrote "The death of the Author". He had, for instance, attended a conference entitled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" in Baltimore in 1966, where Derrida had presented a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences", a paper which David Lodge claims marks the moment at which post-structuralism begins (Lodge 107).
5. James A. Winders, in a chapter on Nietzsche's Gay Science, entitled "Writing Like a Woman (?)", shows how Derrida's reading of Nietzsche's text offers an alternative to the usual readings of "Nietzsche as misogynist". Winders argues that, in spite of (or as well as) Nietzsche's misogynist statements, "women's characteristics are described in ways similar to what Nietzsche has to say about art and writing...in many ways, in Nietzsche's text, woman = writing" (123).
6. Moi proposes that because of her foreign background and East European educational training, Kristeva was "never really a structuralist at all, but rather (if labels are to be used) a kind of post-structuralist *avant la lettre* (Kristeva Reader 3).
7. The *chora*, as Kristeva posits it, is associated with "a law before the law, a distant space, the maternal body" (Oliver 48). The *chora* is possibly the most contentious of all Kristeva's concepts. Many feminists see it as a reduction of



the feminine to the maternal. This, however, is a misreading of Kristeva - she herself is wary of representations that do not separate "woman" from motherhood (6). Kristeva's theories of the *chora* and the "maternal function" are meant as a challenge to the theories of Freud and Lacan, who regard the Oedipus-complex (Freud) and the mirror-stage (Lacan) as the primary experiences of the subject. Kristeva proposes that the infant's response to the maternal body "prefigures" entrance into the Symbolic. She suggests that rejection, identification and the structure of signification are already present in the maternal function (3).

8. In 1987, an article in the New York Times exposed rather unsavoury information regarding De Man's early career as a writer. During the period 1940-1942, he had published 170 articles in the Nazi collaborationist Belgian newspaper, Le Soir. Burke writes: "At a time when critical theory thought to have dispensed with the idea of authorship, the posthumous revelation of De Man's wartime writings brought the author back to centre stage" (1). Burke observes how this information has altered readings of De Man, and points out that subsequently De Man's "denial of biography" and his notion of "autobiography as defacement" have been read as "sinister and meticulous acts of self-protection; by which he sought to (a)void his historical self" (2).
9. It is generally accepted that Coetzee's academic or theoretical writings do cast light upon his novels - a basic premise of Doubling the Point, in which David Attwell uses these critical writings to elucidate Coetzee's novels. Attwell, however, is sensitive to the problematics of the author-issue. He also expresses a desire "not to supplant the novels themselves", to conduct an inquiry in which "Coetzee is not installed as final authority" (3).
10. This separation between Coetzee and the self whose story he is choosing to tell shows that he is aware of the dynamics of autobiography, which involve, as he puts it, "a submerged dialogue between two persons" (DP 392). Not only does the narrating self choose to tell a certain story about its other "more shadowy" self (392), but there is also a split between subject and author. Roland Barthes' autobiography, for instance, is entitled Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, drawing attention to the split between Roland Barthes, subject of the text, and Roland Barthes, author of the text. Similarly, the short story "Borges and I", by Jorge Luis Borges, describes a division between the person and the author, between private and public self.
11. Coetzee quotes Gobineau and Goncourt in order to illustrate the concept of degenerate blood. According to Gobineau, blood degenerates from the red blood belonging the founders of a

race to weak, "watered down" versions of that blood in its descendants' veins. Goncourt uses anaemia as a metaphor to illustrate the "thin-bloodedness" of the "over-civilized degenerate" as opposed to the thick blood of the "red-blooded barbarian" (WW 147).

12. Ian Glenn has noted suspicious attitudes among critics regarding Coetzee's work, including among these Michael Vaughan's Marxist critique as well as the general perception of In the Heart of the Country as "too learned, too intellectual" ("Game Hunting" 121).
13. In Fables of Desire, Geyer-Ryan examines "Popular literature in the Third Reich", quoting sections from political speeches given by Hitler and his National Socialists. What is interesting here is the political rhetoric used to damn artworks not in keeping with the Nazi programme. Avant-garde artworks "which cannot be understood in themselves" says Hitler, are the symptoms of "cultural degeneration" (quoted in Geyer-Ryan 167). Not only is the intellectualism of modern art connected to degeneracy, it is spoken of as "something sickly, unmanly, effeminate..." (167), threatening to infect the "full-blooded men" of Germany with disgraceful "femininity". In order to preserve the identity of the master-race, certain elements need to be abjected, and these happen to conflate with the notion of the "feminine".

## CHAPTER THREE

In the Heart of the Country: An Hystericised Narrative

...if I attune myself carefully to what is passing inside me I can surely feel far away the withered apple of my womb rise and float, boding all ill.

- Magda, in In the Heart of the Country

For the ancients, hysteria was the result of the extravagant wanderings of the uterus ("hysteron" being Greek for womb) which, having broken loose from its moorings, was thought to careen about the innards causing various stoppages.

- Thomas G. Gutheil, "Hysteria"

I blush for my own thin smell, the smell of an unused woman, sharp with hysteria, like onions, like urine.

- Magda, in In the Heart of the Country

## I

In the Heart of the Country, Magda's story, is set on a remote farm in the Karoo. If the farm setting of the novel links it to the *plaasroman* or farm-novel as described by Coetzee in his White Writing essays, then this is done deliberately - Coetzee mimics the genre in order to subvert it. Although In the Heart of the Country expresses the nostalgia for "country ways" so typical of the pastoral strain prominent in (largely Afrikaans) white South African writing of the 1930's,<sup>1</sup> its female protagonist/antagonist is less the dutiful *vrou en moeder* of Afrikaner mythology than a barren Medusa, whose words literally become stones (HC 130), and who turns the pastoral idyll into a "petrified garden" (138). Like Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm, which according to Coetzee, presents the colonies as "dystopias" and the farm as reflecting the sloth, corruption and greed of colonialism (WW 4), Coetzee's novel is profoundly anti-pastoral. Magda tells that "old Eden is dead", that the "once pastoral" has become a

"stifling story" (HC 7) - the novel has been aptly described as "a taut... compulsive account of an obverse-Eden".<sup>2</sup>

In White Writing Coetzee describes the pastoral in South Africa as "essentially conservative" (WW 4). The *plaasroman* projects its vision backwards in time, advocating a return to the land and nostalgically aspiring to a mythical past age when the "forefathers" supposedly lived simple, hard-working lives in harmony with their natural surroundings (4-5). In this "Old-World conception of farming", the farmer is seen as a benevolent patriarch, the head of his family and master of his grateful black labourers. Furthermore, he is regarded as having a sacred or mythical attachment to the land: there is the notion of a kind of marriage between the "feminine" earth and the "husband-farmer" (66). The farm is passed down in a patrilineal way from father to son (66), according to a myth of "natural right" (82).

Coetzee observes that the place and role of women in this system is often "imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast function of giving food to men" (9). In the Heart of the Country undermines the patriarchal discourse of the farm-novel in that it speaks from a traditionally devalued and silenced female position, exposing the oppressive power dynamics at work within this mode. Susan Gallagher has illustrated how Coetzee's female protagonist parodies the image of woman as *vrou en moeder* central to Afrikaner culture (94). Whereas traditional representation has emphasised the submission, spiritual-like purity and childbearing potential of the Afrikaner woman, Magda is a resentful daughter who

suspects that she is barren and indulges in patricidal fantasies.

According to Coetzee, the novels of C.M. van den Heever are examples of the *plaasroman*, whereas Pauline Smith and Olive Schreiner, who write in English, create fiction that is "a foil" to this tradition (64). Olive Schreiner, in particular, is described in White Writing as "the great antipastoral writer in South Africa" (4). Like Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm, In the Heart of the Country seems to articulate a sense of the land that in some ways opposes the ideal of the South African pastoral. When she says that "no-one is ancestral to the stone desert" (HC 19), and that "we are the castaways of God" (135), Magda's vision echoes the "rival dream topography" which Coetzee associates with Schreiner, of the landscape as "a vast, empty, silent space, older than man" (WW 7), of an "empty and indifferent sky" that represents the absence of a personal God (64).

Teresa Dovey, in her Lacanian reading of Coetzee's fiction, claims that whereas Coetzee's first novel, Dusklands, consciously aligns itself with the adventure novel and uses the "erectile and penetrating Phallus" as a metaphor for this genre, In the Heart of the Country, his second novel, uses the "female cavity" as a way of figuring the retrospective mode of the pastoral, a genre marked by nostalgia and loss (LA 149). Issues of lack and desire are an integral part of the novel: Magda asks "What do I lack?" (HC 4) and "What does one do with desire?" (114). Importantly, Coetzee uses a female voice to articulate this sense of "lack", conjuring up an image of the

female body as site of castration.

For Lacan, the phallus is "the signifier of signifiers" (Grosz 121). Drawing on Freud's interpretation of the Medusa myth, Lacan posits that whereas the phallus prevails as "the ultimately significative object which appears when all veils are lifted", in relation to the phallus, everything else is "an object of amputations and interdictions" (121). In the case of femininity, the lifting of the veil reveals the Medusa, a horrifying "castration" (121). To read Magda as a Medusa-figure is thus not inappropriate: her lack, it seems, is made to relate to her female anatomy. As Dovey suggests, the novelistic discourse of Coetzee's text "arises out of the heart of the cunt-ry" (LA 181). Magda says:

I move through the veld not as a knifeblade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole... I am a hole crying to be whole. If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman. (HC 41)

In Doubling the Point, Coetzee warns that In the Heart of the Country is not only an instance of the pastoral/anti-pastoral, it is, more specifically, a "Cervantean" pastoral/anti-pastoral (DP 62). Like the characters in Don Quixote, Coetzee's protagonist is aware of her own fictionality, in this way questioning the realist tradition and opening the novel up to metafictional "games". Ian Glenn's essay, "Game Hunting in In the Heart of the Country", attempts to track down the anti-illusionist tricks that are played within the novel, pointing out that Magda should not be

regarded as a character in the realist sense, but is rather "a story-telling I, a self-reflective writing I reflecting on the conditions of her writing" (123). There are certainly enough instances in the novel to substantiate this point: Magda hints that she is not a real woman with "red blood in her veins" (HC 62) and refers to her monologue with an awareness of its textuality, speaking of "the ribbon of [her] meditations, black on white" (63). Glenn claims that Magda is an *alter ego* for Coetzee himself, allowing him to explore his position as a writer in South Africa (131).

If this is the case, then what is the significance of Coetzee using a specifically female position in order to dramatise his own? Glenn's answer is inadequate: he claims that Magda's narrative asserts the body and thus eludes mastery, but does not explain how or why such a body-orientated discourse should be subversive. His phrasing, however, is rather revealing as regards his own attitude to Coetzee's textual cross-dressing:

Coetzee...makes Magda self-consciously choose to be the madwoman in the closet as a way of reaching a certain bodily and expressive freedom, as a way of asserting the body to escape the father censor. (131)

For some reason, Glenn has used a strange mixed metaphor: does he mean that Magda is analogous to Gilbert and Gubar's "the madwoman in the attic" or does he mean that Magda's femininity is a "skeleton in the closet", possibly in Coetzee's "closet"? In spite of his praise for Magda's "bodily and expressive freedom", Glenn seems to be unconsciously suspicious of

Coetzee's "effeminate" scripting of an "I-figure" who displays characteristics regarded as typical of a woman, associating this with a cliché in homosexual discourse - "coming out of the closet".

## II

In the Heart of the Country was published in the wake of the Soweto uprisings of 1976, a time in South Africa marked by widespread political unrest and government reactionary clamp-downs. In this context, the intellectual games and anti-illusionist strategies of the novel may seem to be, as Coetzee himself suggests, merely "Eurocentric avant-gardism of an old-fashioned kind" (DP 64). David Attwell, however, has linked Coetzee's abandonment of the realist novel to the failure of humanism in South Africa within this particular historical context. Thus Magda's failure to transcend her alienation may be read as the failure of European liberalism in its attempt to instill the notions of individual freedom and equality. Attwell proposes that a consequence of this failure is the decline of the romantic-liberal notion of the self (61).

As Attwell suggests, Coetzee's essay on Achterberg's "Ballade van de Gasfitter" (1977) reveals Coetzee's interest in "the poetics of failure", in "a history of self-cancelling literature" (DP 61). In the Achterberg essay, Coetzee reads the poem as a self-reflective meditation on the relation between poet and poem, with God as an absence, or literally as a "hole". Referring to Satre's Being and Nothingness, Coetzee



draws on the modernist notion of nothingness or absence, describing God/consciousness as "a hole through which nothingness pours into the world" (Attwell SAPW 65). If Magda, with reference to her female anatomy, describes herself as "a zero, null, a vacuum" (2) and as "a hole with a body draped around it" (41), then it should be recognised that her discourse is drawing on, to some extent, the metaphorical connection between the modernist aesthetic and a certain conception of femininity. In fact, Magda is aware that she has literally "a hole through which nothingness pours into the world", as she is barren. Feminine sexuality, seen as centred around a cavity or "hole", becomes a metaphor for the predicament of the modernist subject whose being is profoundly marked by nothingness.

It is generally accepted that Coetzee's fiction, particularly his early work, plays out modernist strategies in a self-conscious way, bringing, as Attwell proposes, a "modernist legacy into a specially charged encounter with history in the form of colonialism and apartheid" ("The Naked Truth" 89).<sup>3</sup> In Doubling the Point, Coetzee remarks on the fundamental influences on In the Heart of the Country. While he acknowledges that there are, as Attwell suggests, links between it and the *nouveau roman*, there is also, he proposes, the influence of film or photography. Coetzee speaks of this influence as follows:

There was a moment in the course of high modernism when first poets, then novelists, realized how rapidly narration could be carried out: films that

used montage effectively were connecting short narrative sequences into longer narratives much more swiftly and deftly than the nineteenth century novelist thought possible. (59)

Coetzee continues that Heart of the Country is "constructed out of quite brief sequences", meaning that "the scene-setting and connective tissue of a traditional realist novel are absent" (60). The films he identifies as particularly influential on the narrative structure of In the Heart of the Country are the Bergsonian science fiction short La Jetee by Chris Marker; The Passenger,<sup>4</sup> an unfinished film put together by colleagues of Andrzej Munk after his death; and the films of Jean Luc-Godard (60).

In A History of Narrative Film, David Cook identifies Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard as exponents of a film genre called the "New Wave". Beginning in France in 1959 and spilling over into the early Sixties, "New Wave" films were to have a profound influence on filmmaking in Europe (555). The young directors of "New Wave" were the first film-educated generation of filmmakers in history (557). As a result of their having experienced the beginnings of cinema in France and having written about it critically in Cahiers du Cinema for nearly a decade, their approach to film-making involved a kind of "self-reflexive cinema", or "metacinema", films about the process of filmmaking itself (557). This explains also their "allusions to and quotations from films of the past" (577).

It is quite easy to see why this approach to

cinematography would appeal to Coetzee. As an intellectual located on the margins of his culture, Coetzee is highly sensitive to the novelistic discourse itself, and is well aware of the history of the novel when he sits down to write one. His writing has been described as "situational metafiction" by David Attwell in Doubling the Point (3) and as "intertextual" by many critics.

However, there is another level at which the "New Wave" films can be tied in with In the Heart of the Country, this being at the level of narrative. Cook explains that the most significant technical feature of the "New Wave" film was "its jagged, elliptical style of editing". The "New Wave" film typically employed "jump cuts" within and between scenes, breaking down the notion of temporal continuity (555). The jump cut involves the elimination of a particular section of a single shot and then a splicing together of what remains, creating an ellipsis (556). An extreme version of this is Marker's La Jetee, composed almost entirely of still photographs (586). Watching a "New Wave" film, the viewer is confronted with what I will later refer to as a *hystericised narrative* - a narrative characterised by shifts, ellipsis, and an absence of temporal continuity.

If the "New Wave" pushes the limits of narrative until its conventions break down, then the *nouveau roman* ("new novel") can be seen as an anti-narrative or even an anti-novel. The *nouveau roman* experiments with the form of the traditional novel, omitting standard elements and playing against the reader's expectations (Abrams 121). An example of

this is Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel, Jealousy, that David Attwell has already discussed in relation to Coetzee. Attwell observes that Jealousy leaves out the traditional novelistic elements of plot, setting, characterization, chronological time and continuous space, presenting the reader with a non-narrative (SAPW 58).

Significantly, both the "New Wave" film and the *nouveau roman* are anti-realist. Jean-Luc Godard claims that the "New Wave" film introduces a "new relationship to fiction and reality" (Cook 564). The *nouveau roman* is often referred to as "*nouveau realisme*", suggesting that it proposes a "new realism" that breaks with traditional realism (Abrams 121). In Doubling the Point, Attwell notes that Coetzee has a preference for "non-realist modes" in his fiction (24). He mentions Coetzee's interest in Surrealism in the late 1970s, referring to Coetzee's essay published in 1979 entitled "Surreal metaphors and Random Processes" (22) and a poem by Coetzee, published in 1978, which produced surreal effects through a mechanical procedure (22).

Surrealism was primarily a revolt against all restraints on artistic creativity, including logic, morality and social conventions (Abrams 183). As a literary effect, Surrealist "automatic writing" is marked by experimentation with free association, non-logical order, dreamlike, fantastical or bizarre sequences and images (183). It is thus understandable, if not predictable, that Andre Breton and Louis Aragon in their surrealist manifestos would celebrate "the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria" acclaiming it as "the greatest poetic

discovery of the latter nineteenth century" and as "a supreme means of expression" (Aragon and Breton 320-321).

Claire Kahane points out that hysteria had tremendous implications for narrative discourse in the twentieth century. She claims that elements we accept as characteristic of the avant-garde would have not been possible without the discourse of the hysteric, and that the hystericised narrative provided one of the strongest metaphors for the fragmentation of the individual subject in early modernism:

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, hysteria was both self-consciously thematized as a trope of literary modernism as well as formalized as a poetics that could more adequately represent the dislocations of the modern subject. In this sense one can say that hysterical narrative voice has not only preceded literary modernism but made it possible. (xv)

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, James Wohlpart has observed that because of its avant-garde strategies, In the Heart of the Country may be read on two levels: the first being on the realist level of the plot, and the second being at the level of narrative technique (219). Wohlpart points out that when reading the plot or content, one is struck by "a lack of a radical political agenda", whereas the narrative strategies or *form* of the novel do enact "a subversion of the language of power" (219).<sup>5</sup> In the sections that follow, I propose another reading which reveals a link, rather than a dislocation, between these two levels: the ambiguity of Magda's simultaneously conservative and subversive properties

in In the Heart of the Country relies on the re-presentation of Magda as a nineteenth century hysteric.

### III

Teresa Dovey has correctly observed that In the Heart of the Country is "articulated around the very principle of stasis" (LA 152), meaning that there is no progression in the plot. Instead, the narrative circles back and forth between sections. We are often uncertain as to whether the events narrated are part of an external plot, or whether they are fantasies enacted only within Magda's fevered mind. The novel opens with a scene in which Magda's father apparently brings home his new bride, Magda's stepmother. As Magda's description of the scene progresses, the reader becomes aware that Magda is probably imagining rather than actually seeing an event. She claims that her father and step-mother arrived in "a dog-cart drawn by a horse" but then adds it is also possible that "they were drawn by two plumed donkeys" (HC 1). She cannot give details, she says, unless she starts to "embroider", for, she tells, she was not watching. Later in the novel this incident seems to have never actually occurred, Magda says that her father "has not brought home a new wife" (16).

Similarly, Magda narrates two separate incidents in which she murders her father. In the first, Magda is apparently driven to the act by the sexual cavorting of her father and stepmother. She chooses as her weapon "the hatchet, weapon of the Valkyries" (11), empowering herself through her

identification with these female winged warriors. With a glance at "the tired blind fish" lolling in her father's groin, she hacks at his throat and delivers "much better the chop" into the crown of her stepmother's head (11). She then begins a steady hacking, maintaining "a cool head" and clear narration, making the incident all the more macabre for its unimpassioned tone.

After various speculations as to her motivations for the crime, Magda contemplates or seems to attempt suicide by drowning. In an observation that brings to mind a tradition of literary women such as Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and the Afrikaans poet, Ingrid Jonker, Magda notes that "of all adventures suicide is the most literary, more so even than murder" (13). Her narration then returns to what appears to be the situation at hand, that she must dispose of the bodies: "Until this bloody afterbirth is gone there can be no new life for me" (15). Yet Magda hints that all her acts are played out within the theatre of herself, telling that her father "does not die so easily after all" (16). The vividly described murder scene was apparently no more than a fantasy and she returns to her role as dutiful daughter, preparing her father's bath (17). As a daughter, Magda must wait on and serve her father; she darns his socks, prepares his bath, lays out his clean underlinen and later nurses him in his dotage, changing his soiled napkins. Despite the fantasies of killing her father that recur in the narrative, Magda ultimately remains subservient, in attendance to her father.

Her second patricidal fantasy is apparently the result of

her father's affair with one of the servants. In the section leading up to the murder, the narrative distorts time so that, although it consists of sections that are numbered sequentially, the time recorded or implied by these sections is not always chronological. In section 37 for instance, Magda tells of her father's sudden listlessness at the dinner table: "My father pushes his food aside untouched" (17). It is only in later sections that we learn the events leading up to his state. In section 38 we are told that, six months before, one of the servants, Hendrik, had brought home a bride, called Klein-Anna (in order to differentiate her from the older housemaid, also called Anna). Magda speculates that Hendrik wants to engender "a humble line of his own in parallel to the line of [her] grandfather and [her] father" (24). This patrilineal system, however, would be just as oppressive and abusive to its women as her father's - she notes that when Klein-Anna settles into her role as wife, she will "no doubt soon be shouted at and beaten too" (27).

In section 65, Magda notes that her father, usually a man who rides out all day on the farm, has been coming home in the mornings, spending his time standing over Klein-Anna as she cleans the house (32). Magda tells that while Hendrik has been sent off to do some task on the farm, her father rides up to Klein-Anna and gives her some candies, "perhaps he even smiles", she says, "Or: as Klein-Anna makes her way homeward in the heat of the afternoon my father comes upon her", giving her candies, a shilling or even a florin (33). Like other sections of the narrative, the use of "perhaps" and "or" warn



the reader that Magda has once again begun to "embroider", and that the meetings between her father and Klein-Anna are her own fanciful versions of what might be fact or fiction. After a series of these seduction scenes, section 70 then returns to the time of section 37, where Magda's father "pecks at his food and pushes it away", but now, like Magda, we can guess at his "guilty thoughts" (33).

Magda's sympathies, it would appear, are at this stage with Hendrik; drifting off to sleep that night she hears voices: "'I look upon any poor man as totally undone', whispers a voice... 'if he has the misfortune to have an honest heart, a fine wife, and a powerful neighbour'" (36). Later we learn that Magda's father has apparently "bribed" Hendrik, giving him brandy in exchange for his wife (60). With this action, the father reverts back to one of the oldest means by which patriarchy objectifies woman, using her as an object of exchange between men.

Magda's identification with Hendrik is the result of her anger against her father. Like Hendrik, she has also had something stolen from her by her father, she claims that he is "the absence" of her mother and that he has "murdered all the motherly in [her]" (37). Much of Magda's narrative is an attempt to articulate the loss of her mother. She seems to fabricate an image of her mother for herself: "a faint grey frail gentle mother... one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself" (2). This mother, Magda imagines, "lived and died under her husband's thumb", his unabated sexual demands and desire for a son resulted in

her death in childbirth (2), showing that, in Magda's mind, femininity is inextricably linked to submission and self-sacrifice.

Angry and disgusted at her father's behaviour, Magda spends what seems to be the afternoon in a speculative torpor in which she meditates on her past, trying to find "the tunnel" that will lead her back to her "mother's knee" (37). She tries to remember her childhood, but can only come up with an image of herself in "a hideous bottlegreen frock" (40). The empty schoolhouse she imagines peopled with generations of children, possibly her father and herself, although, subverting the primacy of speech in a manner typical of any deconstructive character worth her salt, she says that her learning has "the reek of print, not the resonance of the full human voice telling its stories" (47). In a wistful daydream, Magda imagines other children having been around her, perhaps even stepbrothers and sisters, "children of a buxom blond much-loved wife", and "golden Arthur", whom she loved but who never noticed her (37). Section 97 marks a return from her daydream, she hears voices, it is her father issuing commands, speaking to Klein-Anna (50). Her father's booted feet come up the passage, he knocks and then retreats back to the kitchen where Magda imagines him making tea for his lover.

In the novel, Magda's father is described with images that echo those of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" poems: Magda tells of his "slow black boots" (1), symbol of his oppressive presence, and yet she longs to "creep through the honeycomb of [his] bones" (71). As a woman in a strongly patriarchal

Afrikaans society, Magda is subjugated in this instance to her father and to the authority and domination he represents. Magda finds the workings of power in this parent-child relationship disempowering, her father's anger reduces her to "a child again, an infant, a grub, a white shapeless life with no arms, no legs, nothing even to grip the earth with" (HC 51).

Teresa Dovey has pointed out that, on another level, Magda is held in bondage to what her father represents: her father becomes synonymous with the Law-of-the-Father as defined by Jacques Lacan (LA 159). According to Lacan, the child becomes a speaking subject only in relation to the *nom-du-pere*, the name-of-the-father. In the nuclear family, the imaginary mother-child dyad is broken by the intervention of the father, who forbids access to the maternal body rendering it absent or sacrificed (Grosz 71). Thus Magda claims that her father is the absence of her mother (HC 37).

Dovey, using Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, proposes that "Magda has been separated from the mother, but has not yet been granted admission to the Father's world" (LA 159). Thus, Dovey observes, Magda's narrative consists of an "ambivalent 'challenge' to the Symbolic undertaken from a 'metaphorically' pre-Symbolic position in the Imaginary" (153).

Lacan's concept of the Imaginary or "mirror stage" was an attempt to solve Freud's problem of the genesis of narcissism (Grosz 31) and marked his major intervention into psychoanalysis. The mirror stage may be understood as the

early identification of the young child with its image as perceived in a mirror or in relation to another child. This experience signals the child's first recognition of a distinction between itself and the mother (48). Unlike an animal, the child recognises, or rather mis-recognises, an "Ideal-I" in the mirror (Ecrits 2). This ideal self appears to be whole and integrated, creating a contrast between the mirror image and the child's dislocated and fragmentary experience of the world. Henceforth the subject is a split subject, and will forever more orientate itself in the direction of further imaginary identifications (Grosz 48). It is thus that Magda regressively identifies with other figures, seeing herself, in the latter stages of her narrative, as a kind of Circe able to metamorphose men into swine (HC 134), or as a Cinderella figure when she cries out to the flying machines: "Cindrla es mi" (132).<sup>6</sup>

According to Lacan, the mirror stage is the child's first experience of a sense of self and marks its first "process of social acculturation" (Grosz 32). This stage is only dissolved by the oedipus complex that initiates the child into realm of the Symbolic, where the father becomes identified with the figure of the law, with authority, with that which says "no" (48). Significantly, Magda says that in her room at night, she mentally prepares herself for "[her] father's eyebrows to coalesce, the black pools beneath then, then the cavern of the mouth from which echoes and echoes his eternal NO" (HC 16).

Dovey and Attwell have drawn attention to the way in which Magda's narrative reveals her entrapment in a series of

triangular structures of desire which seem to enact an oedipal drama.<sup>7</sup> The first numbered section of the novel already sets up the oedipal triangle:

I am the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines... My father is the one who paces the floorboards back and forth, back and forth in his slow black boots. And then, for a third, there is the new wife, who lies late abed. Those are the antagonists. (1)

In this triangle, the new stepmother is set up as rival, despite her overtures towards Magda, Magda cannot relate to her "as a sister" (4). These triangular structures exist through and despite substitution: Magda's father replaces Hendrik as Anna's lover, Hendrik replaces Magda's father, replicating her fantasy of "the childhood rape" (3) by her father.

Unable to bear her isolation from the love feast between her father and the servant girl any longer, Magda tries to call her father but he sends her away. She seizes the dinner-bell from the sideboard and begins ringing, the sound ushering in a certain comfort for her, a numbness and detachment in which "time drifts past" (57). Suddenly she is aware that she has been hit by her father, her nose is bleeding, she faints, swooning in and out of consciousness (56). In the sequence that follows, Magda chooses a gun from the hatrack and shoots her father, who dies a slow death "hideously draped over the edge of his bed" (80), covered with flies, his own blood and excrement. We are then confronted with the bizarre image of a daughter mourning for the father whom she has killed and

begging for his forgiveness (80).

It is at this stage that time begins to distort the narrative drastically so that both narrator and reader are uncertain of how much time has passed in between Magda's speculative reveries. Earlier she had been resolute in her endeavour to "beat down the blind subjective time of the heart", willing her heart to "throb with the steady one second beat of civilization" (3). After apparently shooting her father she seems to lose all sense of objective time - her narrative is marked by gaps in her memory where she says "A day must have intervened here. Where there is a blank there must have been a day during which my father sickened irrecoverably" (79), and later she says that she is wary of all her suppositions, that she suspects that "the day the day went missing" she was not there, that she will never know how the day was filled (80). She notices that she seems "to exist more and more intermittently", that "whole hours, whole afternoons go missing" (80).

Magda tells of how she and Hendrik bury her father, burning his nightclothes and bedclothes and scrubbing his bloodstains from the floor (80-81). However, if dispensing with her oppressive father seemed to promise liberation, Magda cannot escape what he represents. If it is by way of the name-of-the-father that the child is initiated into systems of representation, including that of language, then killing the father is not an act of liberation, but instead marks what Lacan would call "the fruitful moment of debt through which the subject binds [itself] for life to the law" (Sheridan xi).

Speaking to Hendrik, Magda expresses how she perceives "the law" has taken up residence inside her, subjugating her body to its "war of sounds":

The lips are tired, they are tired of all the articulating they have had to do since they were babies, since it was revealed to them that there was a law... I am exhausted by obedience to this law, I try to say, whose mark lies on me... in the articulations that are set up the war of sounds... The law has gripped my throat, I say and do not say, it invades my larynx, its hand on my tongue, its other hand on my lips. (84)

Magda's desire is for "a language such as lovers use", but she "cannot imagine how it goes" (97). She wishes to "burst through the screen of names into the goatseye view of Armoede" (18), to relate to things without the mastery and corruption of naming. In this she links herself to Virginia Woolf's character, Bernard in The Waves, who needs "a little language such as lovers use", and to sit with "bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself" (Woolf 227).

The language that Magda speaks, however, does not allow her to get beyond a Hegelian master-slave dynamic. She is subordinated to her father, but at the same time, as a member of the dominant class, she unwillingly finds herself in the position of master/mistress to Hendrik and Klein Anna. Anna cannot relate to Magda other than as "Miss". Magda urges her, "Come say Magda for me" and Anna responds "No miss, I can't" (102). Magda is thus trapped in a "language of hierarchy and

distance" (97). In the extent to which she cannot get beyond it, she is spoken by a colonial and patriarchal discourse. The language of the father is not only the *Pere-version*, it is also a "perversion", it has subverted "the true language of the heart", that Magda feels should pass between herself and "these people" (97). She longs for a "pure" language in which to speak. The "voices" she hears towards the end of the novel speak in "a Spanish of pure meanings" (126) and she expresses her yearning for a "true" language that speaks "the language of the heart" :

Why will no-one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the medium - that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled! (133)

After apparently murdering her father and burying him, Magda is seemingly raped by Hendrik, who takes out his anger on her for not paying the servants' wages. It is not certain whether the series of rape scenes (105-110) are real or whether they are fantasies, but, whether sexual fantasies or not, Magda is certain that "this is woman's fate", and that Hendrik's brutal demands mean "more womanwork" for her (106). In spite of killing her father, her degradation and subjection persist - the old master has merely been replaced by a new one.

Towards the end of the narrative, Hendrik and his wife leave the farm, abandoning Magda, whose isolation does not bring liberation but instead bondage to her female role. This



manifests itself as a kind of "housewife psychosis", where she religiously washes linen, cleans the house and moves furniture around (120). Although Magda tells that she has visitors who search every part of the farm for her father, she is apparently living alone on the farm at this stage. Time in the last few pages passes fleetingly, Magda says that "summers and winters come and go" (123). She is now an old crone, comparing herself to "the mad old bad old woman with a stooped back and a hooked nose and knobbly fingers" (123) and to "the witch of fable" (134).

Perhaps the strangest parts of the novel are contained in the final pages, where Magda begins to hear voices. These voices apparently speak to her in "a Spanish of pure meanings", out of machines that fly in the sky (126). There is a remarkable echo of Virginia Woolf's madness here, as Woolf, during one of her delusions, supposedly heard the birds singing in Greek (Lee 195). The voices, whose words Magda thinks "are golden" (130), articulate messages that often sound more like post-modern "proverbs" or phrases from Hegelian philosophy. Magda tries to respond to them, shouting into the sky invented "Spanish" words. Ultimately, however, the voices take no notice of her and, as a desperate measure, she turns to writing (130), then "descends" into ideographs (134), composing an image of a woman's body out of stones in order to lure them to her. Finally she rejects these voices as "Spanish filth" (134), asking why no-one will speak to her "in the true language of the heart" (133).

At the end of the novel, despite Magda's apparent murder

and burial of her father, the reader learns that he is not actually dead. Instead, he seems to exist in a catatonic state, sitting beside her on the "stoep" (136) where Magda attends to him, changing his soiled diapers. As Magda faces oblivion, she wonders: "Will I find the courage to die a crazy old queen in the middle of nowhere, unexplained by and inexplicable to the archaeologists..?" (138). Here perhaps, as Michael du Plessis has suggested, she gestures outside the text to Coetzee's strategy of cross-dressing and his status as a textual "drag-queen" (127).

As Dovey suggests, the novel can quite evidently be read as conservative or static at the level of the endeavours of its protagonist. Ultimately Magda accomplishes nothing as a character, she remains subservient to her father and even in at the level of language her desire for "a true language of the heart" is thwarted.

#### IV

Michael du Plessis and Susan Gallagher have claimed that In the Heart of the Country is an example of a "feminine" text, or *l'écriture féminine*. In the previous chapter, however, I have illustrated the problems inherent in using this term in a glib manner - it is highly problematic to define and identify "feminine" elements within a text and postulate that these are somehow innately subversive. A more useful way in which to approach the novel requires an attentive reading of the way that the narrative displays what Claire Kahane refers to as

"the passions of the voice".

In Passions of the Voice, Kahane examines the links between hysteria, narrative and the figure of the speaking woman in the period 1850 to 1915. Her interest, she claims, is in "narrative voices which are characterised by their inability to sustain a neutral and consistent subject position by their anxious subjection to... the passions of the voice" (vii). Kahane links this "anxiety about the voice itself" (viii) socially and historically to a late nineteenth century phenomenon, to the figure of the speaking woman, and particularly to the woman who speaks in public. Thus, she focuses on the hysteria, ambivalence and thwarted rage of the "New Women" who were apparently claiming power.

Kahane also examines the way in which the passions of the voice manifest themselves in a literary sense, and particularly in the case of modernist or avant-garde texts. She refers to S/Z, where Barthes describes one of the noticeable features of modernist writing as "a voice without origin or parentage", a voice that "gets lost, as though it had leaked out through a hole in discourse" (quoted in Kahane viii). Working from the presupposition that the hysterical discourse exhibits "features of a discourse in crisis", Kahane attempts to theorise a "virtual psychopoetics of hysteria", examining its various "psychic components" as they appear in and structure texts by both male and female writers (xiv).

Both Shoshana Felman and Claire Kahane have drawn attention to the way in which, from its earliest definitions, hysteria has been linked to femininity. Felman asks whether it

is merely incidental that hysteria, derived from the Greek word for uterus,<sup>8</sup> was "originally conceived as an exclusively female complaint, as the lot and prerogative of women" (2). Kahane, tracing the history of hysteria from the Greek depiction of hysterics as women with "wandering wombs" to the "demon-possessed" women of the middle ages and to the figure of the nineteenth century hysteric, notes that "hysteria has always been associated with femininity" (9). She observes an overlap between hysterical symptoms and what were regarded as normal and desirable feminine characteristics at the time, such as passivity, weakness and invalidism (9)<sup>9</sup>. In the eighteenth century, for instance, male hysteria was associated with a "stereotypically fragile feminine constitution" (10).

In Victorian England and Europe, hysteria became something of a social problem, reaching epidemic proportions among middle class, predominantly female, individuals. Although hysteria had in the past been linked to physical or neurological disorders, it took on a new meaning under the researches of Philippe Pinel, who attributed it to sexual rather than biological causes (11). Jean Charcot, using photographs and live demonstrations of female hysterical attacks, gave talks in which he claimed that hysteria could often be cured by hypnosis, influencing Freud's later interpretation of hysterical symptoms as manifestations of repressed, unconscious desire (12).

It was Freud who drew attention to the psychological aspects of hysteria - psychoanalysis was born with his treatment of hysterical patients.<sup>10</sup> His Studies on Hysteria

(1893-1895), written in collaboration with Joseph Breuer, as well as being a theoretical study, is also based on a number of case studies in which Freud and Breuer spoke directly with patients, recording their histories, complaints and symptoms. Kahane points out that Freud's research marked a move from the metaphors of vision, like Charcot's visual displays, to voice, to the "talking cure" (12). Kahane describes the case history as a new narrative genre, suggesting that it had immense implications for the history and development of narrative form.

In "Fragment of an Analysis of A Case of Hysteria" Freud constantly enunciates his difficulty in giving clear, chronologically complete accounts of the case histories of hysterical patients. He writes:

I cannot help wondering how it is that the authorities can produce such smooth and precise histories in cases of hysteria. As a matter of fact the patients are incapable of giving such reports about themselves. They can, indeed, give the physician plenty of current information about this or that period in their lives; but this is sure to be followed by another period as to which their communications run dry, leaving gaps unfilled, and riddles unanswered...The connections - even the ostensible ones - are for the most part incoherent, and the sequence of different events is uncertain. (16)

The hystericised narrative, according to Freud, is marked by "true amnesias" or gaps in memory, as well as "paramnesias" which are fantasies, formed secondarily to fill in the gaps

(17). In the narrative of a hysterical patient the analyst is confronted with gaps, different versions of the same incident, hallucinations or fantasies, incoherencies and a dislocated sequence of events. Ned Lukacher claims that the discourse of the hysteric has a fundamental "unnarratibility" which the analyst cannot overcome (viii).

The hysterical narrative, Claire Kahane observes, is thus necessarily a "discourse in crisis" and exhibits:

...excessive splittings and displacements of the subject, frequent paralyses of the plot, phonemic rather than semantic continuities, and seemingly gratuitous and often bizarre disruptions of narrative sequence. (xiv)

These descriptions of hystericised narrative form could well be descriptions of Magda's own narrative in In the Heart of the Country. Teresa Dovey points out that "Magda's discourse does not attain the continuity of narrative at all" and that "one might question whether the term narrative may legitimately be applied to the numbered segments of speech which constitute this novel" (LA 152). As described above, Magda's narrative is often punctuated with different versions of the same incident and, towards the end of her narrative, Magda's amnesia or gaps in memory produce widening gaps between segments of speech.

Wohlpart's observation that In the Heart of the Country is an example of a Barthesian writerly text (225) may be linked to the hystericisation of narrative in the novel. Wohlpart claims that the narrative structure releases the reader into the freedom and endless pleasures of reading

(225), into the "jouissance" of the text. As Ned Lukacher points out: "Jouissance is an aesthetic text, an aesthetic-hysteric text" (xx). Wohlpert maintains that the novel creates a "circling back and forth between sections" (225). This type of text, according to Susan Suleiman, is "avant garde" - it "defies, aggressively and provocatively, the traditional criteria of narrative intelligibility and correlatively the reader's sense-making ability" (Subversive Intent 36). Read symptomatically, there is an overlap between the "writerly" or avant-garde text and the hysterical narrative. In the Heart of the Country seems to hover on the brink of revealing the connection between Magda's hysteria and the formal experiments of "New Wave" cinematography and the *nouveau roman*.

## V

Freud's most famous case history, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria", records the case of a young woman named Ida Bauer, whom he refers to as "Dora" in the study. Dora's, remarks Freud, was clearly a case of *petit hysteria*. She was recorded as having suffered from migraines, depression and a "hysterical unsociability", which Freud claimed were "the commonest of all hysterical symptoms" ("A Case of Hysteria" 23). As Kahane points out, in addition to listening to Dora's story, there is a story that Freud also wants to tell, his own desire makes itself heard through his apparently "objective" analysis. The story Freud wishes Dora to tell is a "nineteenth century oedipal narrative of heterosexual romance", a story of

the daughter as object of exchange between families, ending in the resolution of an "appropriate marriage" (Kahane 21).

However, because Freud largely overlooks Dora's relationships with women,<sup>11</sup> there is a factor for which he cannot properly account - this being her homosexual desire for her father's mistress, Frau K. He observes that when Dora talked of Frau K, she would praise her "adorable white body" in a manner more fitting to that of a lover than a defeated rival. He attributes this to "gynaecopilic currents of feeling", which he claims are "typical of the unconscious erotic life of hysterical girls" ("A Case of Hysteria" 63). Freud thus envisaged *petit hysteria* as the "derangement of heterosexual imperatives", acted out through bodily symptoms (Kahane 14).

In a later paper, entitled "Hysterical Phantasies and their Relation to Bisexuality", Freud writes that the connection between the symptoms and the fantasies of hysterical patients led him to acknowledge two separate "phantasies" at work, one of a masculine and the other of a feminine character (92-93). "Thus", he writes, "one of these phantasies springs from a homosexual impulse" (93). As an example, Freud cites a case in which a female patient "pressed her dress up against her body with one hand (as the woman), while she simultaneously tried to tear it off with the other (as the man)" (94).

Psychoanalysts since Freud, including Jacques Lacan, have responded to and extended the scope of Freud's research into hysteria. Lacan has pointed out that one of Dora's hysterical



symptoms, her cough, reveals a masculine identification (David-Menard 14). Lacan thus claims that hysteria manifests the pattern of a daughter who identifies with her father as opposed to her mother (Wright 163). As Kahane illustrates, Dora reveals that the "secret" of the hysteric is not only an oedipal attraction to the father but also an identification with him (22). For Lacan, the hysteric's gender question "Am I a woman or a man?" is decoded as the central question about gender. The hysteric reveals that sexual difference is an artificial construction created by the subject's identification, through processes of signification, with the totalized concepts of male or female (Wright 163). The hysteric's bisexuality thus suggests the impossibility of reducing identity to gender and, for Lacan, indicates the inadequacy of any signifier, symbol or archetype to represent sexual difference, ultimately revealing the inadequacy of language itself (Wright 163).

According to Lacan the hysteric not only asks the quintessential question about gender, she also embodies "the quintessence of the human subject" (165). Speaking from the gaps and absences in cultural knowledge, she is markedly subversive, exhibiting qualities of "jouissance" that show up under the symbolic law as neuroses (Wright 164). Lacan praises the "truth" of hysteria, claiming that it is a condition which expresses dissatisfaction with the totality of "knowledge" in any age (165). Within this definition, Lacan describes Socrates and Hegel as hysterics (165) and himself, not surprisingly, as "the perfect hysteric" (Grosz 176).

Lacan proposes that not only is the discourse of hysteria related to "truth", but that knowledge within the Symbolic order, whether it be academic, clinical or cultural, can only advance while "the hysteric's question prevails over the master's answer" (Wright 165). Patricia Elliot, in her study of gender theories in psychoanalytic feminism entitled From Mastery to Analysis, makes a very clear presentation of Lacan's theory regarding the discourse of the hysteric. With the help of his "little four-footed schemas" (*mes petits schemas quatripodes*), Lacan explains the subversive nature of the discourse of hysteria in relation to the discourse of mastery. According to Lacan, there are four signifying functions inherent in any desiring subject, these being the signifiers of the self-determining subject, of knowledge, of the divided subject and of "jouissance".

These four elements are played out in various configurations, constituting the four discourses of mastery, hysteria, the bureaucracy and of analysis. The different configurations are in turn organised according to four constants: the "agent", one who acts upon; the "other", to whom the agent's intent is directed; the desired "product" of this interaction; and the "truth" of that production system. The four functions of the desiring subject are then "mapped onto" the constants in various ways so as to produce the different discourses. From these schemas we can see how the discourse of the hysteric, with its divided subject and latent "jouissance", necessarily becomes the "truth" of the master's discourse that is governed by the signifier of the self-

determining subject and has as its latent term the split subject.<sup>12</sup>

If, in rather abstract Lacanian terms, the discourse of the hysteric is markedly subversive, then it is surprising to see how unsuccessful this subversiveness becomes in terms of her actual existence. While Helene Cixous sees the hysteric as the true heroine of women's writing in the twentieth century, Catherine Clement argues that the hysteric is ultimately a victim: her role is "anti-establishment, and conservative at the same time" ("The Guilty One" 5). Toril Moi, in her essay "Representation of Patriarchy", points out that while it is tempting to read Dora's symptoms as "a silent revolt against male power", it is also particularly disconcerting to notice the inefficiency of this revolt. As Moi points out, Dora grew to resemble her mother, who was afflicted with "housewife psychosis" and became a whining old woman, accomplishing nothing. Hysteria, claims Moi, is "a declaration of defeat, the realization that there is no other way out" (192).

As I suggest earlier, there are definite parallels between Magda and the tragic female writers of European modernism such as Woolf and Plath, particularly with regard to the representation of Magda's "madness". As a female voice, however, Magda is also represented as a typical nineteenth century hysteric. This does not mean that a reading of her as a "real" psychological portrait is necessary, or even advisable. Instead, the following sections focus on the implications of this in terms of her discourse and the ambiguity of her representation.

## VI

It seems strange that Teresa Dovey's study of Coetzee's fiction, which attempts to demonstrate how the novels are allegories of the Lacanian subject retranslated in a South African context, has not explored the possibilities of Magda's hysteria in In the Heart of the Country. Elizabeth Grosz points out that "Lacan's earliest and most fundamental researches in psychoanalysis were based on the discourse of 'madwomen': psychotics, paranoiacs, hysterics and mystics" (Grosz 7). Although Dovey is at great pains to show that In the Heart of the Country is a rewriting of Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm and at certain points compares Magda to Schreiner, she ultimately misses the fact that Schreiner herself was a "self-acknowledged hysteric" (Kahane 80).

The link between the fictively portrayed hysteria of Magda and the "real" hysteria of Olive Schreiner suggests that the anti-pastoral genre, used in Schreiner's fictions and in Magda's narrative, formally enacts the subversiveness of a hysterical discourse, as it provides a foil to the dominant discursive mode of the *plaasroman*.

Magda displays, extravagantly, both the symptoms of the hysteric and the simultaneously conservative and subversive characteristics typical of the hysteric and her discourse. In the first of the 266 numbered sections that comprise her narrative, we are made aware that Magda, like many other girls in the colonies, suffers from migraines, depression and social

withdrawal (1).

According to Kahane, who draws on Freud's case studies, sick-nursing and invalidism play an important role in the formation of hysterical symptoms. There is no doubt that Magda fits this description: she is represented as both nurse and patient. Magda has fantasies of herself as "The Angel in Black who comes to save the children of the brown folk from their croups and fevers" (HC 5) and she apparently nurses her father at various stages in the novel. At the same time, however, she lives up to the "cult of the invalid" associated with femininity in Victorian society. Her description of herself as an invalid might be that of any Victorian woman who has announced her indisposition:

All day I lie stretched out on a counterpane with my  
horny toes in the air and a pillow over my eyes...  
Old Anna brings the meals and cleans the room. I eat  
like a bird. I take nothing for the migraine,  
knowing that nothing will help me and being anyhow a  
cultist of pain. (HC 34)

Playfully, Coetzee makes Magda allude to her wandering womb: "If I attune myself carefully to what passes inside of me I can surely feel the withered apple of my womb rise and float, boding all ill" (HC 50). Like Freud's Dora, however, Magda fails to transcend her condition, and remains chained to her suffering and her feminine role.

The subversive aspects of Magda's discourse may be related to her representation as a hysteric. She exhibits the masculine identification and bisexuality of the hysteric,

which has apparently not been mentioned before in readings of the novel. Susan Gallagher does notice that in Magda's fantasies of patricide, the weapons she chooses are those with masculine identifications: Magda first imagines hacking her father to death with an axe and then blowing out his guts with a shot-gun (Gallagher 96). Although Dovey and Attwell draw attention to the series of oedipal-type triangles that occur within the novel, they read the erotic attraction within these triangles as heterosexual: as between Magda and her father; Klein-Anna and Hendrik; Magda's father and Klein-Anna, and between Magda and Hendrik. Magda's dramatically homoerotic interaction with Klein-Anna, however, has escaped the attention of most critics.

Watching Hendrik's bride descend from the donkey cart through a pair of field glasses, Magda imagines "soft flesh brushing soft flesh under the calico of her dress" (HC 26). Later in the novel, Magda stands behind Anna, caressing "the clear young bones" of her neckline and asks herself "What does one do with desire?" (114). Her question, she speculates, points to "two emptinesses" when one woman desires another, thus suggesting the presence but impossibility of her homosexual desire. As Lacan points out, the bisexuality of the hysteric reveals the inadequacy of language itself. It is thus that Magda, watching Klein Anna descend from the donkey cart, pronounces that "Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire... The frenzy of desire in the medium of words yields the mania of the catalogue" (HC 26). Although Magda never achieves "the language of the heart" and remains subservient

to her father, her discourse as a hysteric is profoundly subversive of the paternal law, pointing to the inadequacy of language as "medium of desire".

The employment of the voice of a female hysteric enables Coetzee to articulate his own relation to master discourses in a very specific way. As a writer, Coetzee is quite evidently sceptical regarding discourses of power and constantly refuses positions of domination, even to the extent of denying mastery over his own texts. Like the hysterical discourse, that speaks the latent and repressed "truth" of mastery, Coetzee's novels are an attempt to undermine discourses of mastery, to rival history. Although Magda says "I is I. Character is Fate. History is God", her discourse undermines the realist notion of character, presenting the reader with a hysterical and split "I-figure" that mutates and identifies itself with others. Her subjective and hysterical first person narrative distorts chronological time, subverting the claim of history to "objective" truth.

Pre-empting later feminist readings of Freud's cases of hysteria, Coetzee makes Magda aware of her ambiguous subversive and conservative position: "Perhaps", she says, "despite my black clothes and the steel in my heart... I am a conserver rather than a destroyer" (43). On a political level, Magda's position perhaps even reflects the "impotence" of Coetzee's own simultaneously subversive and conservative situation as a white dissident intellectual in South Africa. However, although Magda, like Dora, may lack insight into her situation, Coetzee clearly does not share her limited

awareness. The numbered segments of the novel signal the presence of an author who is manipulating her discourse in a conscious and avant-garde manner. In this way In the Heart of the Country provides insight into the ambiguous role of the hysteric and responds to the formal experimentation of certain avant-garde narratives, such as the nouveau roman and the films of Marker and Godard.

Kahane argues that on a more personal level, a male author's use of a hysterical discourse would implicate him in this hysteria. In the final chapter of Passions of the Voice, Kahane examines the hysterical voices in texts by male modernists such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot and Ford Madox Ford. She notes that these authors seem to present hysterical anxiety as "the very condition of the modern subject" (127), and yet, Kahane suggests that this does not mean that these authors are "somehow beyond" the hysteria which appears in their texts, that they are its masters (127). Ultimately, Kahane concludes that: "No more than their readers can Eliot, Conrad and Ford be excluded as authorial writing subjects from the passions of their narrative voices" (150).

Speaking of In the Heart of the Country, Coetzee hints at the presence of his own passion behind Magda's "madness" and explains how the female voice enables him to fictively dramatise this passion. Coetzee claims that, unlike discursive prose, where one "can't be passionate without being mad", fiction "allows the writer to stage his passion" (DP 60). Thus, he adds, "Magda... may be mad... but I behind her am merely passionate" (60). Here Coetzee seems to imply that his



position as an author both distances himself from and implicates him in Magda's madness or passion, enabling him to exploit the possibilities of a hysterical voice in representing a discourse in crisis.

Magda's voice evidently enables Coetzee to dramatise his own position as an author. In Foe, which will be discussed in the next chapter, Coetzee reflects on the nature of novelistic discourse, and on the problematic notion of author-ity.

**Endnotes:**

1. Coetzee, White Writing, p.4.
2. The Guardian, back cover of the Penguin Edition of In the Heart of the Country.
3. Attwell claims it is fairly obvious that Coetzee uses modernist strategies - Coetzee's "modernism" has been noted by critics such as Jonathan Crewe and Neil Lazarus since the earliest reviews on Dusklands. In "'The Naked Truth': A Response to Jean Philippe Wade", however, Attwell disagrees with Wade's "symptomatic reading" of Coetzee as a "lapsed liberal" and therefore a "modernist" (90). He proposes that Coetzee cannot be so tidily labelled, pointing out that Coetzee is not a modernist in the sense of being a product of certain historical conditions in South Africa that were analogous to those of European Modernism. Rather, Coetzee self-consciously "replays" modernist aesthetics within the turbulence of the South African context.
4. The Passenger I believe appealed to Coetzee precisely for its "pieced together" effect as well as for its "extraordinary humanist comment... upon the nature of guilt and suffering" (Cook 669).
5. Attwell seems to agree, claiming that "strictly speaking, very little 'happens' in Heart of the Country", but that what does happen is "an act of consciousness" or "an act of language" which is "deeply transgressive" (SAPW 60).
6. The words Magda uses to articulate her identification with another story, echo Flaubert's famous quote regarding his fictional character, Emma Bovary: "Emma c'est moi". As Glenn argues, this suggests a relation between Coetzee and his protagonist, and infers that Magda operates as an alter-ego for Coetzee as a writer (127).
7. Teresa Dovey and David Attwell have drawn attention to these triangles of desire and the way which they perpetuate themselves (Dovey, LA 168 and Attwell, SAPW 62).
8. Known to Hippocrates and Plato, and subject of the earliest known medical text (1900 BC); hysteria is one of the earliest afflictions recognised in Western medical discourse (Gutheil 198). The term hysteria is derived from the Greek "hysteros" meaning "uterus" - hysterical symptoms were originally regarded as the result of a uterus which was literally thought to be "wandering" (Wright 163).
9. Hannah Decker has interpreted hysterical symptoms as physical manifestations of the repressed anger and desire which Victorian women could not show openly. Their illness allowed them to express their dissatisfaction and yet remain within societal norms of what was considered

appropriate feminine behaviour, since physical weakness and vulnerability were regarded as desirable "feminine" characteristics among middle and upper class women of this period (71).

10. Freud's initial theory of repression is based upon hysterical repression (Lukacher vii), and Elizabeth Grosz points out that "Freud's insights owe more than he can acknowledge to the loquacious brilliance of his first patients, female hysterics" (6).
11. Although hysteria as a social affliction has become an obsolete phenomenon, it is a subject which has inspired extensive writing and discussion. The figure of the hysteric has also set up a substantial dialogue between psychoanalysis and feminism. Toril Moi, in her essay, "Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora", points out that Freud's treatment of Ida Bauer has prompted "many feminists to take up their pen, in anger or fascination" (181). Many of these critics, including Moi, Jacqueline Rose and Maria Ramas have pointed to the way in which Freud's analysis of Dora's case history is limited and flawed. Moi claims that Freud's patriarchal prejudices result in his overlooking the relationships between women and centring all his attention on relationships with men. Thus Freud is unaware of the pre-oedipal factors which influence Dora's hysteria. Maria Ramas writes: "The deepest level of meaning of hysterical symptoms is not a thwarted desire for the father, but a breakthrough of the prohibited desire for the mother" (172).
12. For a full discussion and layout of these "four-footed schemas", see Patricia Elliot, pp. 14 and 15.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Foe: Father to Her Story

I was intended not to be the mother of my story, but to beget it.

- Susan Barton, Foe

## I

Foe is generally described by commentators as a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's eighteenth century classic, Robinson Crusoe, told by a voice elided in the original story, that of a woman. Embedded in the narrative of Foe is the island story of a shipwrecked Cruso<sup>1</sup> and his slave, Friday. Yet the novel also refers obliquely to other texts by Daniel Defoe, who himself appears in Foe under his original patronym, which is also used by Coetzee as the title of his novel. The fact that Defoe appears in Foe as a fictive character emphasises the multi-layered relationship between fiction and reality created in this novel which exploits the tensions between illusionism and anti-illusionism, interrogating the power dynamics at work in the notion of literary "realism". Although Foe is possibly Coetzee's most overtly metafictional novel, Nina Auerbach is wrong to claim that it is his "departure into metafiction" (37). All of Coetzee's novels to date can be read as displaying an awareness of their status as fiction. Like In the Heart of the Country, Foe meditates on the nature of writing, this time examining issues of authorship and power through the voices of Foe and Susan Barton, author and authoress, and through the absence of Friday's voice.

If, as Dovey suggests, Coetzee's earlier novels had been inversions/subversions of various South African literary genres within the novelistic tradition, then Foe seems to grapple with a broader and more problematic heritage - that of the novel itself.

Ian Watt's The Rise of the Novel explores the many factors contributing to the beginnings of the novel as it appeared in England during the early eighteenth century. His study focuses on writers who are regarded as the early founders of the novel: Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Moll Flanders (1722), are described by Abrams as early examples of picaresque novels and Abrams describes Robinson Crusoe as the first "novel of incident" (118).

Watt also observes that the novel was primarily written for a middle class reading public. Unlike the poor, most of the middle class was literate (Watt 39) and the "medium price range" of novels was "closer to the economic capacity of the middle class" (41-42).<sup>2</sup> Watt proposes that authors such as Defoe and Richardson "were wholly representative of the new centre of gravity of [the middle class]" and thus could write novels of interest to this reading public. The printed, published novel was one of the first mass-produced commodities and Defoe was one of the first writers to make a living from writing novels. Thus, as well as being one of the founders of the novel, Defoe is also described as "the apostle of the middle class, the triumphant herald of the all-conquering bourgeoisie" (Earle 3).

According to Abrams, the novelistic form, as it first appeared, was characterised as "the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism" (119). Significantly, Defoe is the creator of "stories... so convincing... set in so solid and factually realized a world" (Abrams 118), that his fiction is regarded as a standard of literary realism.<sup>3</sup> Novelistic discourse, linked to "the power and self-confidence of the middle class" (Watt 59), accumulates even more power when, as Annamarie Carusi points out, this discourse is linked to "realism" and a privileged relation to truth (135).

It is this relation to truth that Coetzee challenges in Foe. If the novels of Defoe create fictive worlds which seem to be real, then Coetzee's response in Foe is to write an anti-illusionistic novel. Anti-illusionism, in Coetzee's own words, involves displaying the novelistic "tricks" one is using instead of concealing them (DP 27). In Foe, both Susan Barton and Foe reflect on the intricacies of writing books, and Coetzee draws attention to Susan's awareness of her own fictionality.

Attwell describes Foe as a uniquely South African contribution to a vast tradition of "Robinsonades" (SAPW 108): he observes in a footnote that by 1895 there had been 115 revisions, 227 imitations (the "Robinsonades"), 110 translations, and 196 English editions of Robinson Crusoe, and that a French tradition of "Robinsonades" has also established itself, including versions by Giraudoux, Michel Tournier and Jules Verne (133).

There have also been many and varied critical readings of

Robinson Crusoe. Susan Gallagher points out that traditional readings tend to see Crusoe's story as "an eighteenth century testament to the superiority of rational civilization over nature and savagery, a dramatization of the Puritan spiritual autobiography, and a celebration of the value of hard work and faith" (168). Certainly, Robinson Crusoe has become something of a cultural myth and does seem to be an expression of the "moral fibre" of which Western society is composed. The novel has also been open to so many retellings that the story of the heroic individual who survives a shipwreck and conquers his island environment has become well known, even though most people have never actually read the original.

More recent readings of Robinson Crusoe have focused on an analysis of the political, economic and ideological factors represented in the novel. Among these is a paragraph by Marx, who uses the story of Crusoe on his island to illustrate a pre-capitalist situation, based on Robinson's production of use-values (Spivak, "Theory in the Margin" 160). Placing the novel's colonialism in context, Lewis Nkosi's essay, "Robinson Crusoe: Call Me Master", argues that the story enacts the British colonial venture and that Crusoe himself is little more than a "slaverunner" (Gallagher 170).

Robinson Crusoe, as Peter Morgan notes, is a story which is "ripe for retelling" (83). It is, he claims, a novel about colonialism and "the marking out of a masculine space" (84). The original presents an ideal vision of a colonial master and his grateful subject, Friday. The important relations in Defoe's novel are between men, between master and slave, and

if Crusoe at times becomes a figure for Enlightenment "Man" forging civilization out of the wilderness, the story certainly has very little space for women - the only women who actually enter the narrative are briefly mentioned at its beginning and end, literally inhabiting the margins of the novel. These female characters are limited to Crusoe's mother who tries to dissuade him from leaving home; Crusoe's "true friend"; the widow, whose role it is to bestow monetary gifts upon him; his wife who conveniently dies so that he may return unaccompanied to his island colony; the seven women Crusoe sends to the island, and those promised to the Englishmen in exchange for labour in his plantations:

besides other Supplies, I sent seven Women, being such as I found fit for service or for Wives to such as would take them: As to the English Men, I promis'd them to send some Women from England, with a good Cargoe of Neccesities if they would apply themselves to planting...

(Robinson Crusoe 306)

Women are clearly only functional here in so far as they can serve a purpose in relation to men. Denied all subjectivity and autonomy, their roles are restricted to those of wives and mothers, or objects which are exchanged between men.

Coetzee's most significant deviation from Defoe's original is his use of a female narrator. This would suggest that Coetzee significantly and consciously sets himself apart from the view of women expressed by Defoe, who, it must be said, was by no means considered "conservative" in his attitude to the role of women in his time. Peter Earle attests



that Defoe was in fact a keen upholder of women's rights (46) and that he advocated better treatment for women than his contemporaries (244). He was a man who, according to Earle, had the strongest criticism for his sex and his "good advice to the ladies", written in 1702, tells women not to get married because their husbands would treat them so badly (246). Although Robinson Crusoe had no place for women, Defoe's novels Moll Flanders and Roxana exhibit a strong sense of sympathy for the plight of women in his society. Nonetheless, although he did believe that women should receive the benefit of a decent education, Defoe was a product of his time - ultimately he believed that a wife should be subjected to her benevolent husband (244).

As Earle points out, during Defoe's time a new class of women had evolved, these being the wives and daughters of the successful men of the middle class. A new class of "idle women" had developed, women who did not have to work and who "naturally", says Earle, "tended to vice" (244). I would like to add that these "idle women" also started to write. As Elaine Showalter has shown, it was around 1750 that English women entered the literary marketplace ("A Literature of Their Own" 275). Showalter also draws attention to Ian Watt's observations that most novels in the eighteenth century came from the female pen, and that men often published books under female names (276).

Defoe's sympathetic portrayal of Moll and Roxana finds a counterpart in Coetzee's novel, in which the author's sympathies are evidently with his struggling

authoress/protagonist. In an interview with Tony Morphet in 1987, conducted shortly after he had completed Foe, Coetzee objected testily to Morphet's insinuation that Coetzee, as a successful author, could be associated with Foe in his novel. Coetzee insisted that instead, his interest was in Susan Barton, the "unsuccessful author - worse, authoress" ("The Almighty Pen" 12). Coetzee's treatment of "the feminist issue", however, is at a far remove from Defoe and his contemporaries and is largely a response to certain seminal feminist texts that must have reached his awareness, these being the central documents of what may be referred to as Anglo-American feminism.

## II

That Coetzee should choose the name Susan for his protagonist in Foe is in a sense intertextually overdetermined, gesturing to the possible levels on which Foe may be read. Coetzee is not the first to write Robinson Crusoe from the perspective of a female character: in the French, Giraudoux had written a version of the island story from the point of view of a heroine named Suzanne. Susan's name, an Anglicised version of Suzanne, asserts the novel's connection with the tradition of Robinsonades with which Coetzee was evidently familiar.

Secondly, as Teresa Dovey points out, the name of Coetzee's Susan Barton, originally "Berton", is a play on the names of feminist theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, writers of The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), an important text

in Anglo-American feminism. In Foe, Coetzee's engagement with feminism as a discourse is nothing, if not obvious and most commentators on the novel have discussed its relation to various feminist texts. I shall give a more detailed account of Coetzee's relation to feminism in Foe later in this chapter.

Thirdly (and by no means finally), the name Susan establishes an intertextual resonance between Foe and Defoe's other "minor" works such as Roxana, a fictional confession narrated by a woman called Roxana, whose concealed name is also Susan. Defoe's novels Roxana and Moll Flanders, like Foe, involve the fictional confessions of female narrators. David Attwell, in Doubling the Point, has pointed to the importance of Coetzee's essay entitled "Confession and Double Thoughts" for an analysis of Foe. The text resonates with images of confession: Susan tells her story to the authoritative Mr Foe, picturing him as a predatory father confessor; she asks Crusoe as he lies dying whether he does not have "something to confess"; her relationship with the mute Friday necessitates a confession, she confesses to Foe that there are times when benevolence deserts her and she uses language only to subject Friday to her will. Susan's scepticism as regards her motives at this point is typical of the secular confession of which Coetzee writes in his essay. Lacking grace, the necessary goal and release of confession, secular confession has no way out of "the endless trials of doubt". So, in a society where there is no longer a belief in "grace", the compulsion towards confession is trapped in endless scepticism, as Foe puts it:

"in the maze of doubting" (135).

In the case of Moll, Roxana and Susan Barton, it is a female voice that confesses, and significantly, in Foe, Susan's confession is largely addressed to Foe, her father confessor. Susan's narrative reveals how the confessional mode is based on a power dynamic. When she is telling Foe about her vision of Friday's nakedness, Susan is aware of how, in spite of her determination not to kneel before Foe "like one of his gallows birds", she has slipped into a position of powerlessness (120). After this incident, Foe tells Susan the story of a woman, a "convicted thief", who, on her deathbed, had so much to confess that she went on "confessing and throwing her confession into doubt" until eventually the chaplain held up his hand and hurried away. Although Foe, evidently made to identify with the chaplain, takes the story as an allegory for a time of eventually ending confession and holding one's peace, Susan, as a woman, is more aware of the power dynamics at work. She takes the lesson of the story to be "he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force" (124).

Roxana, Moll Flanders and Foe not only involve confessional narratives performed by female voices, these voices are also the products of male authors. The implications of this are important for any reading of the novel. The problem of a male author using a female voice is something that both Spivak and Auerbach have drawn attention to in their readings of Foe. Spivak claims that "Coetzee has trouble negotiating a gendered position; he and the text strain to

make this trouble noticeable" and that "the text will not defend itself against the undecidability of imagining a woman" ("Theory in the Margin" 162). Auerbach takes this further, interpreting Susan's insubstantiality as an allegory of Coetzee's failed attempt to write as a woman: "in guilty and weary times, men can no longer write women who live" (37). In terms of my argument, however, it is irrelevant whether or not Coetzee, as a man, can write "authentically" as a woman. As I will demonstrate later, Susan's insubstantiality is structural and deliberate rather than a failed attempt to capture "real" female experience. Nonetheless, Coetzee's use of the female narrative voice in Foe is significant, and will be explored in this chapter.

Written by a white male academic in the South Africa of the 1980s, Foe is a novel conspicuously conscious of its problematic relation to the discourses of both post-colonialism and feminism. In terms of the South African political context, Susan Gallagher has pointed out that it was during the time in which Foe was written that the silencing of dissent by the ruling Nationalist Party reached its zenith. Gallagher notes that in the three years between Life & Times of Michael K and Foe, Coetzee had become something of a spokesperson for South Africa. Internationally, as a South African novelist and a co-editor of A Land Apart (a compilation of South African literature) Coetzee was increasingly being called upon to speak for this land and its silenced dissenters (168). With hindsight, Coetzee himself seems to find this position problematic - in Doubling the

Point he claims that his articles on cultural issues during the mid-1980s (such as those on Afrikaners and the "white tribe") "slipped too easily into the role of commentator on South African affairs" (104).

Coetzee often displays what Gallagher calls "a certain cageyness and refusal to speak as a South African novelist" (167). Coetzee's annoyance with his classification under the label of "South African novelist" shows his reluctance in occupying a rather obvious and stereotypical role,<sup>4</sup> a role that would result in his novels being read only as comments on the South African situation. Nonetheless, it is within this context that Coetzee's exploration of "voice" and "speaking for the other" in Foe takes on specific significance and meaning. Interestingly, Coetzee withholds speech from Friday whereas he writes Susan's voice into existence. I will discuss the implications of this in my analysis of the novel.

### III

In the time between In the Heart of the Country (1977) and Foe (1986), Coetzee had written both Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) and Life & Times of Michael K (1983). Barbarians, written at the beginning of the politically turbulent 1980s, seems to have a sense of foreboding - Teresa Dovey claims that Barbarians spells the end of the liberal novel. The Magistrate writes in a kind of eternal present and is thus incapable of seeing his way out of the time of Empire. Although he is horrified at the torture inflicted by the Empire on its

"enemies", his inability to change the status quo brings him face to face with his own impotence and complicity. The Barbarian girl he tries to help becomes a figure of otherness - she is a surface without apertures, beyond his comprehension.

Although Magda's female anatomy in In the Heart of the Country is used to articulate various forms of lack or absence, in Barbarians the body of the barbarian girl is opaque, impenetrable. Like Friday in Foe, she cannot and does not articulate what it is like to inhabit her body. Her body is only experienced externally, as a surface, through the narrative of the Magistrate. In relation to the Magistrate, the girl is completely "other", as she is both of the opposite sex and outside his cultural inscription, being racially "other". This is different from the relationships between Magda and her father in Heart of the Country and between Susan Barton and Foe in Foe: although Magda and Susan are sexually other in a patriarchal culture, they are part of this culture. The significance of this observation for Foe is that Friday operates in a similar way - his silence ensures that his story remains inaccessible and his body becomes a sign of absolute otherness.

Teresa Dovey claims that the discourse called into question in Michael K is the South African liberal tradition that tries to speak for the voiceless victims of oppression. The Medical Officer who examines K describes him as an allegory of "how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence within a system without becoming a term in

it" (228), emphasising the system's failure to turn K into a "voiceless victim", to reduce him to an "other" who can be spoken for. The medical officer's comment, however, can also be taken in another way. David Attwell has pointed out that K represents not only the figure of a disempowered victim, but also allegorises a subversive element within a signifying system, an "element within textualisation which is beyond calculation or control" (DP 204).

Clearly there has been a shift in Coetzee's representation of disruptive and subversive "otherness". Whereas in In the Heart of the Country it is Magda's voice, that of a female hysteric, which has subversive properties in relation to the discourse of mastery, in Michael K it is a homeless hare-lipped gardener who embodies resistance to the system. This shift suggests that Coetzee has formulated a position more problematic and even, further removed from a position of power than that of the female narrator. As a result, the female voice in Foe is used for very different purposes than in In the Heart of the Country: Susan Barton's voice does not so much conjure up a female body and a disruptive discourse but rather the *female position of authoress* in order to interrogate power and authority. In Foe, as I will argue, it is Friday whose body is the site of resistance to mastery.

Coetzee's dilemma in Foe is to negotiate a position of power -the novel has been described as an "interrogation of authority" by Coetzee himself (DP 247). Speaking of Susan Barton's position in the interview with Morphet, Coetzee



asked: "How can one question power from a position of power? One ought to question it from its antagonist position, namely, the position of weakness" ("The Almighty Pen" 12). Susan Barton's "position of weakness", it would seem, is directly related to her position as a female in a male-dominated society, and also to her status as authoress. As Showalter reminds us:

gender is not only a question of *difference*, which assumes that the sexes are separate and equal; but of *power*, since, looking at the history of gender relations, we find sexual asymmetry, inequality and male dominance in every known society. ("The Rise of Gender" 4)

Furthermore, Showalter has emphasised that in every language, the masculine version is generic, the linguistic norm, whereas the feminine form is always secondary and inferior, often derived through a suffix (1). She points out: "We can call Sylvia Plath or Robert Lowell a 'poet', but we cannot call Lowell a 'poetess' except as an insult" ("The Rise of Gender" 1). The term "author" is used to denote a person who is a writer or composer, an originator and creator. It also has connotative associations such as authority, power, potency and creativity. Most importantly, however, "author" is a male term, its female counterpart being authoress. This terminology thus sets up an unequal power relation between the universal male author/creator with his potent and phallic pen and the inferior female authoress. As I will demonstrate, Susan is made to struggle not only with the problems of being a writer, but also of being a female writer. The solution she

is granted by Coetzee is her own attempt to appropriate male literary power, in the form of the pen as phallus. Coetzee seems to suggest, however, that this project merely reverses and thus perpetuates the power dynamics inherent in the original opposition.

Although the dominant metaphor for literary creation used in Foe is that of the "Almighty Pen", the pen as phallus, there is another less obvious metaphor which may be read as a subtext in the novel - that of childbirth. As I will demonstrate, Susan's problematic status as authoress is further complicated by the fact that she is a mother, a mother in search of her lost daughter. Although the only metaphor for creativity available to Susan is that of the pen, another voice emerges in the novel, a voice that speaks, very faintly and unobtrusively, in terms of the language of childbirth.

The possibilities of different literary metaphors for creativity, however, are presented and explored against the background of Friday's disturbing and radical otherness. Friday's actions are never adequately deciphered, he never speaks in any recognisable language and his story remains the absent centre of the novel. His severed tongue is a brutal reminder of the violence inherent in power structures that silence and turn others into victims who must be spoken for. And yet, because Friday cannot speak, his body remains opaque, impenetrable and ultimately resistant as it is only seen and experienced externally through the gaze of others. Friday is deliberately presented as totally alien, the site of alterity where all representation, including Coetzee's novel itself,

breaks down.

#### IV

The narrative of Foe is divided into four distinct parts or sections. The first of these, marked I, is a self-citation, and appears in inverted commas. Susan writes in the memoir form, using the past tense. We later learn that this memoir has apparently been written in rented lodgings in London. In her letters to Foe, which comprise section II, Susan mentions her writings that form section I: "The memoir I wrote for you I wrote sitting on my bed... I completed that memoir in three days" (Foe 63).

Section I opens with the following paragraph:

"At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard. With slow strokes, my long hair floating about me like a flower of the sea, like an anemone, like a jellyfish of the kind you see in the waters of Brazil, I swam towards the strange island, for a while swimming as I had rowed, against the current, then all at once free of its grip, carried by the waves into the bay and on to the beach (5).

Pamela Dunbar has noted that these images of the sea-anemone and jellyfish are "externally conceived", and that this suggests the presence of another eye/I who watches/perceives Susan even as she is saying "I" (103). Dunbar identifies this

subtle overvoice as the same as that of the unidentified narrator who speaks in section IV (108).<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, it is precisely in the almost imperceptible split between Susan's voice and this "other" voice that a birth metaphor emerges. This opening passage, after all, marks Susan's birth in the novel. Susan slips overboard into the sea, her hair floating around her like a jellyfish - in an understated way the slimy, liquid imagery is suggestive of amniotic fluid. She is carried by the waves, and spewed forth onto the "hot sand" of the beach, naked save for her petticoat, which clings and dries on her body like some kind of afterbirth.

This subtle split in voice, however, suggests that it is not Susan but another unidentified and external voice which is using this birth metaphor. Susan in fact protests later that the beginning of the novel is not her birth, that she had a life before her story begins:

I am not a story, Mr Foe. I may impress you as a story because I began my account of myself without preamble, slipping into the water and striking out for the shore. But my life did not begin in the waves. There was a life before the water... and so on back to the day I was born.

(131)

There is evidently tension set up between *illusionism*, inherent in Susan's "realist" claim that she is a real woman with a real birth and life, and *anti-illusionism*, the opening paragraph suggesting Susan's birth as a character in a novel, and gesturing to a space outside of the novel in which Susan is born in the author/reader's mind. If it is not Susan as a

character who is using anti-illusionistic ploys, then this suggests the presence of another "I" who is.

The first interaction between characters occurs between Susan and the black man, Friday. This initial encounter is a prefigurement of the strange and complex relation between these characters that follows in the novel. In her castaway state, Susan looks up and sees a "dark shadow ... not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him" (5). This man is Friday. Significantly, Coetzee deliberately makes his Friday a black African and thus deviates from Defoe's representation of Friday, who is described as an American Indian, and therefore less racially other (Dunbar 104). Coetzee's Friday is "a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool" (5), whereas Defoe's Friday is written of as having "all the sweetness and softness of a *European* in his countenance" and long black hair, "not curled like wool" (Robinson Crusoe 205).

Coetzee's description of Friday gives him a distinctly post-colonial and African dimension. Comparing South Africa/Africa with the America's, Coetzee points out in White Writing that to the colonists, Southern Africa was not regarded in any way as a "New World", but was rather seen as "the farthest extremities of the old". The natives of Southern Africa, Coetzee writes, inspired vague curiosity or disgust, not admiration (WW 2). Inherent in the colonial view was the notion that Africa harboured the risk of a return to savagery and idleness (3). Cruso's barren terraces in Foe which seem to have no purpose can be interpreted as a defence against sloth, or "going native". Cruso says: "Clearing the ground and piling

stones is little enough, but it is better than sitting in idleness" (Foe 33).

On the island, Susan meets Cruso, to whom she tells her story. She is searching for her lost daughter who has been abducted by an Englishman and "conveyed to the New World" (10). She has spent time in Bahia and on her way to Lisbon embarked on a ship whose crew mutinied, killed the captain and set her adrift upon the ocean. In response, Cruso has no story to tell for himself, but instead tells her, at various intervals, a set of stories "so various... that... he no longer knew what was truth and what was fancy" (12).

During her time on the island, Susan asks why Friday does not speak, or why Cruso does not teach him to speak. In response, Cruso opens Friday's mouth: "He has no tongue", Cruso says, "they cut out his tongue" (23). Although Susan is told that the slavers cut out Friday's tongue, how Friday lost his tongue remains a mystery in the novel as Friday is the only one who can tell his story and he is mute. One day, Susan sees Friday set himself afloat on a log of wood and scatter white flakes, which she later realizes are petals, on the surface of the ocean. Friday's purpose here is utterly cryptic, and yet the mysterious petals reappear in the dreamscape of section IV, floating around the unnamed narrator of this section "like a rain of snowflakes" (156). The significance of Friday's petals is that they remain indecipherable. Susan's hermeneutic enterprise fails to establish their meaning and like Friday's missing tongue, the mystery of Friday's casting of petals onto the ocean remains a

mystery only he can answer. Friday's silence is a figure for his radical "otherness".

Susan desires to escape from the island as she finds Crusoe and Friday poor companions. During one of Crusoe's fevers, they are eventually rescued by a merchant ship. Crusoe dies on board ship "of extremist woe", leaving Susan the story of his island, as she tells Foe (45).

Like the first section, section II is a self-citation, written in inverted commas, this time comprising letters from Susan to Foe. As they later appear in this section, Susan's letters are often undated and are increasingly like "proper narrative", signalling her progress as writer. During this section, Susan moves into Foe's house, but Foe is missing, hiding from bailiffs.<sup>6</sup> Susan waits for Foe to return as she is adamant that he should write her story for her. Her plea is that he should return to her the "substance"-she has lost (51), that her life is "drearily suspended" until Foe's writing is done (63).

Susan's insubstantiality at this point is obviously deliberate and conscious on Coetzee's part and may be read on a number of levels. In some ways her "lost substance" reflects her "anxiety of authorship", her lack of faith in herself as author of her own story. On another level, "substance" becomes a metaphor for truth, for reality and even for literary realism which attempts to create substantial fictional worlds. In the preface to Roxana, Defoe writes of his novel that "the foundation of this is laid in truth of fact; and so the work is not a story but a history" (vi), setting the text up as

"truth". Paradoxically, when Susan draws attention to her lack of substance, she is also emphasising her status as a character in a novel - she is not "real", but belongs to the realm of the fictive.

Gradually, Susan begins to write her own story, but this is only done through her appropriation of Foe's pen:

"Somehow", she writes to Foe, "the pen becomes mine when I write with it" (66). Her assimilation of the pen as phallus marks the beginning of her struggle for literary power. Strangely enough it is precisely at this point that her role as mother returns to haunt her. Susan notices a strange girl outside the house. This girl claims to be Susan's daughter and yet Susan rejects her as sent by Foe, as "fãther-born".

Kirsten Holst-Peterson has observed that this daughter and her maid Amy (or Emmy) are intertextual wanderers - they are derivations of characters in two of Defoe's novels, Roxana and Moll Flanders (246). The sub-plot of the daughter who claims Susan as her mother is lifted from Roxana. Roxana, asserting her own independence as a free woman (Roxana 129), is nonetheless presented as an irresponsible mother. The children who are born to both Roxana and Moll Flanders are treated in terrible ways: they are generally abandoned, palmed off on other relatives, forgotten or even killed.

Roxana, accompanied by her maid, Amy, lives a life of adventure and vice in which she abandons along the way the physical evidence of her misdemeanours, namely her children. She then marries and settles down with a righteous Quaker, but is deeply troubled by the appearance of a girl claiming to be



her daughter. Roxana and her maid endeavour to murder the girl by leading her into the forest. Although Roxana professes that as a woman she is not any less a "free agent" than a man, Spivak has drawn attention to Defoe's subtle condemnation of her simultaneous status of being both mother and autonomous female. Spivak suggests that in Defoe's novels motherhood is deliberately represented as in conflict with and as undermined by "the destiny of female individualism" ("Theory in the Margin" 164).

When Susan rejects this daughter as "father born" she is in fact enacting a refusal of a particular patriarchal definition of herself. She rejects the script "written" for her by a male author, which insinuates that women cannot be both mothers and "free agents" in constructing their own lives. In a passage apparently referring to Defoe's representation of Roxana and Moll, Susan scathingly questions Defoe's knowledge of female experience:

Do you think women drop children and forget them as snakes lay eggs? Only a man could entertain such a fancy... She is more your daughter than she ever was mine. (75)

In an attempt to return Friday to Africa, and to free herself from him, Susan sets off to Bristol. On the way, she must disguise herself as a man in order to hide her vulnerability as a single woman. While she and Friday are travelling they find an infant girl, "stillborn or perhaps stifled" (105). "Whose child is she?", Susan wonders. The dead child is an "uncanny" presence, signalling a secret

recognition. Susan secretly recognises the child as herself: "Who was the babe but I in another life?" (105). As with the earlier split in voice, in the uncanny link between Susan and the dead child a covert childbirth metaphor emerges. Stillborn is often a metaphorical way of describing a failed piece of writing. Perhaps the stifled infant points to the fact that Susan's story itself will be "stifled" under the authorship of Foe/Defoe, as her part in the story of the island will be omitted in the final versions of Defoe's novels.

When Susan gets to Bristol, she realises the futility of her attempt to restore Friday to his native land, and that he has no defence against slavetraders who will probably only sell him into slavery a second time. At the end of this section Susan resignedly adopts Friday as her child, seemingly as a replacement for the daughter she has lost (111).

Although sections I and II are addressed to Foe, section III has no inverted commas. Through her appropriation of the efficacious pen, Susan seems to have achieved the authority and power of male authorship. Her story, however, has none of the elaborate detail and fleshing out of Defoe's novels, which have been praised for their "realism": for creating fictional worlds so real that they masquerade as reality. Susan's environment is sketched in a sparse and generalised fashion. For instance, her description of Foe's "refuge" is as follows:

The room was lit by a single window, through which poured the afternoon sun. The view was to the north, over the roofs of Whitechapel. For furniture there was a table and chair, and a bed, slovenly made; one corner of the room

was curtailed off (113).

Like Susan's story of the island, which Foe is constantly trying to embroider upon, her narrative style is "like a loaf of bread" as Foe describes it: "It will keep us alive, certainly, if we are starved of reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had?" (117). Is this Coetzee's dig at the novels of Defoe, which were designed largely for the purpose of "tempting" a prospective readership into "buying one"? Certainly Foe seems to be concerned with what will sell and his attempt to turn Susan's story into one with "five parts in all" based on a mother-daughter quest is a revision carried out on behalf of a prospective readership. Susan resists, claiming it is the island story that she wishes to tell and that the loss of Friday's tongue is what makes the story hold its silence (117).

When Susan tells Foe of Friday's dancing, it seems that what she has seen is the subject of a strange repression on her part. She confesses that although in her letters to Foe she had mentioned Friday's dancing, she has not told "the whole story" (118). What she has omitted thus far in her narrative is her sight of Friday's nakedness in the dance. Wrapped loosely in Foe's robes which fell to his ankles, Susan tells Foe, Friday would begin to dance, the robes flying up and revealing his nakedness to Susan. This unveiling, however, has a more sinister aspect: although Susan strangely cannot articulate what she has seen, her horror and fascination suggest that she is witnessing the sight of "a slave unmanned"

(119) - Friday has been castrated. She confesses that his severed tongue had suggested to her that there was a "more hideous mutilation" and she imagines the tongue as "a worm cut in half contorting itself in death-throes" (119). In an essay written in 1924, the psychoanalyst J.C. Flugel observed the close connection between tongue and phallus, speech and sexual power, and described an unconscious equation between dumbness and castration or impotence. He noted that excision of the tongue was practised as a castration displacement, and would often have been accompanied by castration itself (Geyer-Ryan 210). Friday's castration situates him "without the phallus", metaphorically stressing his disempowered relation to those who possess the tongue-phallus, key to power in the Symbolic order of language.

When she sees Friday dancing Susan is confounded, even her horror cannot be articulated:

I was so confounded that I gaped without shame at what had hitherto been veiled from me... In the dance nothing was still and yet everything was still. The whirling robe was a scarlet bell settled upon Friday's shoulders and enclosing him; Friday was the dark pillar at its centre. What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, should I say, my eyes were open to what was present to them. (119)

As Teresa Dovey puts it, here Susan sees the "present absence or absent presence" of the phallus (374). Significantly, Coetzee chooses this moment to use what he refers to as the "short passive". In an essay entitled "The Agentless Sentence

as Rhetorical Device" (1980), Coetzee observes the way in which the short passive, or agentless sentence, "leaves an uneasy feeling", opening up an area of uncertainty. In the case of Defoe, Beckett and James, Coetzee claims, this uneasy "gap" is exploited in order to link form to meaning.

When Susan Barton says: "What had been hidden from me was revealed" she is expressing a double lack or uncertainty. The active versions of this sentence would be "X had hidden Y from me" and "X revealed Y to me". In these forms, however, both subject and object, "X" and "Y", are either uncertain or non-existent. Is it Friday, social decorum, or Coetzee himself who is the agent? And what is Y if not the non-existence of the phallus itself? Not only is the agent uncertain, creating a sense of unease and doubt, the presence of an absent, unnameable object suggests the absence of the phallus itself. Whereas Magda's female anatomy in In the Heart of the Country had been a trope for her "lack", marking her as a Medusa figure, in Foe Friday's castration is conveyed through Coetzee's clever use of the passive, so that when "the veil is lifted" it is Friday who becomes the Medusa, paralysing Susan with horror.

In Foe, the phallus is also used as a metaphor for authorship, for empowerment through language, and its absence signifies Friday's lack of authority. Although, like Friday, Susan's position situates her without the phallus, through her search for autonomy and selfhood she can and does appropriate the power of the phallus. As she notes, her silences are deliberate: she still has possession of language, and thus has

the power to withhold. Friday's silence, however, she tells Foe, is "a helpless silence" (122). He is, Susan continues, "the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born" (122). In common with the dead baby found in a ditch, a negative childbirth metaphor emerges, but this time in order to figure Friday's story, a story without authority that can never be retraced or recovered.

Towards the end of section III, Foe and Susan have sexual intercourse and she assumes the dominant position, asserting her status as author of her story. Susan then tries to teach Friday to write. On his slate, however, Friday draws pictures of walking eyes. Susan demands that he give her the slate but he ignores her and wipes his slate clean. After a walk, Susan comes home to find Friday sitting at Foe's desk. Dressed in Foe's robes he holds in his hand a quill pen with a semen-like "drop of black ink glistening at its tip" (151). She first mistakes him for Foe, then realises who he is and tries to snatch the pen away from him, a telling gesture. Although Susan challenges Foe's authority, she is outraged and threatened by Friday's usurpation of the literary father's authority. Friday is covering the page in rows and rows of circles. Susan and Foe interpret these as the letter "o". "It is a start", Foe says, "tomorrow you must teach him 'a'" (152).

In the last section of Foe, marked as IV, an unidentified narrator, who possibly represents either Susan's unconscious self, Coetzee, the reader, or else a significantly anonymous voice, enters the house where Foe, Susan, the daughter and

Friday are lying covered in dust, decay and "a faint smell of lilac" (153). Their bodies seem insubstantial, even paper-like: the woman/girl on the landing "weighs no more than straw" and the skin of Susan and Foe is "dry as paper" (153). Friday seems to be the only one who is alive, "his skin is warm" (154). The narrator tries to part his teeth and listen to what is emitted. From out of Friday's mouth "issue the sounds of the island" (154).

Following this strange vision is another, separated from the first typographically. In this second vision, an unidentified narrator enters Foe's (Defoe's?) house on "a bright autumn day" and yet the room is "darker than before" (155). The narrator sees the same woman/girl on the landing and Susan and Foe lying face to face. Around Friday's neck, the narrator observes, is "a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or a chain", ironically recalling the emancipatory notice Susan signs in Cruso's name and ties around Friday's neck, suggesting the futility of Susan's emancipatory gesture and her complicity in his oppression.

The narrator opens a manuscript on which is written the first page of Foe: "At last I could row no further". This is Susan's memoir. The narrator then slips overboard, into Susan's story; around him/her are Friday's petals. Finally, under the sea, the narrator finds the huge hulk of the wreck mentioned by Cruso in section I.<sup>7</sup> The wreck, shorn of its masts, with a huge hole giving entry, draws the narrator into its womb-like depths.

In the stagnant and slimy waters of this gigantic cavity,

the narrator finds firstly the dead, bloated bodies of Susan Barton and her captain, floating "like stars" (157). Finally, in the last corner, is Friday, crouched in a foetal position, "his knees drawn up, his hands between his thighs" (157). The narrator tries to speak, but cannot: "this is not a place of words... This is where bodies are their own signs. This is the home of Friday" (157). Opening Friday's mouth, the narrator releases from it a "slow stream, without breath, without interruption", that flows outward, stirring up the stagnant waters and running in all directions "to the ends of the earth" (157). This soft, cold, dark and unending stream reminds us of the presence of the truly "other", that which stirs up or disrupts any notion of coherent selfhood or identity, making Friday's breath a potentially deconstructive force.

# V

The final section of Foe is possibly the most cryptic and disturbing part of the novel. Like all dreamscapes, the basis of section IV is wish-fulfilment, expressing the desire for an ultimate state or space. In this case, however, the writing gestures towards two very different kinds of rarefied space that are primarily at odds with each other.

Although the reader is certain that the voice in sections I, II, and III of Foe is Susan Barton's, the voice in section IV is not specifically a male or a female voice. This section, even more so than In the Heart of the Country, is an example of that voice which Barthes claims "gets lost, as though it



had leaked out through a hole in discourse... leaving a gap which enables the utterance to shift from one point of view to the other" (SZ 41-42). This anonymous voice seems to be Coetzee's exploration of Barthes' concept of the death of the Author - it evokes the notion that writing effaces the anatomy of the author, that "writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away... starting with the very identity of the body writing" ("The Death of the Author" 167).

According to Barthes, in the plural and multiple space which is writing, "everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered", and meaning is posited endlessly only to be evaporated (171). Barthes envisions a future where the myth of the all-powerful author is overthrown, and the reader, someone "without history, biography, psychology", becomes the destination of the text. Barthes claims that only "the death of the author" would signal and allow "the birth of the reader". Section IV of *Foe*, a novel suffused with latent birth metaphors, allegorises the birth of the reader. Coming across Susan Barton's manuscript, the anonymous "I" in section IV begins to read:

Bringing the candle nearer, I read the first words of the tall looping script: 'Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further.'

With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard.

(155)

This is, of course, the first paragraph of *Foe*. The narrating "I" has slipped into Susan's story, but whereas the original

paragraph covertly gestured towards Susan's birth in the novel, now it is someone else who is born, who slips into Susan's story - the reader.

Teresa Dovey has suggested that the final section of Foe, spoken by an unnamed narrator, is not an assertion of authorial power but instead gestures towards "a time when the slow stream [of Friday's voice] might become an anonymous murmur, to a time when the insistence on difference and the claim to authority might no longer be a politically necessary strategy" (402). Dovey is referring, of course, to Foucault's essay "What is an Author?", in which Foucault imagines a society where there would no longer be any need for an author or "author function", where the only "voice" heard would be a vague murmur of indifference: "What matter who's speaking?" (Foucault 138).

Nancy K. Miller's paper, "The Text's Heroine", as I mentioned in Chapter Two, argues against this "murmur of indifference". Miller claims that the sex of the author does matter and rejects what she refers to as Foucault's "sovereign indifference" to who is speaking as "one of the masks... behind which phallogentrism hides its fictions" (68). She points out that "the authorising function of its own discourse authorises 'the end of woman' without consulting her" (68). As for authority and power, Miller continues, "only those who have it can play with not having it" (68). If Coetzee was merely re-iterating the concerns of Barthes and Foucault, I believe Miller's point would be valid criticism, not only of Foucault's aspirations, but also of Coetzee's appropriation of

a female voice as well as his use of a disembodied voice without origin. However, the final section of Foe is not quite so easily resolved.

Speaking of Foe retrospectively in Doubling the Point, Coetzee interprets Attwell's question regarding the last section of Foe as "a question about power" (DP 248). "Is representation", Coetzee asks, "to be so robbed of power by the endlessly sceptical processes of textualisation that those represented in/by the text - the feminine subject, the colonial subject - are to have no power either?" (248). Coetzee points out that although Friday has no voice, Friday somehow remains resistant, he "does not disappear, because Friday is body" (248). Because Friday does not enter language, because he does not speak, his body remains in a sense opaque, unmediated by language. This is the suggestion inherent in the final section of the novel where, "descending" into the wreck, the narrator says "this is not a place of words... It is the home of Friday" (157). In contrast to the writerly notion of the text as a surface which can be endlessly and playfully "ranged over, not pierced" (Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 171), Friday's body, located in the "hole" of the wreck, points to an impossible space outside the text itself, a space before which language, writing and Coetzee's novel itself, breaks down entirely. On one level then, Friday's breath constitutes a disruptive force that challenges and stirs up the stagnant waters of Western theory's "endlessly sceptical processes of textualisation" (Coetzee, DP 248).

## VI

If Coetzee's use of the voice of a struggling authoress in his rewriting of Defoe's island story can in some ways be assimilated into a feminist project and shows an awareness of feminist issues, then this awareness is to Coetzee's credit - Elaine Showalter has observed how, although in the early 1980's there were a number of male academics in the fields of history and anthropology who were specializing in gender related areas, in the literary realm feminist theory was seen as unworthy of interest by male theorists ("The Rise of Gender" 6). Books dealing with literature and literary theory at this time generally excluded any mention of feminist or gender-related issues, while those that did were either dismissed or ignored. Sandra Gilbert protested in 1980 that most of her male colleagues did not take the feminist movement seriously at all and were not interested in attending gender forums or reading feminist texts (Showalter, "The Rise of Gender" 6). As I have shown in Chapter One, feminism has taken a long time to be accepted in academic circles. Furthermore, there are still reactionary departments in this country that do not take literary theory, let alone feminist literary theory, seriously.

In his position as Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town, however, as well as during his trips to the United States, Coetzee must have been exposed to certain strands of academic feminism, particularly that of the rather doctrinaire Anglo-American variety. As I will

demonstrate, it is this particular feminist discourse that Coetzee both engages with and problematises in Foe. Because Foe so obviously engages with certain aspects of what may be referred to as a feminist discourse, any discussion of the novel warrants a consideration of Coetzee's position in relation to feminism as presented in the novel.

Clearly, Coetzee's purpose in choosing a female persona involves a certain wilful abdication of power and a challenging of authority. As the Morphet interview "The Almighty Pen" reveals, in Foe Coetzee aligns himself with Susan's position, that of the "unsuccessful authoress".

As I have suggested in the previous chapter, this identification with a woman can be read as closely related to Coetzee's position as a white liberal writing from a "residual, complicit and politically impotent liberal aesthetic space" (Wade 216). The position of a white liberal in South Africa can be seen as broadly analogous to that of Coetzee's female protagonists who must come to terms with an oppressive culture in relation to which they occupy a marginal and dissident position. The white dissenting liberal in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, while not being racially other, belonged to a minority group that was marginal in relation to the dominant power - Afrikaner nationalism. Similarly, the female subject as presented in In the Heart of the Country and Foe has a marginal and less powerful position in relation to the dominant discourses of patriarchal authority - figured by Magda's father and Cruso and Foe.

Furthermore, the liberal tradition, as Coetzee's novels

point out, is unwittingly complicitous in the oppression of the very people it claims to be speaking for, namely the oppressed victims of colonialism. This is figured through the position of the female narrators of Heart of the Country and Foe: although Magda and Susan are oppressed within a patriarchal culture, they are complicitous in oppressing racial others. Magda cannot escape her own position of dominance over the servants on the farm as she has been born into "a language of hierarchy and distance", and Susan cannot liberate Friday as she is unwillingly complicitous in his oppression. In Foe the burden of this complicity becomes a source of great frustration to Susan. She claims that "Friday is the tyrant riding on [her] shoulders" (148) and she dreams that Friday's silence turns into black smoke, threatening to choke her (118).

Susan, however, can also be read on another level. She also represents a certain position in feminist discourse, as has been observed by a number of critics. This feminist discourse, I believe, may be classified more specifically as that of liberal feminism. On this level, it is clear that Coetzee is performing a subtle critique of this particular feminist project.

Elaine Showalter is credited with coining the term "gynocriticism", and her views have been identified as typical of Anglo-American feminism. In "The Female Tradition", a chapter from A Literature of Their Own (1977), Showalter comments on the female literary tradition in the English novel. She claims that "the lost continent of the female

tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English literature" (272). Here Showalter shows her concern with uncovering a tradition of women writers who have hitherto been present in history but hidden. She proposes that women and their literary tradition should be regarded as "a subculture within the framework of a larger society" (273). Because a female literary tradition had not previously been canonised, Showalter emphasized the fact that "each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history" (273). Like other literary subcultures (here Showalter mentions blacks, Jews, Canadians and Anglo-Indians), women's writing goes through three major phases. Showalter identifies these three phases as: a period of *imitation*, in which the subculture internalises the standards of the dominant culture; a period of *protest* and demand for authority; and finally the *attainment of selfhood and autonomy* (276).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar take Showalter's observation regarding the lack of a female tradition further - they examine the debilitating psychological circumstances surrounding the female writer "whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are both overtly and covertly patriarchal" (289). In a chapter entitled "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman writer and the Anxiety of Authorship", from their famous examination of women writers in the nineteenth century, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), Gilbert and Gubar draw on Harold Bloom's theory of the artist's "anxiety of influence". Bloom's psycho-history applies Freudian structures to literary lineages, and is based on the

premise that writers unconsciously or consciously assimilate and then either attempt to maintain or reject the achievements of their literary predecessors (Gilbert and Gubar 290). Bloom asserts that a strong poet must engage in Oedipal warfare with his literary father. Furthermore, he describes the poetic process metaphorically as a sexual encounter between the male poet, who is seen as "begetter", and his female muse (290). Gilbert and Gubar point out that Bloom's analysis of literary history is a patriarchal one, an estimation of male relationships. This, they assert, is an accurate observation on Bloom's part, as literary history has been and is dominated by men (290).

Gilbert and Gubar question where the female poet fits into a male-dominated literary tradition, in which the pen is regarded as a metaphorical penis. They ask whether the female writer also engages in a struggle with a forefather or foremother. "What", they write, "if literary history offers her no precursors?... Does she too have a muse and what is its sex?" (290). These feminist theorists conclude that the female writer does not experience an "anxiety of influence" but an "anxiety of authorship", which is the debilitating fear that she cannot create.

Because she is a woman, Gilbert and Gubar claim, the woman writer fears that she will never become a "precursor" and thus the act of writing isolates and threatens to destroy her (291). This feeling of inadequacy is based on her gender - she cannot fight a male precursor on his terms and she cannot be "begetter" in relation to the female muse (292). The female



writer is confronted with male precursors who personify patriarchal authority, and furthermore, their definitions of her reduce her to extreme stereotypes that contest her own sense of self.

Drawing from Showalter's essay outlined above, Gilbert and Gubar claim that it is precisely this "anxiety of authorship" which forms one of the bonds that unite women in "the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture" (293). The female poet must, according to these feminists, reject or refuse the destructive definitions of herself that patriarchal culture holds up to her - Gilbert and Gubar quote Jane Austen's Henry Tilney: "a woman's only power is the power of refusal" (298).

There is little doubt that Foe makes reference to the feminist documents outlined above. Susan's desire for "substance", her fear that she is not a substantial being, but a phantom (133), may be read as the female writer's "anxiety of authorship" theorised by Gilbert and Gubar. She must, in the words of these feminist critics, embark on "the essential process of self-definition" (quoted in Peterson 244).

The process of Susan Barton's narration seems to be an enactment of the three major phases of female writing described by Showalter. Section I is an appeal to Foe to write Susan's story for her. Here Susan has evidently internalised the patriarchal view that she as a woman cannot write - her view mimics that of patriarchal standards.

Section II sees a gradual increase in Susan's self-confidence as a writer. Although she is at first dependent on

Foe to write her story for her, asking him to return to her the "substance" she has lost, in this section she takes up occupation in Foe's house, usurping his pen (the metaphorical penis) (67).

In section III of Foe Susan has achieved a measure of selfhood and autonomy as an author. The inverted commas which had enclosed the first two sections fall away and she becomes the authoress of her own experience. Her persistent desire to tell the truth can be interpreted as the goal of Anglo-American feminism, which is to write authentically about female experience.

Susan affirms that she is "a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (131). She claims, in a remarkable echo of Austen's character as quoted by Gilbert and Gubar, that it is still in her power "to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold" (123). Her literary authority, however, has come at a price - in order to assert her own power as a writer, Susan must assume a masculine role, that of father to her story (123). She claims that whereas, when writing her memoir, she had prayed for a male Muse, she now knows better. "The Muse", she proclaims, "is both goddess and begetter" (126). Susan realises that she was not meant to be a mother to her story but to beget it (126).

The most striking representation of Susan's assumption of masculine power is her coupling with Foe towards the end of section III. Straddling him, Susan assumes the dominant position (139). The gender reversal that occurs here is

emphasised later - Foe is reduced to the figure of "an old whore" (131) and Susan, trying to comfort him, tells him she thinks of him "as a mistress" or "as wife" (152). Foe then speaks of the "fruit" he will bear - he has assumed the role of childbearer (152).

It is thus that Coetzee performs a critique of the power seeking project of liberal feminism. As Chris Bongie points out: "Barton is over and over again depicted as pursuing essentially the same authoritative, and authoritarian projects as the male writer Foe to whom she is at once opposed and linked" (Bongie 264). Teresa Dovey also observes that the feminist poetics of such theorists as Gilbert and Gubar "simply seeks a reversal of positions, a supplanting of men's literary authority by women's literary authority, which in no way disturbs the notions of ownership and mastery they criticise so strongly" (384).

## VII

In The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar illustrate the way in which nineteenth century female writers would often project their own repressed anger and frustration with their female position onto some character within their writings. This fictionalized monster is in fact a demonised part of the self of these female writers. The classic example of this is Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, in which Bertha Rochester, the lunatic wife of Jane's beloved, is seen as a figure for the heroine's own anger against patriarchal standards.

If Susan's act of taking up residence in Foe's house and usurping his writing tools is part of Coetzee's deliberate construction of what was perceived as being an unconscious pattern amongst female writers, then it is Friday who is Susan's darker other. Like Bertha, who is incarcerated within Rochester's house, Friday has a bed in the cellar at Susan's lodgings in Clock Lane, where she brings him his meals (47). While writing the memoir for Foe, Susan declares that she had been "fearful all the while that Friday would decamp from the cellar" (63). This analogy, which aligns a projected self with Friday, seems to be a deliberate uncovering of the way in which the colonial subject has become an object of projection and appropriation across a wide spectrum of feminist discourse. I will return to this point later.

Kirsten Holst Peterson, in her essay entitled "An Elaborate Dead End? A Feminist Reading of Coetzee's Foe", is disapproving of Coetzee's critique of the feminist project. She claims that "the feminist discourse seems to have been constructed simply in order to be de(con)structed" (251). Peterson reads Susan's narrative as representing a feminist stance and the position of the white liberal in South Africa simultaneously. In terms of the latter, Cruso represents the South African apartheid ideology, and Foe the system of merchant capitalism (249-250). Peterson claims that:

The conflation of the values of white South African liberalism and the attempted search for a specific feminist voice in literature/view of the world in one character cannot help but create an overlap of the value

systems in the mind of the reader, and the biases this erects against the feminist quest amount to a dishonest argument by means of false analogy (251).

What Peterson forgets is that Foe operates on very different levels which are by no means mutually analogous. The novel does set up an analogy between the position of the female subject, Susan Barton, and that of the white liberal in South Africa. Also, Susan Barton's aspirations do represent a certain feminist project. However, although both involve the position of the female subject one should not reduce these levels to an equation in which Susan Barton as feminist agent collapses into Susan Barton as representative of white liberalism. Each reading of Susan Barton demands a very different reading of the novel. Although there is an overlap in Foe between the critique of liberalism in white South African writing and in Anglo-American feminism as both are examples of a liberal discourse, to claim that Coetzee is producing a bias against "the feminist quest" implies that Peterson's conception of feminism is not only monolithic but that liberal humanist feminism is the only sort of feminism imaginable to her.

Furthermore, Peterson claims that "Coetzee seems to want to show that there is no special insight to be gained from a woman's point of view or woman's writing" (251). The most telling examples of this, she argues, are firstly the fact that Friday's story presents a gap in Susan's narrative and renders her quest fruitless, and secondly the fact that the last word is given not to Susan, but to an ungendered "I" in

Section IV. Peterson reads this "I" as the author, Coetzee himself - "setting the record straight" (251). Her conclusion is that from the point of view of feminists who seek a place for a female literary tradition, "the foe may well be Coetzee" (251).

My argument is that such a reading of Foe reduces Friday to nothing more than a figure whose sole purpose is to thwart the feminist project. If, as Peterson points out, "the feminist discourse is constructed merely in order to be de(con)structed" by Friday's silence, then Friday is constructed merely in order to de(con)struct the feminist discourse. This is a position which I believe Foe deliberately challenges. Friday cannot be an object of appropriation in discourse as he is truly "other" - he is outside discourse. Kirsten Holst Peterson's frustration with Friday's silence in relation to the feminist quest for self-definition seems to echo that of Susan Barton herself.

Teresa Dovey, in her chapter on Foe, examines the intersections between the discourses of postmodernism, post-colonialism and feminism in the novel. Dovey reads Foe as an allegory, with Susan Barton representing various positions within feminist discourse, Crusoe representing the discourse of the colonizer and Friday's muteness as representing the impossibility of attaining a pure, original voice on the part of the colonized. Susan's preoccupation with Friday's lost tongue, Dovey claims, is an allegory of the way in which the colonized subject has been appropriated by feminist discourse. Glancing over Elaine Showalter's "The Female Tradition", one

must agree with Dovey. Showalter at one stage tries to create an approximation between the oppression of women and that of racial others. Blacks, Jews, Canadians, and Anglo-Indians, she suggests, are oppressed as "subcultures" in much the same way that women are (247). She claims that "contemporary women novelists will have to face the problems that black, ethnic and marxist writers have faced in the past" (285). This problematic comparison between the oppression of women and that of racial others is not limited to Anglo-American brands of feminism as I will demonstrate.

As I point out in Chapter One, Peter E. Morgan seems to be one of the few critics who reads *Foe* as *l'écriture féminine* (82). In a rather inept attempt at a feminist reading of *Foe*, Morgan makes the claim that Susan Barton is "a sorcerer, a hysteric, a displaced person, an everywoman" (87) and draws on the problematic nature of a "philosophie féminine". His rather odd misreading of the text suggests that it is Susan who has killed the ship's captain, striking at his eye "with which he had fixed her as object" (85).

Morgan's essay, however, is valuable as a demonstration of the way in which feminists outside of the Anglo-American paradigm have also appropriated images of the colonized subject. Morgan's feminist reading, drawing on Cixous, obliges Friday to act as "metaphorical referent" for a "lost" female language. Morgan claims that "Friday's partially elided narrative presents an image in absentia of the state Susan is seeking to conceptualize" (87). He proposes that Susan's quest to restore Friday's tongue is related to her desire to return

to the Imaginary:

Susan returns again and again to ponder [Friday's] life before Cruso, before the slave traders, before the loss of his tongue. What could that stage be like, that pre-oedipal, pre-linguistic condition where the phallogog-  
innocence of a child locates her outside the hegemony of society? (87)

The sections from Cixous' writings that Morgan chooses to emphasise describe femininity as a colonised and unexplored continent, a territory of feminine consciousness which must be freed from male authority. Cixous, Morgan points out, writes that women's bodies have been colonised - "You are Africa" she writes to women, "You are black. Your Continent is dark" (83). In this case, Cixous uses the colonized "dark" continent of Africa as a metaphor for the female body and female sexuality. Dovey claims that Susan's failed attempt to return Friday to Africa is a critique, in allegorical terms, "of the way in which women have posited a primordial identify for themselves via the figure of the colonised subject" (365).

It is this problem within "the house of feminism" that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws attention to in her article on Foe, "Theory in the Margin".<sup>8</sup> Spivak's essay is, in part, a reaction to a comment by Helene Cixous, who writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that "As subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places" (LM 252) and that "as a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations" (253). In a maximal sense, Spivak argues, this suggests that the feminist, fighting against the oppression of



women, struggles in a universal way on behalf of all the oppressed (159). Spivak points out that this feminist position overlooks an important problem: "a concern with women, and men, who have not been written in the same cultural inscription, cannot be mobilised in the same way as the investigation of gender in our own" (159). Spivak treats Foe as an allegory which, by way of aporia, suggests that "feminism (within the same cultural inscription) and anticolonialism (for or against racial others) cannot occupy a continuous narrative space" (168).

#### VIII

If Foe is to read partly as a warning to feminism regarding its appropriation of the colonized subject (Dovey) and its "overdetermination" regarding the links between post-colonialism and feminism (Spivak), then what is the significance of Coetzee's appropriation of the female voice as a way of interrogating and challenging his Western literary heritage? For it is through the figure of Susan that Coetzee distances himself from and challenges Defoe, an example of this being the interview mentioned earlier, in which he rejects being aligned with Foe.

On one level, this seems to be the purpose of Foe - to challenge the power and authority of the author, via the female subject. As Dovey points out, Defoe is regarded as "the father of the English novel", as "an Author representative of the author function" (331). Surely Coetzee's desire to rewrite

Robinson Crusoe must be conscious of its own "oedipal struggle" with its forefather?

Through Susan's narrative, Foe actually supplants Defoe's position as forefather and originator. When Susan wonders what sort of story Foe will create out of her tale, she has a suspicion that he will decide, in his version, to omit her altogether:

I write my letters, I seal them, I drop them in the box. One day when we are departed you will tip them out and glance through them. "Better had there been only Cruso and Friday," you will murmur to yourself: "Better without the woman". (72)

Susan is actually *fictionally pre-empting* Defoe's writings. Thus, in a sense, Coetzee usurps Defoe's position as founding father, to the extent that fictionally (obviously not historically) Coetzee becomes Defoe's creator. This is the implication of Susan's sexual intercourse with Foe, which leaves him as "an old whore". Using Susan, Coetzee metaphorically incapacitates or castrates Foe/Defoe.

I believe that these are the metafictional levels suggested when Susan questions the substantiality of Amy and the girl who claims to be her daughter. This leads her to question her own substantiality:

if these women are creatures of yours, visiting me at your instruction, speaking words you have prepared for them, then who am I and who indeed are you?... I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of

doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you? (133)

Clearly this is more than a fictional character having an existential crisis. Susan had thought that Amy and the daughter were "written" by Foe - she rejects them as his creatures. But if this is the case, then whose creature is Susan? Susan's questioning of who is speaking her and of the order to which she belongs exposes a complex set of power relations that gesture outside of the text to the problematic status of the author.

When associated with power, authority and phallic potency, Coetzee's position as author has very problematic implications. What, for instance, would be the significance of his "speaking from" a female position, while withholding speech from Friday, the colonised-subject? If he, as author, holds supreme power, then it becomes a question of who he is disempowering. Benita Parry claims that "bestowing authority on the woman's text while withholding discursive skills from the dispossessed, is to... re-enact the received disposal of narrative power where voice is correlated with cultural supremacy" ("Speech and Silence" 11). And yet Parry ignores two very important facts. Firstly, Coetzee does not merely grant authority to a woman's text, he is actually performing a critique of this very authority, and thus of power-seeking feminist projects. Secondly, Parry's claim seems to rely on the notion of an all-powerful author, one who would have authority to "bestow" in the first place. As Foe reveals,

however, Coetzee's relation to literary authority is by no means unproblematic, the novel itself being a challenge to the power and authority of the author:

Going along with Parry, however, could one not equally argue that it is more disempowering to be "spoken for" than to be left open as the custodian of significant silence? In Foe, Coetzee not only uses a female voice (speaks as a woman), he also engages with feminist discourse, and thus in a sense speaks *for* women, performing a critique of the Anglo-American feminist project. Does this somehow not matter, because Coetzee occupies the same cultural inscription as that of white female Anglos? If Coetzee is reluctant to speak for the colonial subject, what authorises his critique of liberal feminism? Surely his own position, that of author, denotes an unavoidable position of power? Perhaps, as Chris Bongie claims, this is what Foe argues - the "weakness" of being an author is that one *cannot* occupy a position of weakness without it becoming a position of power.

As we know, Coetzee is uncomfortable with his own power as author. Constantly he expresses his wish to abdicate from a position of authorial omnipotence and to let his texts speak for themselves. Foe reveals that as long as the metaphorical heritage of the pen as phallus prevails, the author remains all-powerful as the literary father. Even in the hands of the feminine or colonised subject, the appropriated phallic pen merely reverses and thus perpetuates power relations. However, as I have traced in the text, Foe also engages, albeit less noticeably, with another metaphor for literary creativity.

Although emerging in a latent form in Foe, the possibilities of the childbirth metaphor spill over and are developed further in Coetzee's next novel, Age of Iron.

Endnotes:

1. "Cruso", as Attwell points out, was the patronym of Defoe's friend, Timothy Cruso, a dissenting minister, whom it seems Defoe's Crusoe is named after, just as Foe is the original patronym of Defoe, before this author gentrified it, adding "De" (Attwell 107). Coetzee's use of the original patronym in naming his characters points to the levels of metafiction set up in Foe, a novel which draws attention to its own status as fiction and to the inter-relationship between the realms of textuality and reality.
2. Marthe Robert has shown that the emergence of the novel corresponds with the rise of middle class society, and Kristeva confirms this in Le Texte du Roman, claiming that the novel is an essentially bourgeois literary form (Carusi 141).
3. I have a suspicion that Defoe's literary "realism", in its scrupulous attention to detail, reflects the concerns of a strongly materialist and predominantly middle-class society.
4. Coetzee, in reviewing a collection of essays by Alan Paton, comments disapprovingly on Alan Paton's entrapment in the role of spokesperson and source of wisdom ("sage and oracle") for South African literature. This role, Coetzee notes, proved limiting to Paton's development as a writer (Gallagher 168).
5. Josephine Dodd has also noticed this subtle split in voice. Her reading, however, sets out to "prove" Coetzee's patriarchal sexism (327), and she claims that this passage from Foe is "an extended sexual metaphor" in which the reader "becomes something of a voyeur as Susan sprawls on the sand" (330). Dodd's argument breaks down when she makes a crude, inaccurate and inflammatory analogy between Susan's position of castaway and the patriarchal "women like rape" myth (330).
6. Defoe himself had been declared bankrupt more than once in his own life, and his political writings had often resulted in his persecution (Earle 278).
7. Coetzee changes Defoe's Robinson Crusoe here. In the original the wreck is washed up on the shore allowing Crusoe access to its material stores. Coetzee's version is a technical ploy which creates an allusion to Adrienne Rich's feminist poem, "Diving into the Wreck", and sets up possibilities for section IV in which the unnamed narrator dives underwater into the hulk of the wreck.

8. Spivak describes herself as "a Marxist, feminist, deconstructivist" (Eagleton 83). Her essay on Foe, it appears, is greatly influenced by Derrida - Spivak had translated and written a preface to Derrida's "Marges de la Philosophie". This influence can be noted directly as she mentions Derrida's "Marges" in her own discussion of "margins" in the essay on Foe ("Theory in the Margin" 158-9).

## CHAPTER FIVE

Age of Iron: A Mother's Voice

How would you survive that armed bestiality, Power, if you didn't always have for yourself, with yourself, in yourself a bit of the mother to remind you that evil doesn't always win out; if there weren't always a bit of the mother to give you peace, to keep a little of the milk of life through the ages and wars, a little of the soul's pleasure that regenerates?

- Helene Cixous, Coming to Writing

"Father, can't you see I'm burning?" implored the child, standing at his father's bedside. But his father, sleeping on, dreaming, did not see.

That is the reason - I bring it forward now for you to see - why I cling so tightly to the memory of my mother. For if she did not give me life, no-one did. I cling not just to the memory of her but to her herself, to her body, to my birth from her body into the world. In blood and milk I drank her body and came to life. And then was stolen and have been lost ever since.

- Elizabeth Curren, in Age of Iron

Even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced.

- John Coetzee, Doubling the Point

## I

Age of Iron takes the form of a letter written by Elizabeth Curren, a retired lecturer in Classics from the University of Cape Town, to her daughter, a voluntary exile in the United States, who has "shaken the dust of South Africa off her feet". On a superficial level the novel seems to be a departure from the anti-illusionism of Foe, in that it has a specifically South African spatial and temporal setting, less evidence of metafictional games, a linear narrative, and employs the realism typical of liberal humanism.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, it is a mistake to claim, as Jean Philippe Wade does, that Age of Iron is entirely "free of any metafictional laying bare of its devices" or that it marks a "new departure" in Coetzee's fiction, a "return to the world of the nineteenth century realist novelist" (Wade 212-213).<sup>2</sup>



Elizabeth is only a realist character in the extent to which her narrative represents a liberal discourse - she is made wryly aware of her own "liberal-humanist posturing" (AI 78).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there are metafictional moments in the narrative where the protagonist reflects on the nature of writing. The most striking of these moments happen to be the childbirth metaphors that pervade the text. As Ina Grabe argues ("Fictionalization" 94), the novel may be seen as a continuation or culmination of Coetzee's fictional project in that many of the issues, images and themes of previous novels (particularly of *Foe*) are replayed in *Age of Iron*, albeit in slightly different configurations.

The time during which Coetzee wrote *Age of Iron*, a story of private suffering and a degraded, violent society, was traumatic personally and politically. The mid 1980s in South Africa were years marked by extreme violence and political unrest. Coetzee was in fact "writing in a state of emergency". On a more personal level, Coetzee buried four close relatives while writing *Age of Iron*, these being both of his parents, his ex-wife, who died of cancer, and his son Nicholas, who was killed falling from a building (Malan 20). The novel is dedicated to Coetzee's parents and to his son.

As Wade has observed, the structure of *Age of Iron* resembles that of *In the Heart of the Country* and *Foe* - a female protagonist is situated in a marginal and disempowered position in relation to a master discourse, and yet is herself a reluctant coloniser in relation to others. Like Madga and Susan Barton, Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* is represented

as trying to make sense of her complicity in the oppression of racial others. Whereas Friday (the "slipping referent" who represents those silenced by power) had been mute, the black Africans in Age of Iron are not silent, possibly reflecting the growing power of Black militants in the 1980's, who had evidently found a voice (DP 249). This situation renders Elizabeth's voice even more marginal: to the Afrikaner policemen she is "die ou kruppel dame met die kaffertjies" (AI 78), and her words count for nothing in the stricken township where she is told that she "talks shit" (91).

Although authority is usually conferred upon the "last words" of the dying, Coetzee points out that neither her field of expertise, nor the fact that she is dying afford Elizabeth Curren any real authority or the ability to change anything (DP 250). Elizabeth imagines making a political statement by setting herself alight before "the House of Shame" (the Parliament buildings), but realizes that even this ultimate sacrifice would not change the suffering and injustice in her country. Coetzee's protagonist in Age of Iron is arguing for "that unheard", for a story that has little or no power in the circumstances in which she finds herself. Once again, Coetzee uses a female voice to examine power relations from "a position of weakness", in this case from the position of an elderly, physically weak, sick and dying woman.

As I have mentioned, Benita Parry claims that all of Coetzee's female narrators "represent the body as agent of language" (48) and thus fails to notice that of the three, it is Magda and Elizabeth Curren whose voices most strongly evoke

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a female body. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Susan Barton does not articulate a bodily discourse, but rather a disempowered female position. In Foe it is Friday who most noticeably represents a "pure" discourse of the body. Even so, there is a subtle difference between the discourses of Magda and Elizabeth Curren: whereas Magda's narrative evokes her female body as site of castration and articulates the bodily discourse of a hysteric, Elizabeth Curren's voice summons up the body of a mother - she enunciates a discourse of maternity.

## II

In a paper presented at the African Studies Association conference in Missouri, Sheila Roberts notes that what makes Coetzee's text unusual, and particularly so coming from a male author, is that it employs the voice of a mother. Citing examples of women's writing such as Pride and Prejudice and To the Lighthouse, Roberts claims that "in the Western tradition of the novel the figure and voice of the mother are either obliterated or denigrated where they are not ridiculed" ("The House of Shame", 12). Usually, the daughter protagonist can only become a true subject when she has silenced or dismissed her mother's voice. In Age of Iron, however, the daughter is absent and silenced, while the mother becomes the subject of enunciation.

Susan Rubin Suleiman, in a number of theoretical writings, has examined representations of the mother in avant-

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garde art and literature. In "Writing and Motherhood", Suleiman notes that theories of motherhood, such as those offered by Freud and even Melanie Klein, have focused largely on the feelings of the child in relation to its mother. "Motherhood", Suleiman argues, "is ultimately the child's drama", as, she proposes, is artistic creation (357). In relation to the child-subject, the mother is "the essential but silent other, the mirror in whom the child searches for his own reflection, the body he seeks to appropriate" (357). As Roland Barthes observes in *Le Plaisir du Texte*: "A writer is someone who plays with the body of his mother" (quoted in Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood" 357).

In "Feminist Intertextuality and the Laugh of the Mother", a chapter from Subversive Intent, Suleiman observes that at the hands of male artists and authors, the mother is often appropriated in the struggle against the father (161).<sup>4</sup> Citing Surrealism as an example of such a struggle, Suleiman suggests that even if the son's rebellion is "perverse", turning the name-of-the-father on its head, it is nonetheless phallogocentric, struggling for possession of the phallus and ultimately repudiating the mother. Furthermore, she notes that the appropriation of the mother is often based on a fundamental "sadism and aggression against the mother's body" (161).

Even in the case of some seemingly radical anti-patriarchal works, Suleiman contends that the figure of the mother "fares badly even on the surface, not merely in the depths of the psyche" (Subversive Intent 165). Tracing

representations of what she refers to as "the Patriarchal mother" (not to be confused with the Phallic mother), Suleiman discerns a number of cases where the mother is perceived as aligned with patriarchal power and oppression, taking on the negative attributes of the father and bearing the brunt of the son's or daughter's anger.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, she notes, in typical feminist plots, the role of mothering is seen as acceding to patriarchal demands - the Patriarchal mother is necessarily on the side of male domination and thus a "good feminist" cannot simultaneously be a mother and reject what the father represents.

Suleiman also acknowledges that attempts have been made to write alternatives to these negative and phallocentric representations of the mother. Discourses exist where the mother functions in a more positive way, both as a metaphor and as a subject. In the writings of Helene Cixous, for instance, motherly attributes are used as a metaphor for an alternative way of relating, for a "feminine" or "gift" economy based on giving, loving and nurturing ("Laugh of the Medusa" 259). Writing itself is described as a form of childbearing or nurturing - the drive to write becomes akin to the "gestation drive" (261) and the woman-writer writes in "mother's milk", in "white ink" (251). For Cixous, women as subjects can be mothers, "never far from mother" (251), and at the same time reject patriarchal laws: "now, I-woman am going to blow up the Law" (257).

Although, like Cixous, Kristeva is also the author of an alternative discourse on maternity,<sup>6</sup> her position in relation

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to the mother is more complex and ambivalent. As an analyst, she is concerned with discourses in which the subject itself becomes infused with "otherness" to the point that identity almost breaks down (Oliver 12). In such discourses, Kristeva suggests that "an ethics of difference" is made possible through an encounter with alterity.<sup>7</sup> Kristeva isolates three discourses marked by this crisis in identity: the discourses of poetry, psychoanalysis and maternity (13). She proposes that the pregnant woman or mother is a "split subject", both materially and metaphorically, and is thus a threat to the unified subject operating in the Symbolic.<sup>8</sup>

Kristeva's account of female oppression is partially related to mothering. She infers that within our culture, women and femininity have been bound up with the maternal function. This association would not be entirely problematic were it not for what Kristeva refers to as *abjection*. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva describes a stage of separation from the mother which the child must go through in order to become a subject. During this phase, the child necessarily *abjects* the mother - without abjection the child would not become a subject. For Kristeva, the abject is above all ambivalent, a position of "not-yet-subject/not-yet-object" (Oliver 57).

As mentioned earlier in Chapter Two, the abject threatens borders and identity with the prospect of dissolution, and is thus "off-limits" in the paternal Symbolic order. It necessarily excites disgust, but also a certain fascination. Rotting flesh, pollution, bodily waste, all things that are

ambiguous or "in-between", must be excluded by the superego and thus become abject (Powers of Horror 4). Kristeva suggests that because in Western culture women have not been separated from the maternal function, they cannot escape their abjection by and oppression in patriarchal society - both the identity of the subject and the social order rely on the abjection of maternal authority (Oliver 6).

In Age of Iron, Elizabeth Curren quite clearly enunciates a maternal discourse. As I will show in my analysis of the novel, the text is suffused with images of milk, of motherly nurturing, of a mother's longing for her child. As a mother, Elizabeth is the voice of love and pity in an age of iron. Her maternal discourse is at odds with the perverse oedipal struggle in her country where fathers make war on sons. Her "devious discourse" (AI 75), her wish to speak in words that are not "yes" or "no" but "yes-no" (134), expresses her marginal position in relation to the either/or logic of certain versions of the-Law-of-the-Father. She rejects the patriarchal discourses of both the Afrikaner politicians with their oppressive "bull-testicles pressing down on their wives, their children" (26) and of the militant Black youth movement, whose watchword of "comradeship", she tells Mr Thabane, is "just another of those icy, exclusive, death-driven male constructions" (137).

In her thesis on the confessional novel in South Africa in which she analyses Age of Iron as a confessional text, Duane Angela Robinson mentions "The Law of the Father and a Mother's Truth". Robinson proposes that in the novel, the

authority of Elizabeth's maternal discourse, her "home truths", are abjected by certain patriarchal discourses (58). Robinson claims that liberal humanism is a "maternal order" that emerges as a form of dissidence within the "paternal order" of nationalist discourses (57). I would agree with Robinson that the discourse of white English-speaking liberals in South Africa has been regarded as "feminine" or "effeminate" in relation to the country's strongly patriarchal discourses of nationalism (a point I have made in previous chapters of this study). I disagree, however, with her claim that "liberal humanism destabilises the binary oppositions of patriarchal discourse" (Robinson 57).<sup>9</sup>

If Elizabeth Curren is made to articulate a liberal humanist discourse then this is complicated by the novel's evocation of a maternal body. Age of Iron is a text suffused with ambivalence, with images of abjection, and it is precisely these images and not Elizabeth's position as a humanist that grimly threaten patriarchal boundaries. Elizabeth's maternal position, in fact, is doubly abject - she is a mother who has cancer. In Coetzee's novel the metaphors of motherhood and those of cancer overlap and fuse.

Susan Sontag, in her essay "Illness as Metaphor", notes that among the images associated with cancer is that of childbearing - the sufferer is perceived as metaphorically "pregnant" with tumourous growths (Sontag 14). The tumours are regarded as "alive", as fetuses with their own life, as parasitic presences within the body (14). Cancer is invasive, it literally invades the boundaries of one's self. Sontag



refers to cancer as "the disease of the Other" - when someone has cancer the self is replaced by "nonself" (68). Cancer is often associated with "subjects of deepest dread" such as corruption, decay and pollution (60). Cancer is thus an abject disease, and it is no wonder that, as Sontag points out, the victim is often regarded as "unclean" and shunned by relatives and friends (6).

Coetzee seems to be drawing on this connection when he makes his protagonist describe herself as pregnant with children she cannot give birth to, monstrous growths that ravage her from within (AI 59). If the pregnant woman is abject, a split subject, then a mother who is "pregnant" with cancerous growths is doubly abject. "How terrible", Elizabeth says, "when motherhood reaches a point of parodying itself" (59).

### III

Like Foe, Age of Iron is divided into four sections. The novel takes the form of a letter, and the blank spaces between the writing blocks indicate the places where Elizabeth, the narrator, has put down and taken up her pen. The novel is set in the mid-1980s in a cold and dreary Cape Town winter - Elizabeth Curren apparently never lives to see the summer she longs for. Her narrative reflects no more than two months of writing, the time she has left to live.<sup>10</sup> The dates set down on the final page of the novel, "1986-1989", are thus not an indication of the narrative time seemingly experienced by

Elizabeth Curren, but are rather a reminder of the novel's elusive author, as this was the time it took Coetzee to write Age of Iron.

In the opening paragraph of the novel, we are made aware of a "you" to whom Elizabeth addresses her narrative:

There is an alley down the side of the garage, you may remember it, you and your friends would sometimes play there. Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot. (AI 3)

Only in the next few pages is it confirmed that this "you" is the narrator's child (5), her daughter (8). Elizabeth's association with the Classics tempts one to read her as a Demeter figure, and her daughter as an exiled Persephone who will not return to the winter of the Southern hemisphere bringing spring with her (Roberts 3).

In the alley, Elizabeth encounters a homeless tramp, "a derelict", asleep in a cardboard shelter (3). She observes "an unsavoury smell about him: urine, sweet wine, mouldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean" (3). Like the rotting leaves in the alley way, this drunken vagrant, Vercueil, is a reminder of dissolution, of uncleanness, of the abject.

Elizabeth has just heard from her doctor that she has cancer. This news and her suffering, she knows, is hers alone, private.<sup>11</sup> Strangely, it is also as if the fatal news is her child, needing to be enfolded in her arms: "It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears" (3). Elizabeth refers to Vercueil as "this other annunciation", setting him up as her "Angel

Gabriel" and herself as a kind of virgin mother. This image becomes parody when we realise that the "child" Elizabeth carries inside her will not bring her redemption but death.

Vercueil is a figure similar to Michael K and Friday in that he shares with these characters both physical disfigurement - his right hand is damaged - and extreme frugality of speech (Parry "Speech and Silence" 45). He is, however, also similar to Foe, in that he acts as Elizabeth's "father confessor" in the novel. "Vercueil", cryptic and loaded as a signifier, is suggestive of the Afrikaans word *verskuil*, meaning hidden or concealed. In Latin, *verum* means truth. Is Vercueil an emblem of hidden truth? Throughout the novel, his presence is itself cryptic, his behaviour often strangely opaque, even inappropriate. Towards the end of the novel, for instance, he dances to the national anthem, "Die Stem", music Elizabeth did not think could be danced to (AI 166). Other etymologies point perhaps to Vercueil's status as a figure of abjection, of death and entropy. In French, "ver" means worm and "cercueil" means coffin (Huggan 202). "Kuיל" in Dutch refers to a pit (Robinson 53).

In this first section of Age of Iron, Elizabeth comes closest to articulating a maternal discourse strikingly similar to that of Cixous. Yearning for her child, for the reciprocity and love of a mother-child relation, Elizabeth is made to write her longing in images of milk, breath and blood:

And then when you turned over, your body blood-warm, your breath milky... You are my life; I love you as I love life itself. In the mornings... I stand a long time

sniffing, concentrating my attention in the hope that across ten thousand miles of land and sea some breath will reach me of the milkiness you still carry with you behind your ears, in the fold of your neck. (AI 5)

When Elizabeth meets Vercueil she cuts him a sandwich.

"Why do I give this man food?", she asks, and then explains it is for the same reason she offered her breast to her daughter:

To be full enough to give and to give from one's fullness: what deeper urge is there? Out of their withered bodies even the old try to squeeze one last drop. A stubborn will to give, to nourish. Shrewd was death's aim when he chose my breast for his first shaft.

(7)

This seems like a direct articulation of the "gift" economy outlined in Cixous' "Laugh of the Medusa" essay, where she writes of "a propriety of woman" - "her ability to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end" ("Laugh of the Medusa" 259). And yet it is her breast, Elizabeth tells us, that was first stricken with cancer. Even when expressing a positive maternal discourse of nurturance, the images used in Age of Iron are not free from a disturbing ambivalence.

Elizabeth uses language to articulate her maternal body, her desire to give, to nourish. Through language she also evokes her suffering body, the abject body that has "betrayed" her (11). The metaphors associated with her disease themselves become a kind of bodily language - Susan Sontag observes that cancer, more so than other diseases, is a disease of the body (19), a disease which supposedly "speaks through the body"

(45). Looking at her hand, Elizabeth sees "only a tool, a hook" (AI 11). "Far from revealing anything spiritual", Sontag notes, "[cancer] reveals that the body is, all too woefully, just the body" ("Illness as Metaphor" 19).

In this first section of Age of Iron, the action is limited to a series of interactions between Elizabeth and Vercueil, and the plot weaves in no other characters at this stage. If Elizabeth's voice and narrative situate her as the protagonist, then Vercueil's silence makes him a catalyst, an antagonist. Later in her narrative Elizabeth describes her mind as a pool which Vercueil's finger enters and stirs. "Without that finger", she says, "stillness, stagnation" (74). His silence becomes a rock upon which her thoughts crash like waves (29).

Together with his dog, Vercueil takes up residence on Elizabeth's property. She brings him coffee and asks if he wants a job. "You are wasting your life" she tells him. There is something within her, she acknowledges, which "revolts at the lassitude, the letting go, the welcoming of dissolution" (7). Vercueil's "welcoming of dissolution" revolts Elizabeth because it is abject, like her cancerous body. Vercueil's degenerate idleness is a reminder of Elizabeth's degenerate body - Susan Sontag has noted that one of the figurative uses of cancer is as a metaphor for idleness and sloth (15). As Robinson suggests, Vercueil becomes a kind of "doppelganger" to Elizabeth (Robinson 53), a sign of her own abject position. "When I write about him", she says, "I write about myself" (AI 8).

In response to Elizabeth's criticism, Vercueil spits a "gob of spit, thick, yellow, streaked with brown from the coffee" onto the ground beside her foot and then walks away. She is shocked:

The thing itself, I thought, shaken: the thing itself brought out between us. Spat not upon me but where I could see it, inspect it, think about it. His word, his kind of word, from his own mouth, warm at the instant when it left him. A word, undeniable, from a language before language. (7)

Although, as Parry notes, both Elizabeth and Vercueil function as exponents of bodily discourse, Vercueil's bodily discourse is not articulated in speech but in "the thing itself". His gob of spit expresses *bodily* his disrespect for Elizabeth, "a woman old enough to be his mother" (7). Like all bodily substances, spit becomes abject when it leaves the body. Vercueil's spittle, lying on the ground before Elizabeth's feet, is abject - it is a word from "a language before language", a pre-oedipal, pre-symbolic form of expression.<sup>12</sup>

Lying in bed, Elizabeth reads Tolstoy's "What Men Live By", the didactic story of an angel sent to earth to find out what it is that men live by. In this story, a poor shoemaker takes the angel into his home and, through this act of charity, the angel realises the truth that men live not through care of themselves, but by love (Gallagher 203). Elizabeth, however, despairingly laments that in her country, the spirit of care, of charity, has perished (AI 19-20).

Elizabeth takes Vercueil on a drive to Fish Hoek and on

the way she tells him a story of her mother and grandmother, who would travel by ox-wagon to the Piesangs River at Christmas time. As a child, her mother would sleep under the wagon, and all through the night would be fearful that the wagon would roll. In the morning, seeing her parents, everything would be all right again. This matrifocal story of fear and reassurance becomes Elizabeth's personal myth (110) and later in the novel she expresses a wish to return to the Eastern Cape, to the place where her mother had slept under the ox-wagon. She describes this place as a "navel", a maternal centre (110).

According to Kristeva, music and poetry evoke the "semiotic" rhythms of the pre-symbolic maternal body. Music is a pervasive presence in this first section of Age of Iron. Listening to music on the radio at night, Elizabeth envisions a womb-like "closed universe, curved like an egg, enclosing us" (AI 20). Playing the piano reminds her of sitting at her grandmother's knee (20), and it is when they are listening to music that Elizabeth feels she is strangely linked to Vercueil (22). Both Elizabeth and Vercueil seem to have a longing for the pre-oedipal mother. Surrounded by violence and degradation, Elizabeth clings to the memory of her mother, she longs for "mother or whoever is prepared to stand in for mother" (77). Elizabeth sees Vercueil's alcoholism as a regressive desire to return to mother love, to *amor matris*: he is "a man in his middle years, yearning for the original bliss" (53). Both Elizabeth and Vercueil are abject outsiders to patriarchal culture, to the Afrikaans language with its

"deadenng closes" which they hear on the television (9).

In jarring contrast to the "heart-chords" (20) of music, the television channels are full of sport (24) or threatening political speeches. Elizabeth describes the Afrikaner politicians as "a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives" (25) - she watches them in horror and fascination. As Sheila Roberts has noted, Elizabeth describes the reign of these politicians with much the same imagery as the "monstrous growths" that consume her body. If her tumours are ravenous and obscene children who ravage their mother's body, then the politicians, dealing death upon the young, are hideous "Boars that devour their offspring" (26).

Coetzee draws upon another of the metaphorical associations of cancer when he makes his protagonist see her cancerous body as a metaphor for the degenerate country in which she lives.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of disease inherent in the "body politic" dates back at least to Shakespeare (Sontag 73). Elizabeth sees disease spreading like contagion through her land: "When madness climbs the throne" she asks, "who in the land escapes contagion?" (AI 97). Corruption, perversion and moral decay have become an integral part of the South Africa Elizabeth sees. Parent-child relationships have broken down and for a large proportion of South African children, childhood, "the growing time of the soul", no longer exists - the young are "children scorning childhood" (6). As Florence, Elizabeth's domestic worker, tells her, in the townships "there are no more mothers and fathers" (36).



According to Kristeva, in terms of abjection there can come a point of utmost disintegration, where "the body itself becomes waste, the corpse, and society becomes barbaric, genocide" (Oliver 58). Hesiod, the Greek poet, spoke of the "age of iron" as the last of the classical ages which had begun with the Golden Age. The age of iron represents "the final descent from the Golden Age into a time of decay, corruption and violence" (Runcie 4). The title of Coetzee's novel suggests that the South Africa of the 1980s, as it appears through the eyes of Elizabeth Curren, is this fallen world. The second and third sections of Age of Iron take the reader, through Elizabeth's voice, on a journey into a dark Hades of blood and violence.

Whereas Elizabeth and Vercueil had been the primary participants in the action of the novel's first section, in section II other characters enter the narrative sequence. Florence, Elizabeth's domestic helper, returns, bringing her daughters, ironically named Hope and Beauty, and her son, Bheki. Bheki is soon joined by his friend, John. Florence has taken her children out of the troubled township, where police are rounding up black children who refuse to go to school. When Elizabeth asks why he will not go to school, Bheki protests that the black schools are there only to make them "fit into the apartheid system" (62). As a white South African presented with only State-controlled media images, Elizabeth is unaware of what is going on in her country. "Of the trouble in the schools", Elizabeth tells, "the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, the newspapers say nothing" (36).<sup>14</sup>

Neither Florence nor the two boys take kindly to Vercueil. When Vercueil, lying in a drunken stupor, calls for water, John takes away his brandy and pours it onto the ground. "They are making you into a dog", he tells Vercueil (42). Assuming that "they" refers to "the whites", this is the first and only indication of Vercueil's racial identity. Later, the boys set upon Vercueil, beating and kicking him. For these "children of iron", Vercueil signifies pollution, abjection - he is, as Florence calls him, a "rubbish person" (44). Elizabeth rebukes Florence for her children's rejection of mercy. "Children cannot", she tells Florence, "grow up without mothers or fathers" (45). In the absence of maternal love, of parental love, Elizabeth suggests, these children will claim death and destruction as their parents.

And yet Elizabeth recognises that this "war without mercy", this age of iron, is the monstrous progeny of an earlier age:

What, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite? Did we not have Voortrekkers, generation after generation of Voortrekkers, grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland?... Calvin, victorious, reborn in the dogmatists and witch hunters of both armies. (47)

The age of granite has spawned a generation of "new puritans" who exorcise all that "softens the rule, dissolves iron" (75). Like Vercueil's alcoholism which "softens, preserves" and allows for forgiveness, Elizabeth's "devious" maternal

discourse is "idle, roundabout, yielding" (75). Her speech, like the cancer inside her, is "a crab's walk" (74) and is treated with suspicion.

This, the second section of the novel, is saturated with recurrent and extensive images of blood. Elizabeth remembers an occasion when she had taken Florence by car to see William, Florence's husband. William's work, Elizabeth discovers, is to slaughter chickens: he is one of three men who "dealt out death to the flightless birds" (39). Although she returns to her home, fantasising about a happy time spent by Florence with her husband, Elizabeth's mind returns to the scene where this man works "in a smell of blood and feathers" (41).

Later, in what comprises the central incident of section II, Bheki and John, while cycling in the street, are brutally knocked over by a police van. The horror of the scene in which a retriever dog begins to lick up the blood of the two boys is only intensified by the banal suburban surroundings of "Schoonder Street on a quiet weekday morning, with a canary-yellow van just turning the corner" (55). Elizabeth approaches, trembling with shock. A man in blue work-clothes disentangles the bodies of the two boys. Bheki is quite badly grazed, but the other boy lies on his back with a sheet of blood flowing down his face, onto the pavement. "I did not know", Elizabeth reflects in horror, "that blood could be so dark, so thick, so heavy" (57). She remembers an occasion where she had taken her daughter to the casualty ward for a small cut that needed stitches:

Blood on the floor, blood on the benches. What did our

timid thimbleful count for beside this torrent of black blood? Child Snowdrop lost in a cavern of blood, and her mother lost too... The dry earth soaking up the blood of its creatures. A land that drinks rivers of blood and is never sated. (57-58)

In this passage South Africa becomes a violent and abject archaic mother, whose womb is a "cavern of blood", and who unrelentingly demands her sacrifice of blood. Elizabeth, the white liberal, has no suffering that may compare to these rivers of black blood. Her sickness, she tells, is dry and bloodless (59), her writing is a "thin" bleeding onto paper (125).

Figuratively, however, blood is ambiguous. Although blood spells suffering, sacrifice and death, its presence is also sacred, precious - it is the locus of life. As Elizabeth stares in a shocked stupor at the blood pouring over the boy's skin, she realises that it is impossible for her not to try to stop the flow. The reason for this, she believes, is:

Because blood is precious, more precious than gold and diamonds. Because blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together... Blood, sacred, abominated. And you, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, bleeding every month into foreign soil. (58-59)

Not only is blood sacred, it is also abominated, abject, linked to female generative power. For the first time in Coetzee's fiction, one of his female voices speaks of menstruation, conjuring up the image of a life-giving "earthy"

female anatomy. The implication is that, through the female anatomy conjured up by her voice, Elizabeth is more aware of the link between life and blood.

Although to Elizabeth blood is "held in common", she lives in a country shattered by apartheid, where blood is not a symbol of common humanity, but of racial difference:<sup>15</sup>

A body of blood. Of all mankind? No: in a place apart, in a mud-walled dam in the Karoo with barbed wire around it and the sun blazing down, the blood of the Afrikaners and their tribute bearers, still, stagnant. (58-59)

The patriarchal discourse of Afrikaner nationalism, founded on exclusion, guards its racial purity by forbidding interracial mingling of blood - in doing so it necessarily abjects Elizabeth's maternal "truth" that blood is one.

John is taken to hospital by an unsympathetic ambulance man, but when Elizabeth takes Florence and Bheki to see him they find him in a ward full of old men, "a waiting room for the funeral" (70). Elizabeth touches John's hand but feels him stiffen in angry recoil as he rejects her maternal gesture (72). Later she goes to the police station in order to lay a charge against the policemen who had knocked over the two boys. She tells the young officer that his colleagues are disgracing her, that she is ashamed. He does not reply, but she imagines the men laughing at her when she leaves (78). Elizabeth's maternal authority has been rejected, abjected by both sides of the war in her land.

In the third part of Age of Iron, Elizabeth's narrative takes us into a landscape of violence, into "Site C", a

section of the black township. Florence receives a telephone call late at night - "There is trouble", she tells Elizabeth. The trouble is with Bheki, who is in the township, and Florence says she must leave immediately. Elizabeth offers to drive her, first to Guguletu, and then to Site C. Verqueuil does not accompany them on this journey, he swears at Elizabeth in his sleep, refusing to be woken.

On the way to Guguletu, they encounter a police roadblock. Elizabeth tells the policemen that she is taking her domestic home, and they grudgingly allow her through. In the air is the smell of burning rubber, it is raining. In this hellish landscape, Hope and Beauty - the baby in Florence's arms, the little girl holding her hand - seem like elements from a farce. "I am living in an allegory", Elizabeth thinks to herself (84). In Guguletu, they pick up Florence's cousin, Mr Thabane, who apparently knows where Bheki is. From there they proceed to Site C, out in a "wilderness of grey dune sand and Port Jackson willow and a stench of garbage and ash" (86). Mr Thabane warns that it is too dangerous to drive, and so they all get out of the car and begin to walk in the rain.

At the top of a dune they look down and see "a scene of devastation", a landscape of burnt and smouldering shanties. Some men are busy, it first appears to Elizabeth, putting out flames and rescuing inhabitants. She then realises that these men are agents of destruction, mercilessly hacking the dilapidated buildings with axes and then setting them alight. One of the onlookers throws a stone, the armed men approach the crowd and everyone begins to flee. Elizabeth, tired and in

pain, says to Mr Thabane that she wants to go home. He turns on her in anger: "What of the people who live here?", he asks her, "when they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?" (90). A crowd gathers and Elizabeth must answer him: "These are terrible sights", she says, "They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself" (91). A man from the crowd tells her that she speaks "shit". "To speak of this", she continues, "you would need the tongue of a god" (91). What Elizabeth is saying is that she does not have sufficient authority nor adequate means to denounce the horror she has witnessed.

At the centre of this horror is a scene in which Florence, Elizabeth and Mr Thabane find five corpses in a burnt-out hall, one of which they recognise as Bheki. Elizabeth is speechless. Although she tells her daughter, the reader, to attend to the writing and not to her, she also has no words with which to express herself. Instead, she uses a bodily gesture: "I held out my hands, palms upward. I am bereft, my hands said, bereft of speech. I come to speak, but have nothing to say" (97).

Later, when Elizabeth returns home, she is completely overwhelmed by what she has seen. As a desperate form of protest, she contemplates setting herself alight before the houses of parliament. Her life, she reflects, has been spoilt by "the men who have created these times" (107). She feels that these men have made her life worthless (107), she is empty, a "doll with a crab inside licking its lips" (103).

Power, like the cancer that has penetrated her body, she reflects, is invasive, "it invades one's life" (107) and reduces her to the abject figure of a living doll.

On a day of clear skies, Elizabeth and Vercueil set out in the car. She is still privately debating suicide. "Do it here" Vercueil tells her, offering her a drink which she accepts. Suddenly she is aware of their ridiculous appearance and tries to grab his bottle, shouting at him to get out of the car. Vercueil throws the keys into the bushes and saunters off with his bottle. In spite of her mistrust of Vercueil and her dislike of him at times, Elizabeth writes that she makes "a wager on trust" with him: "Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him" (119). She is aware that if Vercueil does not send her writings on, her daughter will never read them. Vercueil's action is a sign of redemption or of obliteration. If he delivers her letter, it will signify the presence of "trust, obligation, piety" in the world she leaves behind; if not, then "there is no trust and we deserve no better, all of us, than to fall into a hole and vanish" (119). As readers, we are uncertain of the final outcome, we are not told whether Vercueil delivers the letter or not.

Towards the end of section III, another violent and horrific incident takes place. John, Bheki's friend, returns to Elizabeth's house and is killed in the servant's quarters by policemen. Lying in her room at night, Elizabeth thinks of the boy:

lying on his back with the bomb or whatever it is in his hand... Envisioning the moment when he will arise, fully



himself at last, erect, powerful, transfigured... as Christopher Columbus lay in the dark of his cabin, holding the compass to his chest... holding before him the needle that never wavers, that points forward in one direction, to the future. (138)

Whereas in Foe the pen had been a symbol of phallic authority and power, here it is a gun or a bomb that is held like an erect phallus promising glory and power. In terms of Elizabeth's maternal language, however, the boy is also a "poor child" needing protection (139). Her discourse is one of pity; she rejects glorifications of phallic power and the actions of the policemen, to whom she says: "Ek staan aan die teenkant" (140).

Wrapped in a quilt, Elizabeth walks away from her home. She has no destination. With this gesture, she becomes literally homeless, out of place in an age of iron, like Vercueil. In exhaustion she collapses under a flyover, where she urinates on herself and children mercilessly pry her mouth open with a stick in search of gold teeth. Eventually, she is unexpectedly rescued by Vercueil, who carries her, "wet patch and all", to a quiet wooded space where she can see the stars. Once again, Vercueil's presence, his silence, allows Elizabeth to speak her mind, to confess. She tells him of a crime committed so long ago she has been born into it - it is part of her inheritance. The price for this crime, she says, is a life of shame. Shame has been her touchstone, her guide to honour: "As long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonour" (150). Never ceasing to gnaw her, her shame is

now what is destroying her. "I have cancer", she says, "from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life" (132).

The final part of Age of Iron returns to the interactive space of part I, in that the action is once again limited to Elizabeth and Vercueil. Elizabeth dreams of Florence, envisioning her "striding down Government Avenue holding Hope and Beauty on her back. All three of them wear masks... The eyes of her mask are like eyes in pictures from the ancient Mediterranean" (163). In this dream, Florence becomes matron of liberty - the image of her "in a white slip, ruffled by the wind, her feet bare, her head bare, her right breast bare" (163) is that of Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People", an allegory of the revolutionary spirit. In Delacroix's painting, the female figure of Liberty is classical, but she is tall, represented with the strength of a man. Elizabeth sees Florence as a patriarchal mother necessitated by an age of iron, a "Spartan matron, iron-hearted, bearing warrior-sons for the nation" (46).

As she appears in Elizabeth's dream, Florence is also associated with more violent and frightening aspects of maternity. She is the archaic mother, "an older figure", her face reminiscent of the snake-goddesses and sphinx-type figures of ancient Knossos and Mycenae. Like the mother-land which drinks its creature's blood and is never satisfied, Florence is a powerful "figure of urgency, of cries in the dark, short and sharp, of blood and earth, emerging for an instant, showing herself passing" (164).

In a novel whose protagonist so strongly yearns for the

physical intimacy of a mother-child love relation, it is perhaps fitting that Elizabeth's narrative ends with an embrace. In Doubling the Point, Attwell suggests that Elizabeth's confession reaches absolution in this embrace with Vercueil, "her Angel of Death" (250). Attwell asks Coetzee if this is not "close to the Dostoyevskyan principle of grace" (250). Coetzee, however, responds that the end of the novel seems to be "more troubled", implying that there is no guarantee of absolution or grace (250). Although there are critics who have read the end of Age of Iron as redemptive, I would agree with Coetzee. Although Elizabeth is embraced, this embrace yields no warmth or love - her narrative ends with the words: "From that embrace there was no warmth to be had" (181).

In his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, delivered in 1987 (the period during which he was writing Age of Iron), Coetzee speaks of a "failure of love" that has been the centre of "unfreedom" in South Africa. This failure is part of a system of mastery. It stems from the desire to have liberty without equality or fraternity (DP 97). South Africa, as it is presented in Age of Iron, is a country marked by a failure of love, of care. Elizabeth's cancer, which she uses as a metaphor for the state of her country, is a disease that "shrinks" the body and deadens desire (Sontag 13). Seen through Elizabeth's eyes, South Africa is a community beyond love, a degraded and abject social order.

If mastery, the paternal law, keeps the abject at bay, then it may seem strange that this very mastery is responsible

for a society that has sunk into dissolution, corruption and decay. Graham Huggan, in his essay on Age of Iron, notes a certain tension in the novel between what he refers to as evolutionary and entropic forces (192). Ironically, he points out, it seems that these two elements are interactive rather than oppositional - the struggle for power, for survival, results in entropy, disintegration, abjection (192). In La Croyance Meme, Kristeva shows that a breakdown in sociality is not the result of a breakdown in the superego or in the Law-of-the-Father (378). Rather, she argues, it is a breakdown of love, of maternal love (Oliver 189). Age of Iron demonstrates that although mastery excludes, even abjects, the ethics of mothering, it does so at a price.

#### IV

In her analysis of representations of motherhood, Susan Suleiman proposes:

There will be no genuine renewal...as long as every drama, whether textual or sexual, continues to be envisaged...in terms of the confrontation between an all-powerful father and a traumatised son, a confrontation staged across and over the body of the mother.

(Subversive Intent 87)

Suleiman quotes Serge Doubrovsky, who claims that "the desire to write is a form of the desire to dominate" (70). In the case of Age of Iron, these statements take on a post-colonial dimension.

Michael Marais argues that in Coetzee's novels there is a "conflation of the acts of writing and imperialism" so that authorship is compared not only to domination, but more specifically to imperialism ("The Hermeneutics of Empire" 69). Likewise, the interpretative act becomes a means of providing closure, of "reducing otherness by hermeneutic enterprise" (69). Marais traces what he perceives as a "pervasive birth motif" in Michael K, claiming that "K's identity is created anew by a series of parent-cum-author figures". In relation to these domineering male and female "parents", K is "reborn" in terms of the desires of others (76). As I will demonstrate, however, there is another side to the birth metaphors that pervade Coetzee's novels, a side which provides a "way out" of the association between writing and domination.

In addition to the mother-daughter relationship as mentioned by Roberts, there is another reason for the silencing of the mother in Western literary representation. Susan Stanford Friedman has pointed to the way in which *child-bearing/pro-creation* and *writing/creation* have been culturally defined as mutually exclusive activities (Friedman 75). There is a metaphor, however, which links the act of writing to *pregnancy and giving birth*, and this childbirth metaphor has been used by both male and female writers as diverse as Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney, Alexander Pope, Mary Shelley, Erica Jong, and Denise Levertov (73). The childbirth metaphor, taking female anatomy (the womb) as a trope for creativity, presents a counter to the commensurate phallic analogy of pen as metaphoric penis.

If the female voices in Coetzee's novels articulate certain aspects of a female body, then the strongest representation of this is their discourse relating to childbirth. Although Coetzee is a male author, the implications of his use of childbirth metaphors are complicated by his employment of a female voice to articulate these metaphors. As Friedman observes:

women's use of the childbirth metaphor demonstrates not only a 'marked' discourse distinct from phallogocentric male use of the same metaphor but also a subversive inscription of women's procreativity that has existed for centuries. (74)

Magda, in Heart of the Country, although being the inverse of the typical Afrikaner vrou en moeder and suspecting that she is barren, does nonetheless speculate on the possibility of giving birth to a child - she imagines giving birth to an "Antichrist of the desert come to lead his dancing hordes to the promised land" (HC 10) or "a litter of ratlike, runty girls" (42). Her children are direct parodies of the Afrikaner ideal. Only obliquely does it seem that childbearing becomes a metaphor for her "language". In the speculative interval following her fantasy of bearing an "antichrist", she says: "Labouring under my father's weight I struggle to give life to a world but seem to engender only death" (10). This "labouring" is one of the words Susan Friedman identifies as having a double meaning, joining and separating creativity and procreation (373).<sup>16</sup> Thus Magda's "labouring" and "struggling to give life" make a metaphorical connection between trying to

create "a language of the heart" and procreation or trying to give birth to a child. Her attempt is abortive, however, as the oppressive "language" of her father seems to ensure that she will "engender only death" (10).

In Foe Coetzee seems to be experimenting with two sexual metaphors of literary creativity - there is reference to both the pen as phallus and writing as childbearing. As Spivak suggests, Susan's dilemma is a direct articulation of the dilemma between authorship and childbearing as mutually exclusive categories ("Theory in the Margin" 164). Although Susan rejects (De)Foe's implication that women cannot be both free to write and good mothers, she is a mother who never finds her daughter, a woman who can only write through the appropriation of male literary power. Susan Barton's assumption of literary authority culminates in her appropriation of Foe's pen. She writes: "the pen becomes mine as I write with it, as though growing out of my hand" (Foe 66-67). Her sexual intercourse with Foe, in which she assumes the dominant position, reverses the gender roles (139) just as her assumption of literary power via the phallus necessarily situates her as "father" to her story. Significantly, the pen as phallus becomes synonymous with authority, dominance and power.

Despite the superficial differences between Foe and Age of Iron, there are striking similarities inherent in the childbirth metaphors used in the two novels. In section III of Foe, Foe tells Susan the story of a woman condemned to die. As the day of her execution came nearer, Foe tells, this woman

was flung into despair because she had no-one to take care of her infant daughter after her death. The gaoler took pity on her and his wife agreed to adopt the child so that it would live. When the woman was assured of the safety of her child, she said to her executioners: "Now you may do with me as you wish. For I have escaped your prison; all you have now is the husk of me". Foe continues that she must have been referring to "the husk that the butterfly leaves behind when it is born", and concludes that "there are more ways than one of living eternally" (125).

Foe's anecdote may be interpreted as the story of Elizabeth Curren. Like the woman in Foe's tale, Elizabeth is "not free"; she explains to Vercueil that she has lived "a life in fetters" (AI 150). Like the condemned woman, Elizabeth is going to die. The woman, Foe tells, has committed an unspecified crime, a crime which he forgets. Elizabeth feels that her cancer is the result of a crime committed in her name before she was born (149). Susan Sontag has drawn attention to the mythology of cancer as punishment in the discourse surrounding illness (Sontag 42).

When the woman in Foe's tale says that she leaves behind her the "husk" of herself, she is suggesting that she will escape death through her daughter - a part of her will live on. Bearing children becomes a way of "living eternally". What is interesting in this metaphor is the image it uses to describe childbirth: the mother's (dead) body becomes an empty husk or container from which the child-butterfly emerges. This image resonates throughout Age of Iron, but with added



emphasis: the child, or butterfly, quite overtly becomes a metaphor for the text, linking the activities of artistic creation and human procreation to a greater degree than any other novel by Coetzee.

As I have suggested, the stifled baby girl found in a ditch by Susan Barton in Foe may be interpreted as a trope for the way in which Susan's story of the island will itself be "stifled" by the authority wielded by a male author. In this interpretation, the stifled daughter becomes a covert extended metaphor for a text with little or no authority. In Age of Iron, Elizabeth Curren professes that she is arguing for that unheard, for a story which has little or no authority in the circumstances in which she finds herself. Elizabeth writes that she is fighting for her words, which she says come from her womb, "not to be stifled":

I am like one of those Chinese mothers who knows that their child will be taken away from them if it is a daughter, and done away with, because the need... is for sons with strong arms. (132)

The daughter text, words from the womb, become a counter to discourses of power which demand "sons with strong arms".

In Age of Iron, Elizabeth says: "I am just a shell, as you can see, the shell my child has left behind" (AI 69). Later she speaks of her death, describing her soul as "a white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the figure on the deathbed" (118). This moth, comparable to the child-butterfly in Foe's tale, can and has been read as a trope for the novel itself. Elizabeth says: "The moth is simply what will brush

your cheek ever so lightly as you put down the last page of this letter, before it flutters off on its next journey" (119). The "next journey" of the moth has two meanings. Firstly, Elizabeth likens her soul to a moth, its "next journey" being into the afterlife. Secondly, the moth becomes something like the reader's (in this case Elizabeth's daughter's) experience of the text, "its next journey" suggesting the way in which the letter/text journeys from one reader to another.

The text becomes a way of evading death in the same way that "children are a way of projecting ourselves into the future", as Coetzee suggests in the interview with Andre Viola (7). Elizabeth Curren writes:

I don't even know if it is the same for a man. But when you bear a child from your own body you give your life to that child... Your life is no longer with you, it is no longer yours, it is with the child. That is why we do not really die: we simply pass on our life, the life that was for a while in us, and are left behind. (69)

If children are a way of living on, then so is writing, as Elizabeth notes: "writing is also the foe of death" (106). The childbirth metaphor becomes a way of avoiding the "icy, death-driven male constructions" (137) of paternal discourse. Instead of indicating a stamp of authority on and dominance over the text, the childbirth metaphor opens up the text, giving it a life of its own, thereby defying the "deadening closes" (8) of phallogentric language.

At the end of October 1987, an interview was published in

the Weekly Mail. Ironically, Morphet entitled this interview, "The Almighty Pen and the Hand which Wields It". Age of Iron was obviously still in its early ("embryonic?") stages at this time, and the interview is largely a discussion of what was, at that stage, Coetzee's most recent novel, Foe. Although the title sets the author up as some kind of phallic and omnipotent creator, the interview is significantly marked by Coetzee's extreme discomfort when placed in any position of authority or paternity in relation to his fictions. What Coetzee is refusing at this point is the phallic metaphor for creativity, together with its associations of authority, dominance, and "setting down the law". Unlike the case of Susan Barton in Foe, who empowers herself through appropriating the pen as phallus, Coetzee uses the female voice in Age of Iron in order to articulate and explore the metaphor of childbearing as powerful and ethical alternative in reflecting on what Morphet refers to as "nature and the processes of fiction" ("The Almighty Pen" 12).

In the introduction to South African Feminisms, M.J. Daymond points to the ethical relevance of the childbirth metaphor within the South African context, noting that it draws on the dynamics of "a maternal, nurturing relationship" (xxvii). She claims that the potential of this maternal relationship is "one that is, by extension, beginning to replace phallic ways of understanding creativity and the once-dominant view of authorship as ownership of meaning" (xxvii). She adds that "motherhood" can function in South African texts as a "profoundly disruptive" concept that "stands against the

father's law... on which the apartheid State once rested" and offers a "mutual, non-constraining, (even non-gendered) care that this society needs to recover" (xxvii). Although it is consoling to imagine that the childbirth metaphor as it appears in South African literary texts has the potential to alter the political dynamics of this country, the fictive mode itself does not ensure transformation in the social status quo. It can, however, be said that Coetzee's novels are a profound and ethical form of story-telling.

Endnotes:

1. In Doubling the Point, Coetzee speaks of the way in which realism is the dominant discursive mode of traditional liberal humanism (62-63).
2. Wade seems to be suggesting that in Age of Iron, Coetzee's values may be directly conflated with those of his protagonist, and that the novel thus confirms its author's regression into the "shabby autonomy" of liberal humanism (213). Graham Huggan and Benita Parry argue the other extreme: Huggan proposes that Coetzee's treatment of the suffering Elizabeth Curren is "heavily ironic, if not entirely unsympathetic" (204) and Parry claims that Coetzee distances himself from his protagonist through parodying the dying liberal humanist discourse she represents ("Thanatophony for South Africa" 10). Both positions offered by these critics are inadequate - to read the novel as expressing its author's liberal humanist concerns (Wade) or as an anti-humanist statement (Huggan) is to reduce the complexity of Coetzee's relation to the female voice as it is used in Age of Iron.
3. Age of Iron also makes oblique intertextual references to Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World (1966), a novel that deals with the dilemma of liberal humanism. Elizabeth Curren calls her house "a late bourgeois tomb" (137). She writes of herself as "the last of the dodos" (25) suggesting that she is part of an obsolete liberal tradition. Gordimer's protagonist, Liz Van Den Sandt - note that Coetzee's narrator is also called Elizabeth - is informed that her ex-husband, Max, an "ineffectual rebel, has drowned himself in his car in Cape Town harbour. In Coetzee's novel this image is repeated, Elizabeth toys with the possibility of driving into the sea. She imagines seeing "men and women, thick in the air as midges taking off on their last flight" (14-15). Like Max and Liz Van Den Sandt, Elizabeth's dilemma partly seems to be whether she has the courage to make an ultimate sacrifice - whether she will burn herself before the Parliament Buildings, and whether this would make a difference: "Was my test whether I had the courage to incinerate myself in front of the house of lies? Will the lies stop because a sick old woman kills herself?" (AI 128). Like Michael K, who importantly does not join the guerillas and become a freedom fighter (DP 207), Elizabeth Curren ultimately does not choose the path of active protest and rebellion.
4. As Suleiman acknowledges, this point is made by Kristeva in La Revolution du Langage Poetique (Revolution in Poetic Language) p.471.
5. Here Suleiman gives a series of fascinating examples. She uses Max Ernst's subversive painting, The Blessed virgin Chastises the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses, as a disturbing visual representation of a mother endowed with

the father's disciplinary power and physical strength (Subversive Intent 156). She also mentions William Burroughs' "vitriolic resentment" of mother figures, citing his as a case where the mother is perceived as "a necessary instrument in a larger system of patriarchal power which seeks to dominate the individual from his earliest moment of life" (165). Even in the case of female writers such as Monique Wittig or Jeanette Winterson, Suleiman argues that the mother becomes a negative and repressive force who upholds the father's law in relation to the rebellious "daughter-warrior" (165).

6. See "Stabat Mater" in Kristeva's Tales of Love, where Kristeva (a mother herself) writes a "new discourse of maternity" based on music and love (Oliver 52).
7. Strangers to Ourselves, one of Kristeva's most recent publications, is based on the premise that the alterity within the subject undermines any notion of a singular identity. This notion of "the stranger within", she suggests, can be used ethically in order to acknowledge and reassess our notions of otherness and difference (Oliver 12-13).
8. In "Stabat Mater", her analysis of maternal love, Kristeva observes the way in which traditional accounts of motherhood (such as that of the Virgin mother in Christian mythology) are inadequate in that these representations attempt to mask the potentially disruptive and unsettling aspects of maternity. These accounts, she suggests, omit the "semiotic", which is "the pain and jouissance of the maternal body" (Oliver 49).
9. Toril Moi has pointed out that traditional Western humanism is itself caught up in phallogocentric ideology as it involves the notion of "a seamlessly unified self - either individual or collective - which is commonly called 'Man'" (S/T P 8). At the centre of humanism, she argues, is a *phallic* self which perpetuates rather than questions patriarchal binaries: "Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity" (8).
10. In the first section of the novel, Elizabeth records that she is writing as she sits in bed, her "knees pressed together against the August cold" (AI 51). In the last few pages of her narrative, she dates her letter "September 23, the equinox" (174).
11. Sontag has also drawn attention to the way in which cancer is regarded by its victims as their secret - it is an extremely private disease (8).
12. Kristeva's point in Powers of Horror is that the abject is related to the archaic (pre-oedipal) mother.

13. Importantly, one should be wary of merely reading Elizabeth's cancer as a "fable" for the "body politic", an approach that Coetzee himself has warned against in an interview with Andre Viola (6). Whatever connections are made between Elizabeth's disease and the state of her country are spoken through her voice, seen through her eyes.
14. In his article, "Who Clipped the Hollyhocks?", Michael Marais uses Coetzee's allusion to Plato's cave in an interview to analyse the politics of representation in South Africa as it is represented in Age of Iron. Marais observes:

...white South Africans' understanding of their social and political "reality" is almost entirely dependent on the form in which it is communicated. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, they are presented with phenomena, that is, mere shadows of the ontologically real world... Since the State-controlled media's representations of the country in which they live are all that they ever see, they (mis)take these representations for reality." (3)
15. See Coetzee's essay "Blood, Taint, Flaw, Degeneration", where he examines the way in which blood is used in the novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin. Coetzee observes that in the discourse of racism before 1945, it is blood that marks a fundamental distinction between races (WW 139).
16. In Judeo-Christian mythology, God's punishment of Adam and Eve lends divine authority to the sexual division of labour - Adam must labour to provide human kind with sustenance and culture, while Eve must labour in her (re)production of the species (Friedman 75).

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