Confrontation and identity in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee

Dawn Grieve

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1246
Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author’s moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
CONFRONTATION AND IDENTITY IN THE FICTION OF
J. M. COETZEE

By
Dawn Grieve

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of
Master of Arts, English (Year Two)

Dawn Grieve
M. A. (Eng) (Year One)
Faculty of Arts
Edith Cowan University
Date of Submission: August, 1999
ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the fictional works of J.M. Coetzee to date. By focusing my gaze upon either the lack of encounter or the encounters between the 'Self' and the 'Other', I explore the relationship between confrontation and the fluid formation and erosion of identity. This exploration takes place against a dual background: the history of the apartheid government in South Africa, the legacy of oppression and the post-apartheid opportunities and challenges; and Coetzee's own acknowledgement of complicity with the past and commitment to a reconciled future.

This study not only examines a broad range of criticism on Coetzee but also provides an integrated response to Coetzee's own writing, both fictional and non-fictional.

A crack or flaw is revealed in the identity of each of the main characters in the texts. These aporias resist interrogation and establish what I perceive to be a metafictional objective. The limitations of rational engagement are eloquently represented in Coetzee's novels in the presence of the suffering body. It is the
aim of this thesis to trace a trajectory which begins in this metalingual space and leads to a metaphysical challenge to Western philosophical tradition.

On close textual scrutiny of three of the novels: In the Heart of the Country, Age of Iron and The Master of Petersburg, I have identified widening cracks in the identities of the protagonists. Using a metaphor of leakage, it is my thesis that these gaps offer creative opportunities of sharing which dissolve judgement and allow for imaginative understanding of otherness.

This study is then read back into Coetzee’s world. It reaffirms the significance of his voice locally and globally, both in the academy and society. I concur with most recent comment that Coetzee’s fiction transgresses critical containment and offers metafictional extension to post-colonial theories. This thesis synthesises some of this current debate.

The ethical implications of his work are also extended in this thesis, by honouring his commitment to self-scrutiny throughout the novel sequence and in his personal confession in Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life. In the specific narratives of his characters and the stories from his own past, he provides
fragments of hope which transcend the confines of all discourse. I conclude that
his example invites and encourages a brave response.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

Date 22-02-2000
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My principal thanks are to my supervisor, Dr Jill Durey. She provided essential encouragement and an education in scholarship.

I would also like to thank my family: Tom, Bronwyn, Mary-Anne and Peter for their support.
A NOTE ON THE THESIS

Where the texts of J.M. Coetzee are quoted within the body of the thesis, references have been abbreviated as follows:

1974 *Dusklands* (D)
1982 *Waiting for the Barbarians* (WB)
1982 *In the Heart of the Country* (IHC)
1985 *Life and Times of Michael K* (MK)
1987 *Foe* (F)
1988 *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (WW)
1991 *Age of Iron* (AI)
1992 *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews: J. M. Coetzee* (DP)
1994 *The Master of Petersburg* (MP)
1996 *Giving Offense* (GO)
1997 *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (B)
1999 *The Lives of Animals* (LA)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Master Player 2
1.2. The Game of Transgression 8

II. ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OTHER

2. The ‘I’ confronts the ‘You’ 11
2.1. Local Reality, Global Theory 15
2.2. Eluding the Restrictions of His Historic Positioning 22
2.3. Signs of Identity 27

3. Stoksielalleen 30
3.1. Confronting the Other, Negating the Self 32
3.2. The Aporia of the Other 38
3.3. Beyond Resistance 43

III. CORPOREALITY

4. The Physical 52
4.1. The Mind Confronts the Body 54
4.2. The Damaged Body 56

5. The Political Body 59
5.1. Confronting the Censor 61
5.2. Relinquishing the Idea to the Evidence of the Body 66
5.3. The Mirroring of the Suffering Body 73
5.4. The Threat of Entropic Inertia 79

IV. DESIRE

6. Physical Intimacy 86
6.1. Desire for Identity 88
6.2. Evading the Desire of the Other 99
6.3. Desire, Transgression and the Law 106
V. LEAKAGE BETWEEN IDENTITIES

7. Merging Identities
   7.1. How Real is Our Possession? 118
   7.2. Embracing the Margin 128
   7.3. The Detective Game: Merging and Separating Motives 139
   7.4. Confronting Differences Or the Similarity of Difference 150

VI. THE PRICE AND THE PRIZE OF BETRAYAL

8. A Writer Confronts his World
   8.1. Eluding the Binary 168
   8.2. Either History or Fiction? 177
   8.3. The Post-Colonizer-As-Writer 179
   8.4. A Space for Women 185

9. The Insignificant Angles of the World Reflected
   9.1. The Author’s challenge to the Censor in the Mirror Or
       The Public Confession of a Most Private Life 191

VII. CONCLUSION

10. The Value of the Game 201

BIBLIOGRAPHY 207

211
SECTION I: INTRODUCTION
I. THE MASTER PLAYER

J.M. Coetzee occupies a unique, intermediary position as a white South African, a professor of literature and a writer-as-critic (Head, 1997, pp. 1-24). His gaze encompasses both the local and global history, the current debates on cultural and literary theory and the critical comment on his writing. This thesis argues that it is in the encounters between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ in his novels that Coetzee enacts his response to these three discursive arenas. In a dual trajectory I shall examine the implications of confrontation upon the formation of identity and then I shall trace these findings into Coetzee’s metafictional enterprise in his oeuvre to date.

There is slippage between non-fiction and fiction in Coetzee’s work. Historical events and social realities inform his fiction, which can then be read back into society and the academy. This elision of his non-fictional, fictional and metafictional task is enunciated by Mrs Costello, the protagonist of his latest novella, The Lives of Animals. Coetzee recently presented the Tanner lecture at Princeton University. His lecture took the form of a postmodern fable: a fictional account of a lecture delivered by an ageing Australian author, Elizabeth Costello is embedded in Coetzee’s delivery. This has become the content of his latest book. Costello addresses her audience thus:

"Yet, although I see that the best way to win acceptance from this learned gathering would be for me to join myself, like a tributary stream running into a great river, to the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason, something in me resists, foreseeing in that step the concession of the entire battle."
“For, seen from the outside, from a being who is alien to it, reason is simply a vast tautology. Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe - what else should it do? Dethrone itself? - - . If there were a position from which reason could attack and dethrone itself, reason would already have occupied that position.” (LA, p. 25)

Costello echoes Coetzee’s own novelistic project. Coetzee installs the various forms of confrontation between identities in order to explore the consequences. But I suggest that it is in a fourth, overarching field of vision that Coetzee undertakes to resist such Manichaean understandings. As a linguist, he includes reflection on the process of representation and the meanings which lie behind the Western philosophical and literary canon that this self-consciousness refracts. It is as a metalinguistic enterprise that, I believe, he transcends the binary and envisions a truly ethical way-of-being which provides a novel example to his critics, academia and society. His method includes subverting the positions which he installs by adumbrating the aporia in each position. This is usually a point of self-deception for the character, in which the self-construction is logically flawed or foreclosed.

Coetzee makes full use of his extensive factual and theoretical knowledge. I asseverate, however, that his most sustained metaphysical project is to trace the crack that runs through all discursive positions, in order to resist enclosure in any ideational camp. Among his protagonists, from the most insignificant citizens to the most prominent members of the society, each strives to evade being confined by others. The physical internment camps, the ideational traps of colonial heritage, the cage of fame and the ‘colonizing’ strategies of interpretation are all examples of confinement in the definition imposed on the self by others either as individuals or as cultural milieux. The subject
continually attempts to defy these limitations, whether historical, physical, psychological intellectual or textual.

This transgressive form reflects Coetzee's metalinguistic game. He sets himself up on the boundary between many discourses, transforming some of the theoretical ideas into fictional form but always evading the restriction of identifying fully with any position and defying critical containment. From this marginal position, as the intermediary between the three agons, he makes a most significant contribution to each: the metafictional novel, literary theory and the cultural and the political world.

The expanding discipline of literary theory has come to embrace other discourses such as history, philosophy and psychology. Coetzee weaves his extensive knowledge of literature and current theories into his novels. Thus he establishes an intricate intertextual web, which sets up an internal dialogue with his critics, fellow novelists and poets, the historic events in which his writing is embedded and the theories.

The geographic, temporal and intellectual site from which he writes has prompted keen postmodernist and post-colonial assessment of his work. Some have pondered whether his work is modern or postmodern (Carusi 1991, Parker 1996). Others question his ambivalent relationship with both the post-colonial and the colonial (Wood 1994, Parker 1996, Watson, 1996 and Marais 1996). So, too, the relationship between his novels and the discourse of History has been an ongoing debate (Attwell 1990 and 1993, Gallagher 1993, Marais 1996, Parker 1996, Parry 1996, Watson 1996 and Head 1997). These analyses depend upon precise definition of the terms used. Finally, each risks being a game of semantics aiming at hegemony.
I prefer the emphasis on his intermediary, transgressive, provisional and elusive qualities because this focus takes up Coetzee’s own cue as the master player in his novels. Such critics include Cherry Clayton 1991, Annemaria Carusi 1991, Marianne de Jong 1994, David Attwell 1990, 1993 and 1996, Brian Macaskill 1994, Stephen Watson 1996, Dominic Head 1997 and Rosemary Jolly 1996 among others. I suggest that such approaches resist the temptation towards closure or even secured meaning, which Coetzee himself is continually evading.

The springboard of my engagement with his fiction is Watson’s proposal that Coetzee articulates a ‘failed dialectic’ in his novels, rather than a representation of neat synthesis. Such ‘failure’ allows meanings to leak and merge in undefined and unknown directions. By sophisticated mise-en-abyme, Coetzee extends the textual representation of otherness, without academic colonization of the voice of the other.

In both postmodernism and post-colonialism, there are points of self-conscious congruence. These include the establishment of a precarious balance between the refusal to turn the ‘other’ into the same and fetishizing difference. Jolly signals the important contribution which some white South African writers have made to “moving post-coloniality beyond its North American impasse, which has been constructed by the academic apprehension of the subaltern as incommunicado and the careless definition of appropriation as any attempt on the part of the non-native to envision the oppression of the indigene” (1996, p. 152). She intimates that authors like Andre Brink and Coetzee have shown that “white writing can involve itself in the act of listening to the other in its portrayals of alterity”.
In a discussion on the uneasy hold of the post-colonial label on South African literary production, Annamaria Carusi points out the impossibility of breaking with Western systems of thought: "The naming of the Other as Other can be seen as a thetic and logocentric gesture on the part of post-structuralism whereby otherness is foreclosed" (1991, pp. 102-103). She adds that post-colonial literary discourse emphasises the "irretrievability of "otherness" and - - this does not, however, mean that there is no "otherness"" (p. 103). Rather than searching for origins, she calls for a reconstructive programme in which historicism is present and future, rather than past oriented (103). It is my thesis that Coetzee undertakes such an initiative in his novels.

Another similarity in the fields of 'posts' is the radical questioning of all authorial voices, including the questioning voice. Head argues that this is the specific dilemma of the white South African writer (1997, p. 158). For Head, the demon which possesses the post-colonizer-as-writer "is irreducibly double, the self and the Other, a split literary and historical identity" (1997, p.155). He also claims that there is a need to renegotiate the identities of the self and the other. He says: "This aspect of the literature of the post-colonizer explains how the projection of abnegation can be seen as a responsible confrontation with the present moment" (1997, p. 156).

I wish to align this idea of Head's with the comment of Jolly. By recognising irreconcilable otherness within the self, the post-colonizer is better able to listen to the portrayals of alterity of the other. This opens up possibilities to hear other voices differently, without assimilating them into the cultural paradigms of 'sameness'. It will be my task to show how this 'act of listening' is represented in Coetzee's fiction, without becoming an act of appropriation. Thus Coetzee adds significantly to current theory in his praxis.
His writing spans the last 26 years. This period has been marked by shifts in the configurations of international relations and dramatic changes in the local political structure. The imperialist drive of 'communism' and the threat of an escalation of nuclear arms has abated. In South Africa, apartheid has come full circle: the oppression reached its zenith in the years of the states of emergency in the 1980s and then ended with the election of the African National Congress party in April 1994. The question of how to deal with the violent antagonisms of the past and to create different structures continues. It is to this challenge that Coetzee responds.

I suggest that Coetzee engages with the academic debate of international and local theorists and critics of his writing in order to open up the dialogue beyond an intellectual contest towards a personal commitment to reconciliation and ethical reconstruction. First he installs the metalinguistic presence of the body to occupy this transgressive site. Then he offers moments of merged physical identity to provide an imaginary glimpse of this metaphysical possibility. In this way, I suggest that Coetzee extends the genre of what Majorie Garber calls 'the academic novel' (1999, p. 76).
1.1. THE GAME OF TRANSGRESSION

In my engagement with Coetzee's game there is a progression from the general to the particular from section II to section V. This is an analysis of the formation of individual, separate identities. Textual analysis also tends to become more detailed with a narrowing of focus. The second section covers an overview of encounters with others. The third addresses the significance of the body in the formation of identity. Then, in section IV, the physical representation of desire and the implications for identity are traced. In section V, the nub my thesis is explored in specific moments of physical union in the novels, in which the identity of the self and the other merge. From this point, the gaze is directed outwards, in section VI, to the expanded ramifications of Coetzee's novelistic enterprise.

In chapter 2, I discuss the terms of the oppositionality: the confrontation between the I and the you, some information about the recent apartheid era and Coetzee's position in relation to his heritage and his chosen elusiveness. I conclude this chapter with a brief analysis of the signs of identity in the novels. Chapter 3 covers a more detailed examination of the formation of the self and the essential presence of the other, against which the self can be traced. There is an analysis of the embodiment of identity and the position of the body in relation to individual and collective ideology in chapter 4. The ramifications of this transgressive stance are explored in chapter 5. In chapter 6, I discuss the correlation between physical desire, the desire for identity and the implications for identity of the self as the object of another's desire. In chapter 7, I trace the theme of merging in three of Coetzee's novels. Here I note a progression from a brief imaginary glimpse in an early novel (In the Heart of the Country), to a suspended moment in a later
work (*Age of Iron*), to the pervasive perforation and consequent spillage between identities in a recent text (*The Master of Petersburg*). This development is the crux of my discussion of Coetzee's ethical example. His metalinguistic representation of merged identity provides an opportunity for honest self-scrutiny and sympathetic imagining of otherness.

In chapter 8, I return to the historical and academic background within which Coetzee has written. Here I explore the implications of his fictional scrutiny and revisioning of confrontation for both the theoretical and the real, local and global worlds which he inhabits. Finally, in chapter 9 I introduce his own most personal offering of confessional honesty as the only evidence of his commitment, as a writer, an academic and a citizen (*Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*).
SECTION II: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OTHER
2. THE ‘I’ CONFRONTS THE ‘YOU’

In all of his novels Coetzee establishes a dialectic between the self and the other. While he frequently sets up opposition between two characters, it is within the sphere of a Hegelian synthesis that he stirs the waters which create and disturb the lights and shades of identity. It seems to me that he is not so much interested in representing oppositions with a desire to discover a resolution to confrontation, as in the failed dialectical process, which Watson has identified (1996, pp. 13-36). Here the rules are challenged and the binaries leak, blurring and at times staining or erasing the boundaries which define otherness. Language is the site of this contestation. In Foe, Susan Barton asks: “What are these blinks of an eyelid, against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness? Might they not be the cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices speak in our lives?” (F, p. 30). Identities are never fixed, although they are at times quite distinct and at times they seem to merge with others or disappear into the surroundings. Self scrutiny is the hub around which the texts revolve.

In all eight novels there is minimal dialogue and yet it is in confronting the other that a sense of self is born in the texts. In an analysis of the “Ballade van de Gasfitter” by Gerrit Achterberg, Coetzee elaborates on the statement by Emile Beneviste that I and You are empty signs which are only filled as a speaker uses them (DP, p.71). Coetzee discusses the fluid relationship between the I and the You and the problem of finding stable identities:

The You has little solidarity to the gaze of the I. On the contrary, the You is absent; or it is present only passively, as an object of the awareness of the I; or it
is capable only of an inactive locativity defined in relation to the I. In other words
the You is absent or evanescent or dependent on the I; and the relation of the I to
the You, being barely transitive, cannot be reciprocal (DP, p. 72).

By attempting to bring the You into a fullness of being, we hope to create a mirror in
which to glimpse reflections of the I, however this Bakhtinian ideal remains elusive as we
become embroiled in an endless mirroring loop. The moments of meeting between
subjects in the Coetzee novels provide the nexus from which the characters continue to
spin their inner and outer threads of meaning into an identity. This occurs within the
wider web of the temporal and spatial context. The engagements with others may be
fleeting, such as the three brief scenes in which Elizabeth Curren and the youth, John,
meet in Age of Iron or they may be more enduring, as in the constant company which
Friday keeps with Susan Barton in Foe. Most of the encounters are transitory and have
passed by the end of the narrative, nevertheless the shifting gossamer of self swirls
around the imprints left by that contact.

The texts themselves can also be read as a self-conscious creation of himself by the
author. Coetzee has said that “any construct of the self in language is a form of
dispossession, because the self is being presented like another for another” (DP, p. 30).
His work endorses the linguistic ideal of dialogism, whereby reality and history are
purely the constructs of language (DP, p. 145), and yet he argues that the primal “I” is
not recoverable (DP, p. 75) and so the quest for the “I” becomes an attempt to confront
a void or as Jean-Paul Sartre represents consciousness: “a hole through which
nothingness pours into the world (quoted in DP, p. 72). The protagonist of In the Heart
of the Country, Magda, says “I create myself in the words that create me” (IHC, p. 8).
Coetzee makes a similar claim for himself: “- - writing writes us” (DP, p. 18). He locates
his own authorial position of significance in his texts, but because of the corrosive effect of temporality, his writing is also "a lesson, at the most immediate level, in insignificance. It is not just time as history that threatens to engulf one: it is time itself, time as death" (DP, p. 209). This is covered in chapters 7 and 8. The reader's own subject position is also marked with the allusive memories of this poetics of failure.

Ferdinand de Saussure has asserted that language establishes meaning only by means of the reciprocal differences between definitions (1992, pp. 8-15). Jacques Derrida added that meaning is always deferred (1992, pp. 149-165). The boundaries which establish différence continually become eroded or extended with the march of time, hence each self-consciousness cannot but fail to erect for him/herself an autonomous, stable representation of his/her identity. We each have a desire to experience the world as it is, unmediated by words, perhaps because we believe that we would then know the unchangeable essence of reality as distinct from its shifting representation. This is the striving of the human condition, the nature and dimensions of which are variously explored in Coetzee's novels.

Watson mentions the influence which Sartre's writing in Being and Nothingness has had on Coetzee (1996, p. 25). Edmund Husserl claimed that consciousness itself cannot be known, for consciousness is always of something and Sartre extended this idea (Binkley, 1969, pp. 163 -224). He distinguished between being-in-itself (être-en-soi) as the world with which the individual is confronted and being-for-itself (être-pour-soi) or consciousness which has no essence or is a lack of being continually striving to become. Sartre claimed that an inter-subjective awareness is not possible. He agreed with Hegel that the basis of all relationships is that of master and slave because in any interaction
between two people, one becomes the object or être-en-soi for the other who is the être-pour-soi, but this is a paradox, for no-one can be être-en-soi. As he states:

It is therefore useless for human-reality to seek to get out of this dilemma: one must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him. The essence of all relations between consciousnesses is - - conflict” (Sartre quoted in Binkley 1969, p. 180).

I suggest that this world view may have influenced Coetzee in his belief that the I and the You cannot be reciprocal. The other is a constant threat to the existence of the self and this causes existential anxiety.
2.1. LOCAL REALITY, GLOBAL THEORY

Within the pre-1994 South African situation, the threat of confrontation with the other has been heightened by the self-perpetuating and restricting binary perceptual trap of apartheid. I shall address the post-1994 rearrangement of political authority and the challenge which the future offers in chapter 8. Historically, otherness has been clearly demarcated by racial difference and entrenched by a complex grid of racially based social structures and laws.

Michael Wade discusses the twin psychological realities of repression and anger in this closely controlled society (1993, p. ix). In an analysis of Nadine Gordimer’s novels, The Burger’s Daughter and July’s People, he identifies a collective neurosis in the white English-speaking group (1993, p. 106). Unlike the Afrikaner ‘laager’ or camp and the Black factions, this section of the society lacks a mythological basis or eschatology by which to identify itself. English-speaking South Africans are largely urban dwellers, who do not share the connectedness with the land with the other cultural groups (1993, p. 150). So, too, their traditional song-lines are colonial, for they usually hark back to their British origins and this has resulted in a deep crisis of identity (p. 150). Since their sense of identity is so vulnerable, there is a tendency to represent what is culturally other as a negation of the self, hence otherness is represented as a very personal affront (p. 150). The other is really the only reference by which this group has identified itself, therefore, to be not-Afrikaans and not-Black, is to be a white English-speaking South African (p. 150).
Coetzee may be described as a white, English-speaking South African, although he does not claim to belong to any group, while accepting responsibility for his Afrikaner heritage. He has led a borderline existence in a society in which boundaries are starkly divisive. His memoir, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, provides a glimpse into his background. His mother tongue is English. His father's kinsmen were Afrikaner farmers. As a child, he felt a strong bonding with the land and yet he was excluded from it by his suburban life. He is the dubious heir to a complex mesh of antagonisms between his mother and his Afrikaans-speaking relatives. He cast himself out to the edge of his first school community in a predominantly Dutch Reformed (Protestant), Afrikaans neighbourhood by claiming to belong to Roman Catholic faith, which is more representative of the English-speakers, because he did not want to admit that his family had no religion. Later, at a Catholic college in Cape Town, he was again a non-member of the dominant group.

His childhood family was socially marginalised by the drinking habits and debts of his father. From an early age he questioned the prejudice of those around him and his own response to the attitudes of others. He has avoided political engagement for he resists the confines of sectarian allegiances. His academic pursuits have included a keen interest in linguistics, literary theory, literature and mathematics. He currently holds the position of professor of general literature at the University of Cape Town. Thus his own history has provided a fertile situation from which he undertakes precise interrogation of the boundaries which define, separate, threaten, destroy and dissolve identity.

He has been writing fiction for the past twenty-six years. This has been a time of major transition in the local socio-political milieu and in the global context of critical thought in
which he writes. When his first novel, Duskl...
This pass also restricted their access to white areas, unless it was stamped with a work permit.

Apartheid became a pervasive and effective government machine of racial discrimination and separation, in which only a small percentage of the population, the white minority, had a political voice. Black people had always been denied the vote. Further laws passed in the 1950's denied any legal space for non-violent extra-parliamentary political activity by the ANC [African National Congress] - against race discrimination, pass-law curbs on black mobility, and low wages. And the extent to which the courts could intercede for black rights had been seriously eroded by laws which gave the state arbitrary powers and often ruled out judicial intervention. (Barrell, 1990, p. 2)

On 21 March 1960, 69 unarmed anti-pass law protesters were shot down in Sharpeville, a state of emergency was declared and the ANC (a multi-racial political organisation committed to the democratic rights of all citizens) and the PAC (The Pan-African Congress) were outlawed (Barrell, 1990, pp. 2-3). Within the next 4 months, more than 11,000 people had been detained or arrested. In the face of this plan to silence and marginalize the majority of the population, the armed wing of the ANC was formed, with Nelson Mandela being given the task to install the high command of the organisation (pp. 2-7). Umkhonto we Sizwe, the Spear of the Nation, known as MK in the townships, included members from all racial groups who were committed to fight for freedom and democracy for all the people of the country. Until the next major crisis, the school riots in 1976, the two forces in South Africa, the legal government of the white minority and
the illegal voice of the ANC continued a simmering confrontation as the apartheid laws were enforced and extended.

A law passed in 1963 prevented Blacks from owning land, except for degraded allotments in remote and overcrowded homelands or ‘dumping grounds’ to which many urban Blacks were forcibly removed as a part of the plan to divide and rule. In the 1960’s, nearly 2 million Blacks were re-located. It was the Nationalists’ intention to remove those Blacks who were not expedient to the national economy to independent, ethnically constituted Bantustans. These areas were designated as homelands for the majority of the population and as an outlet for their political aspirations. But this engineering was socially, economically and politically flawed. Urbanised people were forcibly separated from their families and relocated to remote rural, often ecologically degraded, areas. The Bantustans were to support the majority of the population on a meagre 13% of the land. Some industry was created to provide employment, but this proved to be inadequate and unviable. As artificial, separate developments, these Bantustans were wholly dependent on South Africa for their economic survival, hence they were merely political puppet states of the Nationalist government:

The South African chequerboard had been laid out, and the Nationalist politicians, hide-bound by the inflexible doctrine of separate development, were committed to shifting the human counters to fit a pre-determined pattern. (Joyce, 1990, p. 45)

Thus the Nationalist government succeeded in institutionalising racial discrimination over three decades, with a huge administrative structure to regulate the ‘rights’ of Blacks to live or work in ‘white’ cities. The social consequences were dire. Colin Murray identifies
three consequences of this "displaced urbanization" which are: overcrowding on the rural slums; diversion of the limited state housing funds from urban 'locations' to the Bantustans, and widespread commuting from the rural sites to the cities for work (1995, pp. 231-355). This system of control was fraught with tensions within and between groups.

Cracks were beginning to show in the rigid structure of repression. On 16 June 1976 10,000 school children marched in Soweto in protest. The issue at hand was their objection to the government decision that they were to be taught some of their subjects in the medium of Afrikaans, the language of their oppressors. At the heart of their rage was an anger with their own elders who had accepted the yoke of subjugation and with the apartheid state for its injustices. Violence erupted and spread to other centres. This solidarity marked the beginning of an enduring campaign by the disenfranchised majority to "render the country ungovernable" (Joyce, 1990, p. 73).

The apartheid monolith was beginning to crumble. The Nationalist government had largely succeeded in its comprehensive task of silencing all black political utterances, and yet the power of the collective voice of the disaffected generation of youth broke through. The authority of that collective call gained momentum from the violence which was inflicted on the rebels. The government retaliated by attempting to beat back the wave for self-determination with punishment and torture. Conservative official figures record that 575 people died, 3907 were injured and 5980 were arrested for participation in the unrest (Barrell, 1990, p. 31). The thousands of suffering bodies became a ghastly testimony, more eloquent than words, to the voice of the people. It is this voice which Coetzee seems to hear and adumbrate in many of his novels. This is the focus of chapters 4 and 5.
The seventies and eighties were years in which evidence of gross physical conflict was either concealed or misrepresented by the political order in power. The Nationalist government contrived an elaborate network of media and political players to re-present events in order to justify and entrench their governing structure. The demanding and exacting task of enforcing this maze of laws was everywhere undermined by the corporeality of the pawns, the voiceless majority, in this serious game. It is the physical presence or absence of these pawns and, more particularly, the suffering bodies, that is the nexus in which the system, as itself and as metonymy of all rigid systems, dissolves.

By the time that Coetzee’s last four works were published, the antagonistic world of apartheid had imploded. In 1994, in a general election in which all race groups participated, the African National Congress under the leadership of Nelson Mandela was installed. Coetzee’s work spans the turbulent years across which much of the fabric of the nation has undergone a revolution. The ramifications of these changes and their effect on the imaginative enterprises of John Coetzee will be more fully examined in chapter 7, 8 and 9.

During this time, the sphere of critical thought has also undergone major transition. The questions posed by post-structuralist theorists have prompted new challenges to the dominant discourses. This includes a range of theories which share some common assumptions: language is the site of contestation for it produces political and social power; subjectivity is not given, rather it is continually being produced in interaction with the world; all meaning is established by language and since this cannot be fixed, there are no final or transcendental truths.
2.2. ELUDING THE RESTRICTIONS OF HIS HISTORIC POSITIONING

Coetzee embraces his geographic, temporal and ideational situation and yet he is successful at eluding the restrictions which his historic positioning could imply. The self-reflective, auto-representational and allegorical content of each of his novels extends and transgresses the boundaries of its own setting and discourse to become metafictional and metaphysical. Even though the present South African situation is always within his gaze, he uses defamiliarizing techniques to distance his writing from the landscape, the prevailing political negotiations or the social realities of the time and place. For example, the future context of *Life and Times of Michael K* extends the essential political issues in the text beyond the geographic and temporal realities of the Cape Province in the 1980's. Similarly, the tensions in the late nineteenth-century Russian political scene in *The Master of Petersburg* echo many of the dilemmas being faced in his homeland today.

By applying what David Attwell calls "translocation" strategies (1993, p. 214), Coetzee creates a double perspective in which immediate, local concerns remain visible, if only obliquely at times, and wider philosophical issues are encompassed. So, too, Coetzee makes use of the current theoretical debate to inform his work, while resisting enclosure in any camp. Academics ponder over the theoretical categories into which his work best fits.

While this debate highlights the elusiveness of his position, I am reluctant to enter this semantic arena because, as Foucault has said, modern thought "cannot stop itself from
liberating or oppressing” (quoted in A. Carusi, 1991, p. 106), consequently, to name something is to try to control it. Foucault’s attempt to free philosophy from the restrictions of dogmas has had a significant influence on Coetzee. He concurs that we name in order to subjugate (DP, p. 342). He creates narratives which lack a middle, like a “buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button” (E, p. 121). He does not name the button for these reasons: to name is to establish linguistic containment or hegemony; some awarenesses cannot be represented by signs and even to attempt to name them is doomed to failure, because they defy all such containment and there are other features which remain entirely unseen.

Because he fails to engage directly with the realities of South Africa in his novels, Coetzee was criticised for academic and racial elitism in the early 1980’s (Gordimer, 1984). He appears to have responded by writing an accurate account of the revolt of the children in Cape Town, in Age of Iron. It is a realistic representation of the confrontation which occurred at that time. It is also a sensitive portrayal of a confused and ambivalent liberal humanist response to the conflict. But again Coetzee subverts what he installs. He goes beyond the retrospective analytical formula of why things are as they are and he opens up future possibilities of understanding and action beyond explanation. Mrs Curren does not know why she embraces the drunken tramp, Vercueil, but she does have the insight that he is her guide into “the great white glare” (AI, p.160). In chapter 5, I shall elaborate on Coetzee’s challenging response to his critics in a ploy to transgress the very premises on which these critics found their charge.

Attwell maintains that Coetzee’s ‘demythologising’ of history is a means whereby he confronts the postmodern crisis of scepticism by “searching for ways in which the novel might recover an ethical basis, in full appreciation of the political context” (DP, p. 4).
Macaskill says that Coetzee’s writing is simultaneously marginal and medial: it is marginal to the main Anglo-American traditions, and the subjects and their circumstances are marginal to the societies in which they operate (1994, p.446). The South African context reconfigures marginality as central to the local reality and Coetzee unsettles the many different discursive practices in which he positions his fiction by deliberately “choosing middleness precisely to avoid negation or the reproduction of hierarchy with simple alternate terms, deliberately resisting determinism…” (Macaskill, 1994, p. 473).

Part of Coetzee’s enterprise is to counteract the public voice of authority, which speaks within clearly defining paradigms of the dominant culture. The insignificant voice of a private conscience is where he locates his own integrity and the integrity of many his characters. Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* is just such a person and yet her suffering and self-rigorous confession become a most powerful political statement. I agree with Attwell’s argument that Coetzee is able to interrogate the postmodernist “paralysis before history” and to move beyond it to “a reconstructed position in which fiction begins to speak to the political on its own terms - - by searching for ways in which the novel might recover an ethical basis, in full appreciation of the political context” (DP, p. 4). I shall return to this discussion of the position of Coetzee’s work in chapter 8. It is these ‘ways’ that I intend to explore.

Coetzee has had a reputation of being a most private and elusive individual. One critic has described him as being a not too distant relative of Michael K, the main character in *Life and Times of Michael K*, who manages to slip beneath the barbed wire of all physical and ideological camps (Clayton, 1994, p. 154). I maintain that his absence from most public discussion on his novels has been a deliberate act to remove himself from the position of ‘author of ethical commentary’. He has chosen to remove himself as a
signifier in the critical debate, much like Michael K whose story can also be read as an allegory of “how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (MK, p. 166). This leaves the reader to engage with the challenges which the texts present, rather than with the writer of those texts.

It is my thesis that Coetzee is a profoundly ethical writer, for whom the only rule is a political commitment to scrutinise his own hermeneutic position within his historic setting, both within South Africa and beyond. As a South African, the foreground of his vision is the current events which occur around him. As an academic, his gaze encompasses super-national, metaphysical notions.

However, he confronts a moral issue: he does not wish to represent his own position as a proselytising model for others in his novels, and yet his obligation to himself and to his community, whether in the South African context or the international, intellectual world, is to write “himself”. Perhaps this is the reason for his public silence in debates about his work. He is critical of the power which speaking with authority commands, for it widens the non-reciprocal gap between the speaking ‘master’ (être-en-soi) and his ‘slave’ (être-pour-soi) audience. I believe that Coetzee’s guarded privacy and frequent silences can be read as an attempt to reduce the authority of the author so that the reader can respond directly to the text. As Sartre asseverated, we each choose on behalf of mankind (cited in Binkley, 1969, p. 196), so Coetzee is bound to this responsibility for his words and respectful of the reader’s hermeneutic interaction with the text as a post-structural product with the potential for social change.

Coetzee’s self-referring and auto-representational style performs the dual function of metafiction. Linda Hutcheon claims that historiographic metafiction is located in history
and in discourse, while it simultaneously establishes its autonomous imaginary and linguistic nature and that, in metafictional texts, language does not merely reflect reality, it is the reality of the text, hence the reader becomes the "actualising link between history and fiction" (1984, p. xiv). It is to this task that I wish to respond in this thesis.
2.3. SIGNS OF IDENTITY

Coetzee constructs signs which lure the reader into an endless labyrinth of language and consciousness of the other and of the self. The signs left by the majority of the characters are written words. In the Heart of the Country resembles the numbered entries in a journal. Age of Iron takes the form of a letter, which Elizabeth Curren writes to her daughter in America and which she wishes to be posted posthumously. The exploration of Jacobus Coetzee into the hinterland is variously recounted in the ‘historical’ records in Dusklands. Eugene Dawn has also submitted his paper on the mythology of the Vietnam War in Dusklands. In Foe, Susan Barton appeals to Mr Foe to record her story, nevertheless telling the story according to her own desire. The Master of Petersburg is famous for his novels. His step-son is implicated in the revolutionary movement of Nechaev by his papers and letters and he has also begun writing a fictional story.

Other characters leave non-verbal markings as statements of their presence. In Foe both Cruso and Friday install vital evidence of their identities. Cruso spends his days on the island building terraces for future castaways to cultivate, if they have the foresight to bring seeds. Michael Marais refers to this as the re-inscribing of his familiar paradigms on the wild landscape so that he can secure his own sense of self (1996, p. 68). It is the mixed legacy of hope and meaninglessness which he leaves for Susan to ponder and record. In the final image in Foe a stream of bubbles issues forth from Friday’s mouth and flows to the ends of the earth. This is certainly an extensive, if illusive, message. In Life and Times of Michael K, Michael leaves no trace of himself on the land and yet he treasures seeds as the kernel of himself as a gardener. Eugene Dawn’s act of stabbing his
son, is a non-verbal inscription of his instability. Like the ancient slips of strange script which fascinate the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, his own relics will be interpreted by future archaeologists.

Each of the signs in the texts evolves out of the history of outer encounter and inner response and offers an identity as ‘other’ to the subject for whom the signs are intended, but in each case that subject is noticeably absent. Mrs Curren’s daughter is away in America (AI). ‘Dostoevsky’s’ step-son son is dead and his reading audience is not present, for this writing is the work of J. M. Coetzee and not Dostoevsky (MP). The magistrate (WB) and Cruso (E) rely on a future response to their work and even Magda (IHC) has no-one to whom she can show her diary. Michael K’s seeds contain the promise of nourishment and survival for the future but they have not yet been planted (MK). The adventure of Jacobus Coetzee is an historic event which is re-examined long after his demise and Eugene Dawn’s work is criticised by his immediate superior but it is not submitted by the end of the text (D). He muses over the possible responses of the psychiatrists to the stark sign of his disturbance and yet these doctors are not introduced into the text.

These aporias are occupied by the reader, who attempts to engage in dialogue with the narrative of the ‘others’ in the text in order to understand them better. Beyond the text, the ‘other’ is silent, so the impenetrable darknesses in the stories which confront the reader cannot be entered into, yet they do cast their opaque pall upon the identity of each of the players, the character, the author and the reader. In this way, Coetzee skilfully implicates the reader in his game of self-scrutiny. Coetzee is most mindful that writing and also reading are informed by the same “hegemonic cultural forces as imperialism”
Coetzee’s empowerment of the silences within and beyond the texts will be addressed in chapters 3, 6 and 7.

Each one of the main characters is marginal. They are separated from the mainstream of society by their circumstances or their beliefs. Their separateness gives them a vantage point from which to look into the centre. They do not have an all-encompassing gaze, but Coetzee does install them as an(other) against which the mainstream of the society, inhabited by them, can be traced. This is the focus of chapter 3. Each subject is reflective about the changing configuration of his/her own identity against the background of their milieu. Their mutating shape is also under the scrutiny of those around them, including the reader. Because they are all at some time itinerant or antagonistic towards their surroundings, the space which they occupy cannot be read as the negative pattern of their identity. Instead, their space shifts, confronts and merges with them.

Now I choose to follow Coetzee’s cue by exploring his trajectory in which he installs, transgresses and erases the boundaries of identity in his novels. I shall trace the incomplete contours that he creates in order to adumbrate the hazy shadows, cast by these markings upon the perceptions of individual subjects and their societies. I shall explore the ways in which some of the characters are trapped within themselves in chapter 3. Some appear to be unable to interact meaningfully with those around them. Others resist interrogation. I shall then examine the function of corporeality in the texts in chapters 4 and 5 and the intimate physical relationships between subjects in order to decipher how Coetzee charges and drains the currents of identity through physical contact in chapter 6. Finally, I shall consider the wider ramifications of this failed dialectic in chapter 7 and 8, and Coetzee’s most personal response to his own challenge in chapter 9.
Many of the characters have great difficulty communicating with others. Some, like Eugene Dawn (D), Jacobus Coetzee (F), the magistrate (WB) and Magda (IHC) appear to be locked into a dialogue within themselves, and others, such as the barbarian girl (WB), Michael K (MK), Friday (F) and Vercueil (AI) are impervious to questioning, revealing only disconnected glimpses of themselves. The identity of the Master of Petersburg is torn and partly disintegrated in the conflict between his inner agony and the outer challenges to his position. In spite of these gaping holes in the heart of their stories, there is a desire by the interrogating characters to create whole tracings of these murky identities, whether of themselves or of others. It is in these shadowy spaces that Coetzee weaves the webs of his textual games, in which the reader's own sense of incomplete identity and complicity becomes caught as nourishment for the master's imaginative appetite.

The theory of Julia Kristeva provides a useful loom through which to weave Coetzee's trajectories. Both writers share an on-going interest in language and linguistics. As a psychoanalyst, Kristeva is interested in subjectivity. Her first mentor in Paris, Jacques Lacan, added to Freudian theory. He defined the pre-Oedipal, mirror stage in which the child can identify with its image in the mirror but is still unable to differentiate between itself as the subject, rather than the object of reflection. He suggested that it is with the acquisition of language that the child identifies itself as a subject, thereby entering the realm of the symbolic (1992, p. 122-127). Kristeva has extended these ideas. Her earlier work paid particular attention to the pre-linguistic or pre-symbolic stage which she called
the “semiotic”, in which meaningless verbal patterns and rhythms are babbled by the infant. This semiotic modality becomes repressed (secondary repression), when the child separates its own identity from that of its mother. She maintains that the semiotic continues to make its presence felt in music, poetry and moments of incoherence (1992, pp. 131-132).

Like many of her contemporaries, Kristeva also believes that meaning is not stable, consequently identity is not fixed. Subjects are only ever in the process of becoming. They may also be said to be “subjects-on-trial”, as they are continually having to define themselves against others in an on-going attempt to stabilise meaning (1992, pp. 128-129). There is a gap between our self-perception and our representation. Like Sartre, Kristeva’s theory is based on an essential confrontation between subjectivities. Some of the ramifications of this conflict are illustrated in Coetzee’s fiction.
3.1. CONFRONTING THE OTHER, NEGATING THE SELF

The first part of *Dusklands*, The Vietnam Project, is the journal of Eugene Dawn. It is a private confession of his isolation. At work he feels alienated. He is a member of the War Office and yet he is ambivalent about his task to improve the effectiveness of America's military machine in Vietnam. He feels persecuted by his superior, Coetzee. At home he is estranged from his wife, who blames him for her distresses. He is conscientious about his task as a mythologist. He writes a well-developed treatise, recommending the use of radio propaganda to undermine Vietnamese morale. The vivid signs which he uses as evidence in his well-developed argument, the photographs of war atrocities, are the triggers which expose the crack in his mythology and cause him so much trauma.

It is ironic that he is able to present such an articulate and dispassionate paper and yet he is unable to communicate his own emotional distress to anyone. It is as if his own suffering is beyond the explanation of words. It is a snare of meaninglessness which entraps him. He cannot cope and his pain overflows into a senseless act of violence against his own son. I will examine this more closely later in this chapter. Ironically, his opinions will no longer be valued as the representation of a rational mind and his work will be lost in the mass of myths about the war, when he is hospitalised. As a subject-on-trial who is free to make his life meaningful, he fails because the task of his working life becomes irrelevant, his marriage is over, he damages the relationship with his son by stabbing him and he is now locked into the position of object of scrutiny to the psychiatrists. This is equivalent to the meaningless holes at the centre of the lives of most of Coetzee's characters.
The encounters between subjectivities expose the disparity between the enunciating I and the enunciation. Kristeva offers useful metaphors to vivify these aporias. The abject, as she theorises it in *Powers of Horror* (1982), is a concept which cannot easily be defined, for it is a pre-linguistic entity. She returns to Freud’s theories to explore more fully the development of the child’s consciousness prior to Lacan’s mirror stage. Freud claimed that in primary repression the superego separates the abject from what will become the subject and its object. de Saussure defined meaning as a system of difference, and difference is established by boundaries which are the constructs of geometry. Victor Burgin describes Kristeva’s abject as “the origin of geometry” (1990, p. 115).

The abject is both the origin and limit of meaning, which hovers on the fluid boundary between a sense of identity and meaninglessness. It may be considered to be isomorphic with matter which is both within and without the body, such as the foetus, secretions and a corpse. It elicits both fascination and disgust. This void is simultaneously the point of potential obliteration and the font of creativity (Kristeva, 1982). And so the ambivalent symptoms of horror and awe lap at the edges of our consciousness. It is these symptoms which echo through Eugene Dawn’s narrative and many of the other Coetzee stories.

In the second section of *Dusklands*, the narrative of Jacobus Coetzee is told from three different perspectives. The first is the heroic adventure history as recounted by Jacobus. Like Eugene Dawn, he is unable to share his fears with anyone who will understand. In his writing he uses the language of a coloniser, thus he takes comfort from the assumed sympathy of a reader for his marginal superiority, his imperial status. He is an early venturer into the hinterland of the Western Cape. As a lone white man, he feels defensive in the face of the different customs of the Khoisan people (the Hottentots).
N. Armstrong and L. Tennenhouse suggest that, for Coetzee, there is a compulsion to represent that which is culturally other as a negation of the self (1989, p. 16). They conclude that such a representation requires that otherness be taken personally so that the idleness of the 'Hottentots' is interpreted by the Boers (Afrikaners) as an act of violence (1989, p. 16). I would add that this mimetic style serves a dual purpose. It establishes the link which connects J. M. Coetzee with his forefather, Jacobus Coetzee (the character in the novel), and his historic complicity with the architects of apartheid (DP, p. 242-243). Mimesis is also a tool of post-colonial subversion. This duality highlights the ambivalence of the subject position of the post-coloniser-as-writer. It is this site of great transitional potential, identified by Head (1998), which will be explored in chapter 8.

In a chapter, "Idleness in South Africa", Coetzee writes: "The moment when the travel writer condemns the Hottentot for doing nothing marks the moment when the Hottentot brings him face to face with the limits of his own conceptual framework" (1989, pp. 127-8). Jacobus believes that he can retain his edge in negotiations with these people by means of his possessions which they value. When they disregard his ownership of the goods and divide them all out among themselves, he loses his leverage. His ill health exacerbates his vulnerability and he becomes dependent on their mercy. As his power diminishes, so he shifts from a self-perceived superior position of judgement of the unclean practices of the Khoisan 'others' to the position of the unclean 'other'. He is housed separately from the village, in the hut reserved for menstruating women. Thus he is reduced to the lowly status of a contaminated female, in this patriarchal society. His perceptual limitation also becomes a bodily isolation.
He has the misconception that his colonial position as definer of boundaries is secure. Yet he not only loses this controlling stance but his condition and location signify the erasure of those boundaries. Jacobus becomes metonymic of the Kristevan abject through his own incontinence and the connotations of spillage and defilement, which some patriarchal systems associate with menstruating women.

Jacobus Coetzee creates himself in confrontation with the 'other'. Jacobus declares: “the gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us” (D, p. 84). In his encounters with the indigenous people, he destroys all others whom he perceives to be a threat to his own colonising ‘light’, the ‘untameable’, including even his rebellious servants. Peter Knox-Shaw:

- - in the brilliance of the desert the narrator confronts - in place of a dark, infinitely recessive self - a centre of complete emptiness. The lack of an apparent self prompts him to view his identity as coterminous with that of the external world, 'I am all that I see' [says Jacobus in D, p. 84]. (1996, p. 117)

In doing this, he involves the entire universe in his sensation of nullity, his inner death, hence his need for violence, for “only by demonstrating his separateness - only by bringing death into the world - can he preserve a belief in external life” (1996, p. 117).

I suggest that Coetzee installs this logic with an inherent flaw, which neatly subverts Jacobus’ rational position. Jacobus says that “through their deaths I, - - , again asserted my reality” (D, p. 113). By annihilating all the ‘tame’ Khoisan who betray him in the camp in the land of the Great Namaqua, Jacobus removes the ‘other’ against which he, the explorer, can define himself. In their betrayal, he reads his own capacity for reversion
to the wild and the loss of his racial identity (Knox-Shaw, 1996, p. 112). Attwell concurs with Teresa Dovey who states that Jacobus' argument is self defeating because his identity is confirmed by the recognition given by the other (1993, p. 51). If the other is destroyed, there would be no validation of the self (1993, p. 51). Alone, he is left facing the horror of his own death and attempting to evade that frightening but inconceivable possibility (Parker, 1996, p. 114). Thus his violence against the other is, ironically, a corrosion of his own identity.

The apparently disparate narratives of Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn share a cultural disorder: the former is a settler colonialist and the latter is an employee of the neo-colonial United States war office. According to P. R. Wood, both have a similar way of being-in-the-world in which "the Other, whose independent existence as a centre of consciousness has been denied, or demeaned, or impotently raged at, is now appealed to in order to affirm my own existence" (1994, p. 182). When circumstances expose Eugene as not conforming to his highly rational self image, he turns against his son in order to affirm his own subjectivity. But his intention inverts, and his irrational behaviour becomes the dubious object of psychoanalytical questioning. Eugene's mind is soiled by the horrific images of violence in Vietnam and his psyche is tainted by his foul deed. Jacobus' body is infected with a bowel debility. To prevent their pollution from spreading to others, they are both removed from contact with the community.

These two stories can be understood as physical metaphors for protecting the self from aspects of the other that we fear and cannot explain. We create a frame within which to restrain the other in order to avoid coming into contact with the dis-ease (those aspects in the other with which we are uneasy). Thus we hope to keep the abject void of meaninglessness at a distance, while still focusing on it as a source of creativity. Eugene
and Jacobus set out to create a verbal receptacle to contain the otherness which they encounter, thereby keeping it at bay. However, they become the otherness which threatens those around them and they are separated and isolated in order to protect the others from them.

Violence is the most overt representation of confrontation. It is troublesome to Coetzee's own sense of identity. As a white South African he feels complicit in the racial conflict in his homeland, but he feels such revulsion against such violence that he has said that any sign of it within himself becomes introverted as violence against himself (DP, p. 337). I suggest that it is from this essential, paradoxical position, in which his own identity is vulnerable, that Coetzee writes. This personal response to violence will be further explored in chapter 7. Violence fascinates and horrifies him because it invests and effaces identity. Other modalities in which conflagration occurs in the texts, such as physical intimacy and merging of identities, will be examined later, in chapters 6 and 7.
3.2. THE APORIA OF THE OTHER

In his next novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee represents the inner life of a spinster in the form of a diary. Magda is quite alone as the only white woman on a farm in the Karoo. She has no peers. Her circumstances isolate her from the few people around her. She attempts to break out of her restricted role in her writings which mirror the deep divisions in her society. In the original edition, all direct speech was written in Afrikaans and all other writing was in English. This highlights the duality of her life: her Afrikaner origins and her English language heritage. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher states that the Afrikaner mythology of the 'Chosen People' supports a hierarchical world view in which “language has been a crucial means of creating identity and a tool of oppression” (1991, p. 37). The use of English creates a separation from the Boer identity and introduces the sanction of the metropolis. I suggest that it also adds another layer of colonial authority to Magda's verbal gaol.

The demarcation between the facts of her life and her imaginary flights is very blurred. She hovers between reality and delusion. Her borderline existence is further complicated by the fact that her intellectual reality is European, but her physical reality is African (Glenn, 1996, p. 129). This post-modern style confounds the reader, so that events and fictitious daydreams cannot be unravelled and the reader shares the confused space of her consciousness. This novel is an allegory of the non-recoverability of primal identity, which also implicates the reader. Chapter 6 deals with this in more detail.

Magda's opportunities of engaging with the other are extremely limited. A rigid social hierarchy is observed on the farm. This has the effect of keeping all subjects apart. Her father conforms to the role of the patriarchal authority. He has always been aloof and
unapproachable. In spite of her vivid imaginative attempts to free herself from his imposing will by killing him, he is still present at the end of the novel. It is sadly ironic that the real father is not the virile challenger against whom she can vent her frustration, but a mute invalid who is merely there as a constant reminder and burden of her imprisoning isolation. Her relationship with the servants is formal. She is distanced from them by her status as the mistress of the house. Her position is borderline in the rules of a master-servant relationship. Her father does not include her in the running of the farm and she has to carry out his wishes in the house. She does not even fit this role neatly, for she is only filling the gap left by her deceased mother. Since her outer existence is so marginal and devoid of any intimacy with another, she spends many hours filling her empty days with imaginary contact. She creates an inner world full of intrigue, passion and confrontation within which to carve out her own identity.

In attempting to outline the opaque characters, we, the readers and the curious characters in the narratives, employ logical explanation, sometimes well supported with theoretical tools. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* tries to understand the motives behind the destructive forces of the Empire. Susan Barton muses throughout the text of *Foe* over the possibilities of Friday’s past. These self-conscious tactics engage the reader in the debate surrounding anthropological and post-colonial theories. In *Age of Iron* Elizabeth Curren seeks to know Vercueil’s story so that she can understand him better. He can be read as a metaphor of Kristeva’s abject and the narrative as an allegory for Kristeva’s theoretical discourse. There is justification for this method of inquiry: if the elusiveness of the other can be clearly defined, then it can be contained within the defining boundary, and the identity of the interrogating subject will be protected from contamination by spillage. The magistrate, Susan and Elizabeth each fail to preserve their separate identities intact. Their ‘taint’ will be considered in chapters 6 and 7.
In *Waiting for the Barbarians* there are some allusions which invoke the life of Jesus. The narrative scrambles the Christian message by ironic entanglements. The care with which the magistrate washes and massages the damaged feet of the 'barbarian' girl's feet contains uneasy echoings of a scene in which Christ washes the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. The magistrate defies the behavioural code of a 'civilised' employee of the Empire towards a primitive captive in the same way that Jesus humbles himself to perform an act of servitude. In an ironic twist, this image suggests an inherent superiority of the man over the girl. The actions of the Biblical character are symbolic of a cleansing from sin. This implication increases the hegemony of the magistrate by introducing a moral dimension in which he is compared with the Saviour.

The magistrate does acknowledge, however, that his search for "an entry into the secret body of the other" (*WB*, p. 43) resembles her torturers' aggressive hunt for answers from her. He is acutely aware of his ambivalent or even failed role as the go-between of "the men of the future and the men of the past -- a jackal of Empire in sheep's clothing!" (*WB*, p. 72). In yet another fold, this Biblical reference represents him as the antithesis of a saviour. His failure is further reflected in the double turn to another religious connotation. As Christ was condemned by the authorities of Rome (one of the greatest empires of History) and crucified for the sins of mankind, so the magistrate is sentenced to imprisonment by Col. Joll. He is hung from a tree in a parody of the Crucifixion but, unlike Christ, he does not die. Lacking the guarantee of a seat in Heaven, the magistrate ends up confronting the uncomfortable fact that any certainty is merely a life-giving illusion (*WB*, p.143). He has taken the girl up as the key to the labyrinth of understanding, yet he fails to unlock her meaning. As he says: "The knot loops in upon itself, I cannot find the end" (*WB*, p. 21). He is caught in an endless, isolating and implicating explanation. Marais' description of the double-bind of imperialism in
Dusklands can also be applied to the magistrate’s sense of identity: “Just as the colonised is subject to and constituted by this discourse, so too is the coloniser” (1996, p. 72).

Juxtaposed with this dominant narratorial perspective of the magistrate’s not knowing, there is the less textually visible gaze of the ‘barbarian’ girl herself. At the centre of her vision she can see nothing. There is a blur, which was caused by her torturers (WB, p. 29). The magistrate’s active attempts to ‘see’ her are subverted by her passively received blindness. This moral knot of opaque flipsides creates a sense of vertigo which binds the reader in the same feeling of rational disorientation in which the boundaries of discourses wash away into an abject drain hole. This is the double dilemma faced by liberal humanists: the other either cannot or will not be fully known and no discourse (not even the grand discourse of Christianity) can secure an explanation and hence a resolution to conflict. As Michael Wade explains: “Liberalism becomes imperialism at the point where its processes lead to a breakdown in the ability to distinguish between self and other” (1993, p. 143).

Much of Susan Barton’s preoccupation in Foe is with a post-colonial exploration of the history of Friday’s assault. Mr Foe, the authority on story-telling, encourages her:

In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story --- but I should have said the eye, the eye of the story. Friday rows his log of wood across the dark pupil --- To us he leaves the task of descending into that eye. (E, p. 141)
This eye can be read as the centre of a storm or maelstrom, a terrible orbit around a
gaping void. An unknown narrator takes up Foe’s challenge and imagines diving down
to the sunken wreck, the home of the mythical monster, the Kraken. There Friday is
found with a stream of bubbles issuing from his mouth. These bubbles resemble the rows
of the letter ‘o’ which Friday has written on the slate, a string of empty holes or, as
Richard Begam has proposed, a mantra of divine circles chanted in the worship of
Benamuckee and signifying his sense of atonement and unity with the world (1994, pp.
24-25). This ambiguity suggests that, regardless of the risks involved in entering these
waters, the origin of the pulse which throbs in Friday’s story cannot be finally
deciphered. Even Mr Foe’s faith in words fails for Friday’s meaning cannot be
interpreted. He remains present yet unexplained, undisclosed, like a stick alone in a field.
Nevertheless, his is an awesome silence, the effects of which are felt to the ends of the
earth. Again Coetzee exposes the emptiness in the centre of the narrative. His resistance
is embodied in these powerful silences. Post-colonial theories, myths and imagination are
unable to provide the answers, the words for the other subject.
3.3. BEYOND RESISTANCE

Coetzee responds to Foucault’s argument that it is the role of the intellectual to re-examine rules and evidences and ways of applying these in order to influence the political will of his audience. Foucault maintains that the intellectual cannot expect resolutions or victories, for his task is perpetual resistance (Racevskis 1988, pp. 30-32). Via historical analysis, Foucault undertakes his project of scepticism (Rajchman, 1985, p. 8). Coetzee concurs but he goes further than this. He embraces the idea of the endless questioning of constituted experience but he adds the spiritual element of grace. In 1985 he wrote an essay on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Rousseau, after which time he says that the story which he tells about himself has become hazier, for he has found himself confronting harder questions from the future (DP, p. 391). In that essay he admires the spiritual commitment of both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. For him now “the debate is between cynicism and grace. Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness” (DP, p. 391). If I read this correctly, Coetzee is not speaking of a transcendental, absolute Truth, but rather of a personal authenticity.

This was also a transitional time for Coetzee in the intellectual discussion of his fiction. I contend that his subsequent work can be read as a response to the criticism that his work evades the realities of the times. Henceforth, he explores a position that transcends binary resistance, a position of committed self-scrutiny and self-disclosure. Chapter 8 will address this topic.

This shift is quite noticeable in his novels. There are a few glimmers of hope in the earlier novels like the magistrate’s dream of children building a snowman (WB), which might
signify reconstructed future community, but which Attwell describes as "a limited possibility even though the novel has not invested its critical and fictive energies in its definition" (1993, p. 87). In chapter 7, I also argue that there is a hint of shared understanding beyond the colonial shackles in Magda's imaginary union with Klein-Anna. Nevertheless, the novels written before 1983 each end nowhere. In Dusklands Eugene Dawn is in no-man's land between his self-perception and his actions, in the psychiatric hospital. Jacobus Coetzee also shifts into an abject gap when he, a colonialist explorer, wreaks bloody havoc among the herds of the colony, knowing that the Khoisan will be blamed. The magistrate ends off feeling stupid, "like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (WB, p. 156). Magda concludes her journal by saying that nothing is going to happen besides her returning to dust on the farm (IHC, p. 138).

*Life and Times of Michael K*, first published in 1983, ends with the faint but possible future life beyond the war. By lowering a teaspoon tied to a ball of string down a well on a desert farm, and by bringing it up, "there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way he would say, one can live" (*MK*, p. 184). I suggest that this may be read as a pivotal novel, for in it Coetzee describes a very tiny seed of faith which might allow for an end to confession and a redeemed or reconstituted future. I agree with Nadine Gordimer that Michael K represents a return to the earth for the healing regeneration of nature in gardening. (1984, pp. 3-6).

Nevertheless, Coetzee remains sceptical of all systems of rules and this includes the codes which govern religion. He has claimed to be not yet a Christian (*DP*, p. 250). In two later novels he acknowledges the soul which hovers on the awesome edge. In *Age of Iron* Elizabeth is dying of cancer but her story is not of death and decay. She says:
"this was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses' (AI, p. 170). The Master of Petersburg pays for his writing with his soul (MP, p. 250). Since Coetzee has claimed that writing creates the writer (DP, p. 94), I suggest that Coetzee, like Dostoevsky, also nurtures his soul with his writing. Writing becomes his own attempt to adumbrate his metaphysical identity. As I have implied, his writing is a political act with revolutionary implications. I would now add that those implications also transcend the physical context of political relevance and include metaphysical significance.

The tramp, Vercueil, is a shadowy and ambivalent character in Age of Iron. His actions are never confronting, but his mere presence is. The drunkenness, filth and apparent meaninglessness of his life are alienating. I would argue that it is the very opaqueness of his occupancy in the text that establishes him as a catalysing 'other'. Besides his dog, he has no attachments to possessions or persons or professed ideology by which he can be identified. He is “stoksielalleen: a stick in an empty field, a soul alone, sole” (AI, p. 172). He occupies a third, boundaryless position in a political situation which is tense with opposing forces. He makes no judgements but he provides the figure against which the defensive black mother, Florence, and the white arm of the law, the detective, can air their indignation.

One of Elizabeth’s dying wishes is to see Vercueil as he really is (AI, p. 165). She has made her living as a classicist by giving voice to the dead (AI, p. 176). She should therefore be qualified to see her angel of death as he really is (AI, p. 160). But she cannot: “He is like one of those half-mythical creatures that come out in photographs only as blurs, vague forms disappearing into the undergrowth that could be man or beast or merely a bad spot on the emulsion: unproven, unattested” (AI, p. 177). Vercueil’s identity is impervious to the interrogation of her discipline, just as the abject cannot be
symbolically represented. Once again, discursive method fails. The significance of his opaqueness will be examined in chapter 7.

In The Master of Petersburg, ‘Dostoevsky’ is separated from those around him by his grief. At times his mourning is so intense that he loses his sense of self in an epileptic whorl. His known identity also prevents other characters from relating to him. He is not a resident of St. Petersburg and his fame sets him apart. Because he is not the real father of Pavel, he may be denied the sympathies accorded to a father. Some of the condemning writings of his step-son induce criticism of his methods of raising the boy. His neglect of his hygiene is alienating. Finally, his sexual attraction to the little girl, Matryosha, is repulsive. He occupies an alienating and oppositional position to the other characters in the text and to the reader.

The other characters in the text want to evaluate the conflicting information that they have about ‘Dostoevsky’. In his own writing, the nineteenth-century author appears to be compassionate and understanding and yet Pavel has described him as a mean, uncompromising authoritarian. Who is right? Anna Segeyevna, Nechaev and even little Matryosha set up a dialogue in their own minds between Pavel and ‘Fyodor Mikhailovich’, so that they can create their own complete image of his identity. They are troubled by the discrepancies between the harsh words of Pavel, the established reputation of the great novelist and the real man in their presence. It is as if these discrepancies are perforations in his outline through which the madness of his distress threatens to escape.

Even he is aware of this, for he says “I am far from being a master. - - There is a crack running through me” (MP, p. 141). Each of the other characters in the text has a vital
self-interest in getting to know ‘Dostoevsky’ better, so that they can preserve their own separate identity from contamination by his madness. This is an ambivalent response because they have to engage with him in order to learn about him, and yet they also want to avoid contact with him for fear that their own identities will become infected by his touch, the hand of grief or worse, the hand of the defiler and a man willing to lose his soul. The extent to which they fail will be examined in Chapter 7.

This text can be read as the self-conscious private reckoning of a public figure. It is his confession. There is great risk involved in ‘Dostoevsky’s’ detective work to investigate the cause of Pavel’s death. He puts himself in physical danger when he trusts Nechaev to take him to the tower. He becomes trapped in the city because his passport is taken away by Maximov and his money taken by Nechaev. His bravest act is his writing, for he risks having his soul condemned by representing himself to the viewing and judgement of others. This is a high price to pay. Perhaps it is worth the cost to gain the acknowledgement of others, and thereby gain recognition as an identity. Surely in losing the disguise of a completed, famous personage, he surrenders himself to the real and the fictional ‘others’, thereby continually opening himself to the threat of losing himself as he is known and to rebirth as a potentially different identity. Once again, a Coetzee character can be read as an allegory of the Kristevan abject.

Within such regeneration there is uncertainty. He says “I have lost my place in my soul” (DP, p. 249). I suggest that the imaginary assault on the child is a metaphor for condemnation. The perpetrator is banished to a dark vault of separation from others. This is an area of emptiness, for there is no other against which the ‘self’ can be created. The identity of the master has dissolved into the tomb. “Am I dead already?” he asks
(MP, p. 250). Thus he has betrayed everyone by his vile absence, for he removes the other against which their own identities can be forged.

Artfully, Coetzee has implicated himself as a writer, like 'Dostoevsky'. Both he and the reader are also involved in the game of judgement, for abuse of an innocent is universally damnable. As fellow players, the author of this text, Coetzee, and the reader are also betrayed, for they share in the condemnation of the abuser and hence the removal of the other. Their sense of self, like the other characters in the novel, also become threatened with the meaninglessness of being a soul alone and undefined. Since definition can only occur in encountering the other, the risk of spillage from the other is the very price of self-validation. The pervasive contamination by the other is both the threat and the transitional opportunity for creative transcendence, beyond the endless opposition between the self and the other.

The Christian inference in the query whether betrayal tastes more like vinegar or gall is interesting (MP, p. 250). Christ was crucified because he was betrayed to the Roman soldiers by one of his Apostles, Peter. On the cross he asked for water but a sponge soaked in vinegar was offered to him. Jesus was, in a sense, betraying his people by absenting himself as the other against which they could define themselves. This latter betrayal may taste of gall, for it occurs from within. Perhaps in all sacrifice there is the double-bind of the betrayal by the other, which tastes like vinegar and the betrayal of oneself which tastes of gall. At the end of the novel the bitter bile of complicity in the game of betrayal has also welled up in the reader. Coetzee manages to include himself and the reader in the precarious hermeneutic contest between the self and the other, for which the prize and the price is each of our souls. Perhaps he is proposing that we must sacrifice our claimed or fixed identity in order to find the tracings of our soul, our
metaphysical identity. This vital complicity is central to Coetzee’s thesis. I shall elaborate on this in chapter 7.

The abject which Kristeva theorises cannot be defined, but she argues that the “talking cure” of the analysts builds up a discourse around the

braided horror and fascination that bespeaks the incompleteness of the speaking being but, because it is heard as a narcissistic crisis on the outskirts of the feminine, shows up with a comic gleam the religious and political pretensions that attempt to give meaning to the human adventure. (1982, p. 210)

I maintain that, even though it focuses on the subject-in-process, psychoanalysis is nevertheless a discursive practice, which, like all other symbolic attempts, is trying to establish meaning. As a linguist, Coetzee has said that “as far back as he can see he has been ill at ease with language that lays down the law, that is not provisional, that does not as one of its habitual motions glance back sceptically at its own premises” (DP, p. 394). I believe that this is the starting point from which Coetzee undertakes each of his novelistic machinations. He manipulates the rules of discourse in order to reveal the cracks. Dick Penner sums up a speech which Coetzee made on story-telling thus: “- - the story quite simply may be playing the game of being a story, as elusive and enduring as the cockroach, scuttling within the walls of history” (1989, p. 134). History is only one construct which he chooses to investigate. The novels of J. M. Coetzee install numerous discourses and then subvert these by revealing an internal flaw in the logic, thereby exposing the failure of that set of rules to provide a comfortable, explanatory synthesis.
Other critics like Watson have analysed the failed dialectic in Coetzee’s work. While this failure may be a primary intention, I contend that Coetzee achieves more. He has said: “I understand the Crucifixion as a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence, a refusal so deliberate, so conscious, and so powerful that it overwhelms any reinterpretation, Freudian, Marxian, or what ever, that we can give to it” (DP, p. 278). I maintain that this statement is the seed from which Coetzee’s fiction grows. No theory or legal structure, whether intellectual, religious or governmental, can match the power of the suffering body of Christ on the cross. This image is most familiar to the Western World. It represents the willing sacrifice of a life or an established identity in order to open up possibilities for the future. This signification is located in the almost silent presence of the body of Jesus. The value which Coetzee attributes to Christ on the Cross is not religious. It is, rather, the transgressive significance of the icon that offers a position which commands attention and yet transcends traditional discursive methodology.
SECTION III. CORPOREALITY
4. THE PHYSICAL

Corporeality occupies a significant place in the texts of Coetzee. It is the form which the self occupies or the visible inscription of identity. The body is a ‘chora’, a Greek word meaning receptacle. This has been appropriated by Winnicott to mean ‘holding’ in which the mother and infant hold each other. Julia Kristeva extends this idea by claiming that the semiotic, or pre-lingual chora is the font of creativity. For her, the body is doubly-bound to the life-giving nurture and entombing womb of the archaic mother (Oliver, 1993). The conscious mind is the hidden scribe of paternal heritage, which is continually negotiating between the semiotic, pre-Oedipal outpourings and the symbolic structures of the ‘knowable’ world to trace and create the shifting contours of that identity. In modern times bodies have been regarded as “totally classifiable by signifying systems” (Clayton, 1994, p. 163). It is the body which is both the source and the trap of the self.

Coetzee aims to provide a space “where bodies are their own signs” (E, p. 163). Physical existence offers meanings which are outside the strictures of systematic linguistic representation. It is in representing the troublesome physical presence or absence of an individual that Coetzee enacts his elusive but vital response to the laws of discourse. Coetzee has written: “As the unframed framer, reason is a form of power with no in-built sense of what the experience of powerlessness might be” (GO, p. 4). In his novels he challenges all positions of authority, including that of rational thought, by installing corporeality to transgress the division between power and powerlessness in an attempt to reify the experience and the influence of the powerless. In his texts the body occupies the position of authority. He has said that the body, particularly the suffering body, bears an undeniable power (DP, p. 248). Nevertheless, that authority remains
ambivalent for, in Kristevan terms, it is both an alienating trap and a site of hopeful new meanings.
4.1. THE MIND CONFRONTS THE BODY

The mind and body dichotomy of the subject is the most immediate site of confrontation in which individual identity is wrested. Our bodies do not conform to the mental picture which we have of ourselves. In his first novel, Coetzee explores this tension between modernist Cartesian consciousness and physical representation. In Dusklands Eugene Dawn "tries to master the world by dissolving it into an image or projection of his own subjectivity. Anything that resists this process, anything distinct from Dawn's subjectivity (including his own body), is consequently a source of exasperation, anxiety and loathing" (Wood, 1994, p. 182). Early in the novel, Dawn is irritated by his own involuntary habits, such as his toes curling up into the soles of his feet and he wishes that he could have a different body (D, p. 5). This separation of his will from his actions augurs badly from the beginning. He manages his thoughts well. They are so methodically set out. His ideal "is of an endless discourse of character, the self reading the self to the self in all infinity" (D, p. 40). It is his uncontrollable muscular activity that is the source of his anxiety, for it does not obey the rules of the symbolic order.

This disparity between his symbolic self-representation and his material presence peaks when he stabs his son, another resistance to his projected subjectivity, in an spontaneous act of panic. He is overwhelmed by emotional distress but he is unable to articulate his feelings. As the seat of emotion, Dawn's body has been the container of his intense anguish. When his affective frustration becomes so pent-up that his body can no longer restrain it, it bursts into the incongruous attack (D, p. 43-44). Nevertheless, the disjuncture between his consciousness and his physical tension persists.
When he cannot continue to maintain this false separation between his thoughts and what is actually happening because the presence of the others, his wife and the police, and his own violation of another has come threateningly close to damaging his own subjectivity, he stops his self-justification and hones in on the details of what his body is feeling. I suggest that this shift of focus from his mind to his body allows him to retain the gap between his bizarre behaviour and his self-perception. He says: “Fortunately, I am beginning to drift, and my body to go numb as I leave it” (D, p. 43). His actions betray him and his mind evades responsibility by acute concentration on his physical sensations. It is ironic that his ideal of self-knowledge becomes highly articulated self-delusion. The expression of his psychological state results in his containment in a psychiatric hospital. Thus his inner emotional confinement becomes his external physical reality.

Confrontation with the shocking images of the damage which violence effects upon other bodies (the Vietnam War photographs) and his inability even to recognise, let alone express, the trauma which he feels, builds up tension within his body, like the pressure in a volcano which then erupts and overflows. The gap between his semiotic responses and his rational training has upset the balance of his inner and outer identity. Rational representation loosens its hold and spills over into such an irrational attack. Eugene Dawn becomes the perpetrator of the very violence which he has so painstakingly set out to discredit. Contrary to his intention, his savage act casts him into the camp of the group which he abhors, the group which he perceives as abusing their authority by committing acts of gratuitous brutality. From this contradiction, one can deduce that the power and integrity of discursive formulations is neither stable nor inviolate. It is Dawn’s physicality which challenges this authority. The ramifications of this conclusion can be witnessed in the recent history of the author’s own country. These will be traced in the next chapter.
4.2. THE DAMAGED BODY

The mutilated or deformed body is an object of fascination in many of the texts. The narrator’s focus on the damage of others is an attempt to uncover the reasons for the wounding confrontation. Susan ponders over the causes of Friday’s gross mutilation, the removal of his tongue (F). Michael K has difficulty articulating because of his hair-lip (MK). The magistrate, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, spends many hours pouring over the body of the ‘barbarian’ girl in an attempt to understand the scars made by her torturers. He says: “- - until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (WB, p. 31). Dovey articulates his dilemma: “What he seeks is direct access to the girl’s past experiences and to the girl’s ‘being’, unmediated by his own situation in the present” (1996, p. 143). The reader shares the magistrate’s fascination with trying to comprehend what his colleagues have done in the name of Empire.

It is as if there has been a double intention on the part of Col. Joll in ordering the specific maiming of her feet and eyesight. One suggestion could be that the girl has been deprived of her freedom to roam the country at her own desire by having her feet broken. The colonel is punishing the ‘barbarians’ for representing what he perceives as a threat to imperial occupancy. That is not the threat of aggression but rather the very freedom by which the barbarians live within the landscape. The ‘barbarians’ thrive in a symbiotic relationship with the countryside. The colonisers do not understand this delicate balance between the indigenous people and the environment, which they themselves find harsh and inhospitable.
Unlike the nomadic locals, the ruling newcomers have set out to control the territory by building a dam from which to water crops. Over the years increasing salinity problems have upset the eco-system of the area and reduced it to a desert. The colonisers are alienated from their surroundings and themselves. By breaking the girl’s feet, Joll is trying to harness or subjugate her, in order that the subjectivity of his people might share the same connectedness to the land. The colonial blindness is their inability to realise that domination will never result in the freedom which belonging affords.

Perhaps the girl’s burnt vision signifies that her attackers are ashamed of their vile actions and do not wish to be recognised. The eyes are also the windows of the soul. Their damage may be the bars aimed at capturing the girl’s soul. Could it be that this terroristic subjugation is intended to affirm the authority with which the coloniser keeps the unknowable at bay or is it merely a deep desire to entrap a freedom which is beyond Joll’s vision, in the hope that he may somehow be able to absorb the elusive otherness into his own identity, thereby setting his own soul free? Joll’s eyes are concealed by sunglasses. These hide his blind spot: his vulnerability before the other. I suggest that this vulnerability is his desire for the freedom which the ‘barbarians’ enjoy.

The ‘barbarian’ girl is “blank, like a fist beneath a black wig, the face grows out of the throat and out of the blank body beneath it, without aperture, without entry” (WB, p. 42). This nameless, damaged bystander is metonymic of the colonised other, who remains fascinating and yet closed to imperialist interrogation. In describing the silence of Friday in Foe, Derek Attridge explains that “the most fundamental silence is itself produced by - at the same time as it makes possible - the dominant discourse” (1996, p. 181). Friday is most likely mutilated by colonisers and it is his mutilation which establishes their dominance. In Waiting for the Barbarians, the magistrate’s incarceration
and torture are an allegory of the trap in which colonial identity is ensnared. Attwell explains that Coetzee is critiquing liberal humanism as an "essentially self-validating and dominating form of "soul formation"" (1993, p. 80). By depriving the other of his freedom, the colonialist has created his own prison. The ruling order produces this inviolable silence as a condition of its power, but the condition of its power is also the condition for its powerlessness. This paradox lies at the core of the violent confrontation between the self and the other.

The identity of the magistrate as an employee of the empire and therefore as a participant, if a reluctant one, in the machinery of that imperial authority belongs to the dominant colonial discourse. He represents the liberal humanist who tries and fails to maintain a moral distance from foul acts of the group to which he cannot but belong. Such complicity is repeated in the narrative of Elizabeth Curren in Age of Iron, which will be examined shortly. This echoes Coetzee's own sense of responsibility for the subjugation of the indigenous people in his country by white settlers, and his unavoidable membership of that group.

Coetzee's theoretical work on the relationship between the censor and the writer and his enquiry into the nature of confession provide useful platforms from which I shall now undertake an interrogation of the political role of the body.
5. THE POLITICAL BODY

There has been considerable debate on the milieu in which Coetzee writes. This will be addressed in chapter 8. Some critics like Watson, for example, have called him the dissenting coloniser in accordance with Albert Memmi's formulation (1996, pp. 13-36). Perhaps his own sense of identity in some ways resembles that of the magistrate (WB). Others, like Kenneth Parker, infer that he belongs primarily to the international liberal élite (66-104). Here, I maintain that Coetzee is a kinsman of his character, Elizabeth Curren. Certainly his intellectual exposure has been extensive. A wide knowledge of linguistics and critical theory and intertextual links have informed his work.

Although he chooses to subvert all power structures, even that of the powerless whom he has re-installed (most of his characters are private, insignificant and marginal), he nevertheless is able to claim a position from which to speak, while still evading being fenced in by any labels. Post-colonialist, postmodernist, anti-apartheid protest writer, literary theorist and ethical critic are just some of the descriptions which can be applied to John Coetzee, yet his novels seem to slip beneath the barbed wire of any laager or ideational cloister. Laager is an Afrikaans word describing the manner in which oxwagons were positioned in a circle to provide a defensive buffer against attack. The voortrekkers or frontiersmen preferred to trek into the hinterland of Southern Africa in the hope of claiming their own territory from the numerous indigenous tribes, rather than live under British rule in the southern tip of Cape Town in the nineteenth-century.

De Klerk creates a distinction between the Great Trek and the Thirstland Trek: The former was a practical solution to a problem, namely the Boer dissatisfaction with imperial administration, whereas the latter was a world view in which the laager
represented metaphysical connotations of defiance, aimed at resisting the other (1975, pp 324-325). De Klerk sums up the futility of this attitude which has played an important part in the corporate identity of the Nationalist government: “In this fatal isolation, mesmerised by a sense of calling, the Thirstlander ultimately trekked to the very denial of his own strivings” (1975, p. 325). Coetzee seeks to evade such entrapment by identifying the premises upon which all confrontation is founded and then offering fictional challenges to those premises.

In this time of ‘posts’ when the maps of past orders such as modernism and colonialism are being scrutinised and contested, Coetzee’s voice hovers precariously on the edge of most discursive debate, be it political, historical or literary. It is from this marginal position that he is best able to maintain his vigilance to confront all positions on either side of the line and from which he is heard heralding the future. This mediating role will be explored later in chapter 8. In this post-apartheid time, when the South African people are trying to come to terms with their distressing past and to create and respond to new opportunities, the vantage point which Coetzee provides offers new possibilities. Like the texts themselves, these offerings transcend local relevance and bear global theoretical and practical significance.

In spite of the unbounded imaginary territory in which Coetzee’s creative efforts roam, from historic settings in the United States (D), South Africa (IHC, Al and B) and Russia (MP) to imaginary past (WB and F) and future sites (MK), I believe that his South African context is the essential socio-historical landscape to which he is grounded. It is both the rapidly changing configurations of authority within South Africa and his own ethical commitment to his people which offer a fertile field for Coetzee’s imagination to till.
5.1. CONFRONTING THE CENSOR

The realities of the international political climate and the immediate South African environment offer an over-abundance of evidence which is resistant to any exclusive theory. In the wake of the horror of World War II, the subsequent decades were overshadowed by Manichaean judgements. The ideological and militaristic threat of communism was pervasively feared. McCarthyism in the United States of America set an international tone of vigilance to keep the hostile ideology out. In Cuba the Batista dictatorship was overthrown by Fidel Castro in 1959. The new communist government severed its economic dependence on the United States and realigned itself with the USSR. The Bay of Pigs fiasco is evidence of the threat which the United States perceived in the independent communist foothold on its doorstep.

The military expansionism of the communist nations extended beyond an arms race to military assistance, in the form of troops from Cuba and weaponry and capital from the USSR, to assist locals in the overthrow of existing governments. In the 1970's there were a significant number of Cubans involved in the civil war in Angola, while Mozambique become an independent Marxist state in 1975. This strong communist presence in these erstwhile Portuguese colonies to the north posed a significant danger to the internal security of the South African government. Similar military support, in the form of training, finance and arms, was given to the ANC. The third country to the north, Zimbabwe, was also wracked with civil war until it gained independence in 1980. These threats provided justification for the rigid and extensive mesh of controls over the local population.
One of the main focuses of governance was the dissemination of news. Strict censorship laws aimed at representing all official action in a positive light. For decades censorship restricted all forms of communication in South Africa. The anti-government editorial comment in the English morning newspaper, *The Rand Daily Mail* was one of the most outspoken media criticisms of Nationalist government policy in the country during the sixties and seventies. It was successfully silenced by what came to be called the “information scandal”. In 1978 Justice Mostert made public the evidence that the Department of Information had used national funds to finance *The Citizen*. This covert propagandist tool was set up in competition with the only other English morning paper in the Johannesburg area, *The Rand Daily Mail*, which succumbed to the financial pressure and closed down. Opposition to the official position was thus deprived of one of its main voices. As a direct outcome of this startling scandal, B. J. Vorster (ironically a former minister of Justice and then the Prime Minister) resigned. In the subsequent years, the new prime minister, P.W. Botha, tightened the muzzle on all dissent by proclaiming ‘total onslaught’ against what he termed ‘the enemies of state’. As Norval says, total onslaught required total strategy (in D. Attwell, 1993, p. 74). And so the net of apartheid was justified and tightened.

The SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) was controlled by members of the elite and secret Afrikaner group, the Broederbond, who were the primary architects of Apartheid (W. de Klerk, 1975, p. 199). All news was given the propagandist slant of the ruling establishment. A newspaper article stated: “For its part, Pretoria has filled the information vacuum [due to the censorship restriction] with a relentless campaign to present the ANC as an organisation of bloodthirsty terrorists controlled from Moscow” (quoted from *The Star* 12 July 1987 in Joyce, 1990, p. 133). Any breaking of rank with the authority in power was represented as a communist-supported threat to the internal
security of the country. This editorial opinion was presented as an alarming truth against which the nation was encouraged to rally.

While so much was made of these so-called ‘enemies of the state’, the subversive activities of the police and military, aimed at destabilising black opposition, were largely overlooked by the media. In the introduction to Between Speech and Silence: Hate Speech, Pornography and the New South Africa, Raymond Louw comments that censorship results in “a huge gap in one’s knowledge of what is going on in one’s community or society generally” (1996, p. 17). This manipulation of the news meant that the population had little idea of what was happening. Personal witness, rumour and distorted representations all contributed to a very muddled picture.

All creative endeavours, such as novels and plays, that were regarded as a challenge to the status quo, were also prohibited. Under the Publications Act of 1974, more than 30,000 books were banned (R. Louw, 1996, p. 28). The ever-present danger that the law and order of the country would collapse and communist inspired anarchy would prevail was the most effective tool of the Censorship Board. The petty enforcement of these rules was often ridiculous. It demonstrated the rigidity and paranoia and hence the vulnerability of the authorities.

Ironically, censorship of artistic enterprise frequently has the obverse effect of the one desired. Commenting on censorship, Coetzee himself has said: “the more seriously the artist sees his work being taken by the represented and offended party, and the more his work is denounced, the less he is likely to take that party seriously” (GO, p. 7). Censorship in South Africa may have restricted the reception of challenging works but it was unable to silence them. As Andre Brink, a contemporary South African novelist, an
Afrikaner and a colleague of Coetzee at the University of Cape Town, has said: “Let the South African State be warned. It is always the artist, in the end, who wins” (GO, p. 211).

On the 25 August 1973, the play directed by Athol Fugard called *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* was banned from four charity performances. Ironically, the reason for the banning was not the politically defiant content of the play, which exposes the injustices of the Pass Laws. Instead, the play was banned because a permit had not been obtained under the Group Areas Act for black actors to perform before an audience of coloured people (Joyce, 1990, p. 83). In a post-modern contemplation in which reality and its reflection become conflated, I suggest that these actual events reinforce the restrictions that are circumvented by the artful performers: Sizwe Banzi exchanges identity documents with a murdered man, Robert Zwelinzima, in order to remain in Port Elizabeth and find work (Fugard, Kani & Ntshona, 1974). But such creative transgressions are pale shadows of the consequences which were frequently carried out on real perpetrators.

The death in custody of the black activist leader, Steve Biko, in 1977 and the subsequent inquiry are a well-known example of the charade of deception and collusion which was required to bolster this regime. Jean-Phillipe Wade maintains that the torture and detention of the magistrate (WB) exposes the vile reality of state ‘security measures’ behind the public explanations for Biko’s death (1990, 281). In a recent series of essays entitled *Giving Offense*, Coetzee examines the relationship between censorship and writing, without entering the routine debate about victories and defeats. He investigates the “myth of the writer as a hero of resistance” (Barnett quoted in GO, p. 148), in which the writer occupies the moral high ground over politics. He is intent upon finding a position from which to speak and be heard “which does not get assimilated by the
destructive political dynamic of rivalry and denunciation” (GO, p. 149). His aim is to verbalise an ethic which is beyond any narrow political assessment. While he acknowledges that all writing plays on and around the limits of discourses, he also perceives a similarity between the censor and the writer.

Censorship is characterised by a form of judgement which results in incorporation or expulsion of material in much the same pattern in which all discourse, including criticism of censorship and more creative choices, is achieved. Thus censorship and its opponents share the same evaluative process (GO, p. 151). Like the censor, the writer would wish to situate his own position as mediator beyond the confrontational dynamic of accusation and counter-accusation. However, he cannot. Both the censor and the writer are complicit in the debate. They each focus their gaze on seeking out that which transgresses boundaries. Coetzee, as a writer himself, is engaged, like the censor, in “sniffing out” rather than explaining, with the expectation that he will be revealing a “final rationality” (GO, p. 155).

In a game of oppositional politics between the state censor and the hegemonic claims of protest writers, I would argue that the physical proof of injured or missing bodies has declared, and continues to declare, their transgressive existence, in overt defiance of the meticulous binary constructs of apartheid and its critics. It is this physical evidence, which lies across the boundaries of rationality, that Coetzee adumbrates. The suffering bodies provide a model which his fiction emulates. Consequently Coetzee has created a body of work which challenges the very space which all discourse occupies. He employs the physical and the fictional to represent his metaphysical and metafictional concerns. This is the subject matter of Age of Iron.
5.2. RELINQUISHING THE IDEA TO THE EVIDENCE OF THE BODY

*Age of Iron* was written between 1986 and 1989. It was a time of great personal tragedy for the author because he lost both his parents and his son during these years. The dedication of this novel is to 3 sets of initials, representing his deceased family. It was also a period of cataclysmic violence in South Africa. The ‘total onslaught’ of the government to control all dissenting elements in the country met with a nation-wide wave of black resistance. Head points out that the principles of non-white solidarity of Black, Coloured and Indian groups and non-co-operation in the form of school boycotts were the focus of the unrest described in this novel (Head, 1997, 131). Graham Huggan has said that Coetzee’s private and public worlds interfuse in this apocalyptic parable which “recounts in graphic detail both the horrors of living under apartheid and the shame of living with it” (1996, p. 192). It is an explicit and personal engagement with the brutal realities of the times. The emotional anguish which throbs through the text is centred on the physical trauma which is exposed. On one level, the protagonist and narrator, Elizabeth Curren, undertakes an elaborate and well-informed reflection on the atrocities of the age in justification of her own ambivalent theoretical position, while, on another level, the damaged bodies inscribe their transgressive purpose.

Huggan skilfully analyses how her tortuous letter is, in fact, merely an intellectual game of personal myth-making in which she is attempting to justify her position as a liberal humanist (1996, pp. 190-212). He suggests that “a bizarre metamorphosis takes place in Coetzee’s novel: the yoking of one paradigm of historical development, Hesiod’s entropic Myth of Five Ages, to another, Spencer’s Myth of Progress” (1996, p. 199). He argues that the irony of pitting the entropic metaphor of progressive disintegration
against the evolutionary metaphor of arrested development creates an unwitting trap for
the narrator because there is contradiction between these two principles (1996, p. 199).

In Hesiod's Myth of Five Ages, the universe begins with the Golden Age in which the
people lived an idyllic existence, free from conflict and suffering. The universe ends with
the Age of Iron in which conflict and violence predominate (quoted in Huggan, 1996, p.
196). This time of confrontation and death leads to the destruction of the age itself.
Elizabeth's appeal to this historiography of Hesiod allows her to make two inherently
opposed self-justifications (Huggan, 1996, pp. 190-212).

On the one hand, because the Iron Age signifies a degenerative sequence of violence
with no 'enlightened' outcome, she feels that she can justify her own resistance to social
change and her political inertia. She witnesses the injustices of the system in the
indefensible 'accident' in which the two black youths are hurt outside her home and is
outraged (AI, pp. 55-57). She empathises with the boys and yet she does not condone
the young blacks' use of violent methods to overcome the violence of their oppression.
She uses history to defend her position: "The Germans had comradeship, and the
Japanese, and the Spartans. Shaka's impis too, I am sure. Comradeship is nothing but a
mystique of death, of killing and dying, masquerading as what you call a bond" (AI, p.
137). She supports neither party in the conflict. She condemns the regime,
acknowledging that its censorship of media is a ploy to conceal its vile war games, which
include targetting children and encouraging and funding vigilante groups like the
'Witdoeke' to destroy squatter camps. But she also criticises the child comrades for their
fascination with 'a mystique of death'.
On the other hand, she is also attempting to secure her own redemption, so she responds to the injustices that she witnesses. She puts herself at great risk by entering the volatile black squatter camp in an attempt to help the young boys. Later, she tries to defend John from the police guns with her own body. She knows that the young white constable will not fire at her, besides, her life is terminal anyway. Should she live or die, she will not lose. Her acts appear to be altruistic, perhaps noble enough to secure her deliverance from the gnawing inside and the turbulence outside. Here, Huggan points out that Hesiod’s schema is unclear about whether new life follows death (1996, pp. 196-197). Will a new age follow the demise of the Age of Iron? Will Elizabeth be delivered from her suffering into a peaceful and secure after-life?

Spencer’s theory of social Darwinism supports the maxim of ‘survival of the fittest’ in which “degeneracy is - - the symptom of a widespread social disease whose ‘cure’ necessitates the identification, isolation and systematic purging of degenerate elements within the social body” (Huggan, 1996, p. 199). Mrs Curren draws an analogy between her cancerous body and the diseased society in which she lives. In this transitional phase of the revolution, she concludes that her life needs to be sacrificed for the benefit of the future nation, for she is metonymic of the affliction in contemporary South Africa. Thus she is able to create a theoretically-based rationalisation of her own immanent death.

I agree with Huggan that there is a contradiction in her dual theoretical position for, while she may be resistant to the process of social change, she is also accepting of her own metaphoric demise to make way for the new order. Her body is rapidly succumbing to cancer. She accepts that she is dying but, significantly, she does not pass on. She is caught between the wish to emerge out of the darkness and yet she is resistant to the light of change.
In the last paragraph, Vercueil holds her in his arms. Her final words: “from that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (AJ, p. 181) shift into the passive voice. Thus the protagonist has lost her voice as the agent of the narrative. She is suspended on the edge. Huggan describes this final scene as being suggestive of “regression to a state of entropic inertia (quite literally a state in which no further transference of heat is possible)” (1996, p. 203). Here Elizabeth’s body is suspended on the cusp between a diseased life and the uncertainty of rebirth into an afterlife or destruction in death. Head describes this moment as “the hovering time of interregnum” (Head, 1997, p. 143). It is a personal interregnum before her death. It also represents a political interregnum from which contemporary South African society can draw no comforting hope that the great white glare of confrontation in the late 1980’s would be followed by a revolutionary new system, rather than by mass destruction.

I suggest that Coetzee has created a profound irony by embodying the disease of the society in the cancerous nub which multiplies inside the body of a white English-speaking liberal South African woman. By making her physical state metonymic of the monstrous growth of apartheid and her intellectual state apparently metonymic of opposition to that malignant mushroom, Coetzee is tracing the crack which runs through the white South African liberal identity. Where do the loyalties of this group lie? In a time of rapidly mutating patterns this crack widens into a gaping crisis of identity to which Michael Wade has alluded (1993, p. 150).

As I noted in chapter 2, Coetzee responds to the criticism that his earlier fiction fails to address the current issues in South Africa by writing this brutally realistic protest novel. It engages directly with the confrontations of the troubled times of the 1970’s and 1980’s. However, he installs a contradiction within the one identity in order to subvert
any possibility of an ethically ‘safe’ personal camp from which judgement can be made. In attempting to secure her own redemption, Elizabeth Curren is inadvertently seeking a superior, secure position for herself beyond the chaos that pervades the country. Like the magistrate (WB), she cannot evade her historic complicity as a member of the ‘colonising’ group, even though this is in ironic contravention of her professed humanist sympathies. In fact the episodic violence is beyond her control and does not directly involve her and yet it has a vital and debilitating effect upon her health. It is her liminal yet persistent corporeality which expresses her flawed identity and exposes her self-delusive symbolic representation.

In Age of Iron, Coetzee disempowers reason as the ‘unframed framer’, leaving only the powerless shell of the ailing body remaining. Finally, Mrs Curren relinquishes the rational position to which she has clung as a ‘dissenting colonist’. Her mental surrender is physically enacted when she abandons the safety of her home and spends a night, like a tramp, under the freeway overpass. The truth about her epiphany is embodied in her confession to Vercueil. This confession will be discussed in chapter 7.

Elizabeth lacks any position of authority from which to speak. Graham Huggan demonstrates how Elizabeth Curren’s careful construction of an intellectual position is eroded away by inconsistencies in her logic, hence the theoretical authority for her position is questionable. In commenting on this character, Coetzee has said that Elizabeth Curren speaks with the double authority of the classics and of one dying, but both forms of hegemony are derided, for the classics are generally considered to be irrelevant and hers is a private death (DP, p. 250). I would add that she is also denied the final authority of the grave, for she is still alive by the end of the text. In the final lines, Vercueil holds her with such a force that the breath rushes out of her (181). She no
longer has the breath with which to utter words. Her voice, the medium with which she can represent her reasoning, becomes silent.

Perhaps because she is stripped of all power, even the power of language, her scarred and suffering body is able to speak for itself. Her body becomes the only source and vehicle of authority. This authority is so immediate, so articulate, and so uncluttered by competing agendas between identities precisely because her time is so short and she has nothing to lose, that it demands to be heard. I believe that this resembles the solitary but powerful authority of the body of Jesus on the Cross, who is trapped between his condemned life and immanent death. What does this position have to offer the process of reconciliation and reconstruction in the post-apartheid South Africa? The implications of this question will be explored in chapters 7 and 8.

In a sombre sequence of iron images, Elizabeth confronts the damaged bodies of the black others. First she describes the lifeless body of Bheki as a leaden weight lying on top of her (Al, p. 113). She proceeds to the dark blood of his friend flowing in the street. She imagines the bodies of the black ‘others’ not burning but sinking to just below the surface of the earth like molten pig-iron which smelts the country into a land of iron, the substance of rust (Al, p. 114). The rust tarnishes the identities of all who live there. Similarly, the ferrous presence inhibits future cultivation. The bodies of murdered black people cannot be purged from the memory of all citizens. Instead, the dark subterranean presence burns into the contours of their conscience. This malignancy invades and scars the identity of Elizabeth Curren like the cancer within her body but it does not destroy her. So, too, the bodies of all those who have been killed in the name of apartheid leave their rusty scars on the identities of everyone in the country.
While contemplating Vercueil’s damaged hand near the end of the text, she remarks that “we do not stare at scars, which are places where the soul has struggled to leave and been forced back, closed up, sewn in” (Al, p. 180). This implies a cultural convention to protect both the marked person from having to confront the awful realities of an entrapped soul and the one who stares from any contamination. I maintain that Coetzee defies this social nicety for he makes his readers stare with him at the blemishes on the souls of his own white South African people.

But how can the soul of each implicated person and of the collective identity of the nation be released from this injured corpus? The question remains unanswered in Age of Iron but I contend that Coetzee does begin to pick at the stitching to free the soul in the unlikely and unlovely presence of Vercueil. Huggan briefly mentions Coetzee’s “not entirely unsympathetic treatment of his suffering protagonist” (1996, p. 204). I wish to expand on this allusion. I suggest that he does appear to be quite ruthless in his unblinking critical gaze upon Elizabeth Curren, for he never offers an apology for her, but he allows her to embrace the opportunity which Vercueil’s abject presence offers. This opportunity provided by her angel of death is more fully explored in the next chapter. It is in his next novel, The Master of Petersburg, that Coetzee begins the painful process of undoing the stitching which restrains the souls of all colluders, including the white South African and his/her identity.
5.3. THE MIRRORING OF THE SUFFERING BODY

In *The Master of Petersburg*, 'Dostoevsky's' authority is largely stripped from him. As a parent and as the voice of the famous novelist, he is exposed as a charlatan. He falsifies his identity by using the name of his step-son's natural father, Isaev, in order to claim Pavel's papers. Thus he relinquishes his podium of recognition. By changing his name, he also abandons his reputation as an ethical person. Through the text, his actual and imaginary sexual encounters reduce him to the status of wife betrayer and child abuser. There is a continual re-weighing of his position of authority. As other characters learn that he is really the literary master, one would expect his prestige to increase, however, his questionable morality and his refusal to concur with the methods of either the bureaucrats or the revolutionaries reduces the influence of his words. Like Elizabeth Curren (*AI*), he carries no authority but is merely a psychologically and physically damaged person who is desperately trying to save his own soul.

The absence of Pavel is the navel around which the body of this text is constructed. 'Dostoevsky's' attempts to enter into dialogue are futile because the boy is dead. He is, however, able to engage with the writings of his step-son and with the recollections of those who knew him, his own memories and even with the smells of the boy's possessions and places which he frequented. The patterns which the 'other' (Pavel) presents are not open to redefinition. The membrane separating the two identities is only semi-permeable. 'Dostoevsky's' identity is vulnerable to absorbing the emptiness which the final absence of Pavel exposes. The physical detail of 'Dostoevky's' experience when he has a bad turn creates a corpus of awareness against which the reader can rub. It is the vortex, "the approach to the edge, the glance downward, the lurch of the soul" (*MP*, p. 118), which the epileptic step-father senses, that Pavel's death bares.
'Dostoevsky's' incoherent mumblings reveal his unstable condition. For Kristeva this is a
semitic flow which is the source of creativity (1992, p. 133). I shall discuss this in
chapter 7. Like Eugene Dawn in Dusklonds, 'Fyodor's' fitful body expresses his
emotional distress. Coetzee has said that he is "interested in how the voice moves the
body, moves in the body" (DP, p. 23). I suggest that in his novels he explores the limits
which the voice is able to express and then he moves on to provide space for the
wordless body, present or absent, as being-in-itself. Since he views the suffering body as
a powerful authority (DP, p. 248), he recuperates a position of authority for the narrator.
But this is the authority of a suffering body, rather than the words of a famous name.

Coetzee has delved into the physical sensations which exist at the limit between the vital
but suffering physical presence of 'Dostoevsky' and the counter-position of nullity of
Pavel in The Master of Petersburg. In this way, he has created a positive and a negative
template of his premise that corporeality can make a powerful political statement. The
importance of this statement within the Russian context and its relevance to the South
African situation will be discussed in chapter 7.

The novels of John Coetzee are not sectarian in their commitment to the local political
situation, but they are deeply pledged to the ideal of justice in South Africa and beyond.
His ideal is for a common pool in which differences wash away (DP, p. 341). He has also
said that "likeness and difference were meanings that we did not find but created" (quoted in Parker, 1996, p. 102). I would add that, if we have been responsible for
formulating these binary constructs, surely we are capable of deconstructing them? I
suggest that this is the nexus of Coetzee's project.
As I have already mentioned in chapter 3, Coetzee regards the article: “Confession and Double Thoughts: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Rousseau” as pivotal. In it, he considers the self’s presence to the self (DP, 391). I suggest that each of his novels written after this article is the site of a never-ending struggle to represent confessional honesty. In this, I maintain that they provide a valuable precedent as well as a subsequent comment for the ‘New South Africa’.

The African National Congress Party was elected in the first ever general election in which all adults voted on the 27-30 April 1994. One of the most important tasks facing the new multi-racial government has been to provide an opportunity for the diverse groups to come to terms with a very troubled past, so that they can build a more tolerable future for the nation. To this end, the Government of National Unity installed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Desmond Tutu in 1995.

This quasi-judicial body performed a dual function. It bore the responsibility of providing a forum where the harm, which was wrought upon those who challenged the authority of the Nationalist government and upon unwitting victims who got in the way of the apartheid machine, could be revealed. It also aimed to help the people to accept the harsh realities of their history, so that they could move on. As Jolly and Attridge have said:

“The Commission highlights the need to narrativize the past in such a way that the future becomes - unlike the past - bearable. - - - . The need to tell the underside of apartheid history, and to outline its implications for the present and future, is matched by a desire in many instances to find a form of narration capable of acknowledging difference without fetishizing it.” (1998. p. 3)
It was a legal requirement that all those called before the commission present themselves. Failure to do so could have resulted in prosecution. Amnesty was offered to all confessors, except those who had shown excessive cruelty or personal vengeance.

This forum offered a chance for many private individuals and former state officials to confess the unjust crimes which they had performed under the old regime. The manner in which this invitation was to be taken up was left to those chosen to decide. However, as Merle Friedman, a Johannesburg psychologist, has said: “remorse cannot be legislated” (1998). The commission witnessed some very emotional confessions and public apologies from people belonging to all camps. Former white policemen admitted to committing inhumane acts of violence on innocent civilians in the name of law and order. Members of the PAC, a militant black organisation with the slogan “one settler, one bullet”, openly regretted bombing a bar in which Whites were killed.

Many individuals against whom the atrocities were committed were unable to accept the apologies for they have died, but the damage still marks the identities of their families and friends, their assailants and the mass of implicated members of the society. Those who were immediately affected, the families, were given time to respond. Compensation was negotiated. The requests varied. These included educational funds for orphaned children or sometimes only a proper burial service and headstone to mark out a place of recognition in the consciousness of the whole nation for those who had disappeared. Jolly and Attridge have identified a double bind in the testimony of the victims: “There is a tension between the desire for reparation - not in terms of the physical comfort it promises but the closure it appears to promise - and the desire for knowledge, which denies any such closure” (1998, p. 6).
The commission aimed to create a safe podium of representation for those who were silenced either by their active complicity, their fear of retribution or by their final annihilation. The editors of *Writing South Africa* claim that the post-colonial world faces the same challenge as the South African community, which is not to fetishize difference, for they asseverate that international theorists can glean much from the post-apartheid situation, which demands creative ethical responses to the realities of imperfectly understanding the other without turning the other into a version of the self (Jolly & Attridge, 1998, p. 6). In much the same way that Coetzee’s novelistic confessions have made the readers focus on the injuries which deform the characters, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave public attention to past atrocities in an attempt to heal a severely wounded society. Coetzee’s contemplation on confession might be read as acquiring the ‘substance of being’, or a kind of corporeality in the Truth and Reconciliation courtroom.

Coetzee describes confession as one element in the linear process of transgression, confession, penitence and absolution (*DP*, p. 251). Penitence and absolution are the desired outcome, yet it is necessary for confession to precede any healing of identities. This appears to be so structured and rational but the actual events are not sequentially “solved”. Coetzee hints at the flaw in this neat, biblical formula, when he states that “yielding subsequently to the new truth entails damage to that identity” (*DP*, p. 273). He also states that we each face the problem of how to bring our confession to an end for behind each true and final position hovers yet another truer and even more final position (*DP*, p. 248-299). This dilemma will be explored in chapter 7.

This continuous unfurling implies a cyclical rather than a linear pattern of revelation. From this it is not possible to deduce a future solution in which the scars of history will
dissolve. Perhaps the aim is not to seek a final resolution, for that would imply a static, motionless entropy, a passively received, energyless destination. This final emptiness may be the ultimate desire, which, according to René Girard, is death (1961, p. 290), however, as I have demonstrated, Age of Iron exposes the ambivalence of the tomb as the chora of both nullity and new life. Surely this uncertainty urges a continual vigilance? Coetzee hopes to retain the circular flow of self-scrutiny. He provides the motivation for this endless movement in the bodies of his characters. Their corporeality is beyond analysis, hence they continually elude the restrictions imposed by classification. They continually draw those who encounter them out of the entrapment of reason and justification and so they maintain the tension and the momentum of continuous attempts to articulate the paradoxical meanings of the silence which exists beyond words.

In his latest work, The Lives of Animals, Coetzee extend this thesis. He juxtaposes the fullness of being of the animal to the confining being of thinking. Costello says: “The freedom of the body to move in space is targeted as the point at which reason can most painfully and effectively harm the being of the other” (LA, p. 34). This damaging potential of rational thought is what traps us in history. Because reason is essentially confrontational, it can never release us from binary bondage. I believe it is Coetzee’s intention to use the sympathetic imagination to transcend the confines of our Socratic heritage. I shall examine how Coetzee achieves this in his fiction in Section VI.
5.4. THE THREAT OF ENTROPIC INERTIA

In pursuance of the fictionality of the self, Katrin Wagner considers Susan Barton’s adventure of telling her own story in Foe and she asserts that all autobiography is a mode of self-definition and of self-creation, which interrogates and subverts that construction (1989, pp. 1-11). Susan’s grasp of her identity, or her sense of control over her narrative material, is shown to be an illusion in the novel. This is illustrated when Mr Foe provides a convincing history to prove that the young woman who appears near the end of the text is, in fact, her daughter. This physical ‘evidence’ prompts the reader to question the validity of Susan’s denial of the girl’s relationship to her. Thus her story collapses into “a final flux of indeterminacy” (Wagner, 1989, p. 3).

This novel can be read as Susan’s attempts to construct her identity as her sense of a stable identity is deconstructed. Coetzee has said that the process of self-elaboration must “be felt not as an act of creation but as an act of decreation, a shedding of exhausted self-constructs, a peeling of walnut shells, in an endless search for the kernel” (quoted in Wagner, 1989, p. 7). I maintain that this critique unveils the problem which confronts many of Coetzee’s characters: the simultaneous effort of creating and decreating suggests a movement and a counter-movement with the risk that the one force will counteract the other, thereby halting all motion to a state of entropic inertia. This resembles the position in which Elizabeth Curren finds herself at the end of Age of Iron. Just as the enigmatic physical presence of Vercueil offers Elizabeth a hint of opportunity out of this state of flux, so the final scene in Foe holds up the hope of continuing movement in the bubbles that come from the body of Friday.
Friday offers a persistent physical presence in *Foe*, yet all representation of him is made by Susan Barton. In this novel, as Steven Connor suggests, Coetzee is considering the implications of speaking on behalf of those who cannot be heard (1994, p. 95). I agree with Connor, who maintains that there is a risk of the voice of the other only being audible in terms of the self and that an acknowledgement of this difficulty is no guarantee against “reversion to the mentality of the slave-owner, the colonist, the self-originator” (1994, p. 97). Susan is fascinated by the cause of Friday’s disablement. It is her words which give meaning to his mutilation.

Finally, the stream which emerges from Friday’s mouth, is felt by the narrator: “Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin off my face” (*F*, p. 157). This presence touches the unknown narrator and a wordless communication is sensed. Even though it is Susan’s story, it is Friday’s silent issue which commands authority “to the ends of the earth” (*F*, p. 157). Through Friday, Coetzee is again able to draw the reader into a dynamic cycle of musing in which each reader/narrator is creating her/his own story.

Throughout the text, the I of the narrator confronts the You of the other. As Connor says: “Either to speak the self, or to speak the other in the self’s terms, is to do violence to the transferential ethics of narrative, which always expels the self from centrality” (1994, p. 95). But, in the final image, Connor claims that Coetzee is offering a vision of commitment to the other, in spite of the impossibility of ethical immunity (1994, pp. 95-97). I would argue that, in Friday, Coetzee has created a position similar to that of the image of the Crucified Christ. Like the body of Jesus, Friday’s damaged existence defies all analysis; nevertheless his influence extends over the whole world. This commitment to the other gives hope.
In between the juxtapositions of the highly articulate Elizabeth Curren (AI) and ‘Fyodor Dostoevsky’ (MP), Susan Barton (E) and Magda (IHC), and the absent or silent aporias of the barbarian girl (WB), Pavel (MP), Friday (E) and Magda’s father (IHC), Coetzee has created the liminal character of Michael K (MK). Michael hovers on the borderline of existence. His meagre and reducing food intake is carefully recorded. At first, he eats a variety of available food. On the farm, he reduces his needs to the few pumpkins that he grows. When he enters the hospital in Cape Town, he is severely malnourished and eats with great difficulty. His mental coherence also appears to diminish as his body shrinks. His consciousness floats in the twilight haze between life and death, in the abject space between the semiotic and the symbolic, about which Kristeva theorises. Nevertheless he could continue to eke out an existence in hard dry land with some seeds, a teaspoon and a ball of string. He describes himself as an earthworm or mole: that is, a gardener that does not tell stories (MK, p. 182). This is a study in minimal physical survival. Coetzee brings the reader to a contemplation of the very edge of being. Michael can be read as a metaphor for the closest a person can come to entropic inertia.

It is as if Michael K makes one well considered decision at the beginning of the novel: to take his mother away from the site of conflict, back to the freedom of her childhood in the country. His subsequent action is metonymic of the paradox of failure either to escape or belong to a system. Michael K can neither avoid the effects of the war, nor does he become a participant in the historic events. He is, in fact, merely a pawn who is not significant in the system and yet whose liminal presence cannot be denied.

This is the first time that Coetzee has attempted an extensive representation, albeit feint, of the gaze of the other. This can be read as a brave or perhaps a transgressive action in the light of much of the prevailing post-colonial theory. Nevertheless, Coetzee still
respects the other by writing his narrative in the third person. This contrasts with the first person narrative of the medical officer. In *Age of Iron* Coetzee expands his representation of the voices of others, namely Mr Thabane and Florence. Here, I would argue, these others are metonymic of another competing centre rather than the margin. I will expand on this in chapter 7.

His life can be read as an alternative to the aggressive racial confrontation which pervades the futuristic, imaginary South African "times" which he inhabits. His specific racial grouping under South Africa’s laws is unclear. In fact, Coetzee refuses to label him with the dehumanising classification of apartheid. He could be either black or coloured. Regardless, in the context of the internecine warfare, Michael would be regarded as a member of the ‘enemy’ or other, non-white group by the white authorities. Like Vercueil, the very marginality of his physical existence is Michael K’s authority. As Head says, this novel

announces a challenge. It alludes directly to a tradition of thinking about individual identity in relation to history. The challenge is that the novel ironically undermines the association [with the historic novel and the political memoir] by presenting the life of an anti-hero who resists all obvious contact with the social and political milieu. (1997, p. 93)

It is this abject position into which meaning drains and is resurrected. One such possible resurrection is the ironic connection between the apolitical Michael K (MK) and the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe (known simply as MK). Perhaps such an unlikely connection highlights the success of a subversive operation in evading discovery
by the enemy. Another resurrection could be the linkage between Michael and the initials Mk for Manlike Kleurling (Male Coloured), signifying the protagonist as a ‘typical’ example of a coloured man’s life. Each of these possible narrative threads is an attempt to give meaning to Michael’s story. Each is a game of myth-making by the reader. An example of such a game is included in the text, in the medical officer’s observations. This will be addressed in chapter 6. The reality or the facts of Michael’s existence challenge all historical explanations, for the ‘truth’ of his story remains opaque. As Derek Wright describes him:

He is Chthonic Man, outside of language and history, as inarticulate as the seeds, plants and humus of the earth-cycle into which he is locked, and also, by definition, outside the range of understanding encompassed by the white author.

(1991, p. 12)

The marginal physical presence of each of the characters described above defies all rational interpretation. There may be many possibilities of explaining the narratives and yet one is no more viable than another. Each analysis is merely a justification of the critic’s own position in relation to the text. While different interpretations continue to be juggled in an effort to claim critical hegemony, the presence of each suffering body persists, as evidence of itself, beyond the significance of the words.

Corporeality as being-in-itself occupies vital positions in the novels of Coetzee. As being-for-others, the bodies of characters are represented from other perspectives. In the introduction to Textual Bodies, Lori Lefkovitz states: “In our culture [Western culture], the body alternately insists on its own integrity, or relinquishes that integrity to intimacy, duty or violation -- the body is alternately inviolate, vulnerable and violated, a construct
never fully itself" (1997, p. 1). Because the body is a construct which is "never fully itself", an analysis of corporeality in Coetzee's novels would be incomplete without some discussion of the permeability between bodies. This sharing between identities occurs when there is intimate physical contact.
SECTION IV: DESIRE
6. PHYSICAL INTIMACY

Coetzee uses physical relationships as another mode of confrontation in which identity is both forged and melted. Physical communion is frequently problematic in his novels. Sexual encounters highlight the dynamic ways in which the identity of the self is challenged, refined and erased by close contact with the other. These moments of connection cast light upon the hidden inner mazes of the ‘stoksielalleen’ presences and they reconfigure the outer shapes of those identities. Desire for intimacy is the medium of negotiation, although this sexual desire is often a guise for the less tangible need to create an identity for the self by close contact with the other.

I suggest that to trace the labyrinth of sexual longings of characters is to attempt to reach the core of their identity. It would be impossible to complete such a task, for that core is always a shifting void. Nevertheless, the emptiness at the centre of each story, which is a characteristic of all of Coetzee’s protagonists, can be adumbrated in their expression of desire for another. Desire of the ‘I’ and desire of the ‘You’ are not always coterminous, so transgression is often the shadow bed-fellow of sexual fulfilment. As Lefkovitz says: “The body’s history in literature is also the history of bodily violation” (1997, p. 1). Sexual transgression in some of the novels provides a different perspective, like a photographic negative of individual identity and the context or society in which it is being shaped. The external environment in which the characters are conceived is addressed in chapter 7.

In some of the novels there is a marked lack of desire for the ‘other’. Sexual events in these texts are infrequent and complex, staking out a space with little content but clear intent. Foe and Life and Times of Michael K include such rare and dispassionate unions.
These scenes open up new insights into the identities of the subjects. In other texts, desire for intimacy is a preoccupation of the narrators. A longing for sexual union with another is the obsessional chimera of Magda in *In The Heart of the Country* and a primary pursuit of the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Physical intimacy or connectedness only succeeds in emphasising the separateness or isolation of these protagonists. In *The Master of Petersburg*, sexual desire is most overtly transgressive. Here, Coetzee uses sexuality to expose the power of the author to transgress limits of fictional discourse. Once again, this potency represents the value of the novelistic imagination to venture beyond the boundaries of current thinking in order to cast new light on old discursive patterns. However, this textual game also skilfully implicates the integrity of the author in the transgressions, and the question is, at what price? This metafictional trajectory will be followed in section V.

In some of the novels, attempts at close physical contact seem to smudge the boundaries between the self and the other, leading to a merging of aspects of those identities which, in turn, raises new contours for the reader to confront. The fusing of identities in *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg* and *Foe* will be examined for the ramifications of yet another range of identity configurations in the next chapter.
6.1. DESIRE FOR IDENTITY

All of Coetzee’s novels can be read as metafictional, in that they self-consciously explore textuality and the process of writing. Girard has formulated a theory of mediated or triangular desire:

The simultaneous presence of external and internal mediation in the same work seems to us to confirm the unity of novelistic literature. - - - All the ideas of the Western novel are present in germ in Don Quixote. And the idea of these ideas, the idea whose central role is constantly being confirmed, the basic idea from which one can rediscover everything is triangular desire. (1961, p. 52)

The act of authoring involves a triangular structure of desire in which the writer (the subject) longs to communicate his/her story (the object) and the mediator is language (the text) (Girard, 1961, p. 52). Coetzee, himself, has applied this idea to advertising and he points out that triangular structures originate in a yearning for transcendence which remains unsatisfied by the modern world (DP, p. 127-138). The problem is that language is not transparent: “Pure textual meaning” can never diadically achieved, for language is always the “masked mediator” in what is, indeed, a triangular structure of desire (DP, p. 136). Language, therefore, thwarts the purpose of the author to tell his ‘truth’. This failure is re-enacted in the narrative of Susan Batron in Foe. Her physical desires reify her authorial intention.

Of all of Coetzee’s novels, Foe is the most overtly metafictional deliberation on authorship. The moment of creative begetting of a narrative is equated with the literal conception of a new life. The possibility of such a ‘procreative event’ is the nexus of the
text. Susan yearns for a sexual encounter from which her current and retrospective sense of meaning and belonging can be born. Her desire to conceive never comes to full term; nevertheless, it is born in the form of the text of *Foe*. This novel is not the fulfilment of Susan's narrative desire (F, p. 131), but it is a deficient representation of her story.

In *Foe*, there is an ambivalent thread of sexual desire and a lack of desire which weaves through the text. Susan Barton's own sexual activity is repeatedly implied in the references to her having shared the cabin of the captain of the wrecked ship, her life as courtesan in Bahia and the existence of a daughter. Within the text, physical desire is largely absent, except for her literal wish to 'sire her own story' (Furbank, 1987, p. 995). She engages in two sexual acts, one with Robinson Cruso on the island and one with Daniel Foe back in England. Both events fail to fulfil her desire. In her first encounter she attempts to create a place of meaning for herself in the present, on the island. Her second recounted union is an attempt to infuse a record of the past with 'life' or significance. Both events are textualized in *Foe*, hence both are dependent on language as the mediator in a triangular structure of desire, which cannot be transcended.

Cruso exhibits only one moment of desire. He does not appear to long for physical gratification, nor does he dream of leaving the island. Since this is the story of Susan and not Cruso, his lack of desire is only the counterpoint to her needs. Above all, she wishes to create a place of belonging for herself, a position of meaning in which her identity can be forged. On the island, she does this by attempting to become the 'other' in a relationship with Cruso. Her desire is not for immediate physical satisfaction but it is rather a metaphysical yearning for significance.
In paternalist discourse, the female subject is able to take up a most significant position as the object of desire. Susan demonstrates her willingness to embrace a traditional female role by sharing Cruso’s bed, as the object of his one moment of desiring. Her wish is to create meaning for herself, to be the creator of her own narrative, the subject not the object of her story. Nevertheless, within patriarchy, as the mistress of the island, she would be able to carve out a defined position for herself, even if it was only the position of ‘object of desire’. From a secured situation of being desired, she would be able to launch her own primary desire, which is to create a meaningful existence for herself. Once nested as the object of the other’s desire, she would have the socially approved framework of an identity from which to embark on her quest for meaning.

Girard makes a comment which can relate directly to Susan’s desire. He states that “subjectivisms and objectivisms - - appear to be in opposition but are secretly in agreement to conceal the presence of the mediator (1961, p. 16). This theoretical stance is affirmed in Susan’s dual position as both the subject and the object of desire. Thus Coetzee’s project to unveil the function of language in the novel is enacted.

That one sexual encounter with Cruso does not open up the intimacy for which she hopes, an intimacy within which she can achieve her desire to establish an orthodox identity for herself. In his lack of desire, Cruso fails to offer her the counter-position of ‘object of his desire’, consequently, there is no substance to his otherness against which she can etch out her own space. An ongoing sexual relationship with Cruso will not satisfy her need to be needed. Since she has no place of meaningful contribution on the island, Susan longs to leave the island (F, p. 36).
The captain on the ship returning to England mentions that he would enjoy her company, but she does not take him up on his invitation. Given the transience of the circumstances, such an encounter would merely afford immediate physical gratification. The time constraints would prevent the captain from providing her with the more substantial role as object of his needs, from which she could pursue her wish to belong. She resists intimacy with him, for it will not fulfil her desire.

There is a shift in her desire when she arrives back in England. While on the island, Susan sought to understand her environment and create a useful niche for herself. Back in her familiar environment, she asks Daniel Foe to help her to tell the story of Cruso. Her purpose changes from a concern with her present location and her position therein, to a project of recording the past. There is a notable fallacy in her intention here. If the identity of the man, Cruso, his thoughts, his wishes and his disappointments have remained closed to her, then how can she communicate who he is to the famous storyteller? She wants to tell her story according to her own desire (Ep. 131), yet she claims that her story is about Robinson Cruso, a man who was, and continues to be, dialogically impervious to her. She says: "Who but Cruso, who is no more, could truly tell you Cruso's story? I should have said less about him, more about myself" (Ep. 51). So she acknowledges her failure and turns instead to her own story. But she has still not understood the essential flaw in all storytelling about another or the self. She was unable to tell the tale of Cruso, so how can she expect Foe to transcribe her own narrative? She asks: "Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty" (Ep. 51).

Perhaps the greater fallacy here is the suggestion that a storyteller can create a more substantial identity with words than the real-life identity of a person. But, on the other hand, perhaps this is the greater truth. After all, there is the implication in this text that it
is only in creating a narrative that a life can be meaningful. In other words, language is the source of meaning. It is only the recorded 'history' that establishes significance. And significance can only be validated if it bears the form of a commonly recognised value (like the novels of the publicly acknowledged author, Daniel Defoe). The text is fixed and a point of tangible reference but the actual identity of a subject remains elusive in its changing temporal-spatial flow.

In the counter-argument, the textual content becomes an historical record which no longer captures the essence of the present. This dilemma reflects the tension between the discourses of history and fiction. It is an essential focus of Coetzee's third novel, Waiting for the Barbarians (DP, pp. 94-133). In Foe, the author returns to this metaphysical quandary in which he lacks the authority to ascribe either meaning or authenticity to the story, whether it is historically verifiable or fictional fancy.

Coetzee installs the ideal of narrative to represent the truth and simultaneously critiques it. While Susan's desire remains clear throughout the novel, the fulfilment of her wish remains elusive and her story becomes more and more indistinct and contradictory as the novel progresses. The master storyteller, Daniel Foe, reveals that key facts of her life are open to question, as was described in chapter 3. Early in the novel, Susan said: "I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me" (F, p. 40). She demands that the truth be told but who is telling the truth? While we may want to be the authoring subjects of our own narratives, we are also the objects in the narratives of others. If Girard's dictum that "objective and subjective fallacies are the same" (1961, p. 16), then perhaps the focus of our scrutiny should be the concealed mediator of language, as Coetzee dramatises.
A further comment by Girard confirms the ethical importance of uncovering other masked mediators. He says: "The mediator's prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value" (1961, p. 17). This statement also raises the question: can the value of the text, as the object of desire of the author, be illusory? I suggest that Coetzee might agree. Certainly, the authors of the texts of History have enhanced if not created such notions as 'the Chosen People' (A. Brink quoted in WW, p. 18). Myths such as these have provided 'evidence' to justify systems such as apartheid.

The only physical conjoining between Susan and Mr Foe is an inversion of the traditional male and female stances. Susan straddles him to signify that she is the begetter of her autobiography. In an extension of this gender twist, she claims the power of a male muse, who must "do what ever lies in her power to father her offspring [her story]" (E, p. 140). This suggests that she is not the passive receiver or object of desire of the other, but rather the active creator or subject of her own story. As the object of Susan-as-muse's desire, Mr Foe does not merely fulfil her desire by giving birth to the story which she wants. He takes his payment: "In kissing [he] gave such a sharp bite to my lip that I cried out and drew away. But he held me close and I felt him suck the wound" (E, p. 139). She pays for her story with her blood. Perhaps this spillage is an example of the leakage which I will describe in chapter 7. This cost is most significant, for it relates to the price which the storyteller himself pays. This is the nub of Coetzee's later novel, The Master of Petersburg, and will be explored in chapter 7.

Daniel Foe, as the appropriation of a successfully published author, maintains that "the moral of the story is that there comes a time when we must give reckoning of ourselves to the world, and then forever after be content to hold our peace" (E, p 124). This suggests that the tale of a life can never be fully told, for there will always be aporias in
the telling, and the identity of the subject is not encompassed by the writing, but continually changes as new situations beyond the frame of the text arise. Susan’s agenda is different from that of her mentor. She says: “The moral is that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force” (E, p. 124). She is less interested in the saleable result of a published book, than in the process of storytelling. As Gallagher states: “Susan demonstrates that social power can determine discourse, that in the politics of competing interpretations, the power given by gender, race, or class can determine what story is told” (1991, p. 180). This metafictional concern predicates the form of the novel. This is the expanded on in chapter 8.

By the end of the text, Susan has failed to write her story. Actually, she seems to be lost in a disintegrating maze of refuted facts, contradictory self representations (as the liberator and oppressor of Friday) and a surreal final sequence which is only tentatively linked to Susan. She does not fulfil her apparent wish as “a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire”(E, p. 131). Could it be that the last chapter is the hole in her story for which she ultimately longs? I believe that Susan meets the object of her desire in this flow of images. She cannot comprehend it consciously, nor can she represent it in words, but it does caress her intimately in a dream as the stream of bubbles “it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face “(E, p. 157).

Ironically, this intimate touch is the wordless utterance of the colonial other, with whom she has lived so closely but with whom she has shared neither ideas nor intimacy. Gallagher refers to the parallels which Nina Auerbach draws between the final pages of Foe and Adrienne Rich’s poem of feminine creativity, “Diving into the Wreck” (1991, p. 190). Gallagher concludes that chapter 4 of the novel “embodies the feminine
imagination. The suggestion that the body - of Friday, of the wreck, of “the thing itself” - can write invokes a language beyond difference” (1991, p. 190). This new language, beyond reason, is what Coetzee invites his readers to hear. It is also his ideal that the touch of this new textual embodiment of otherness will be felt “northward and southward to the ends of the earth” (F, p. 157).

Susan and each subject wishing to be ‘master’ of his or her own story, or to be meaningfully involved in the making of new narratives, take on a responsibility. An unknown narrator articulates the challenge involved in the final pages of the text: this is to explore the sunken wrecks of the defunct ships of grand narratives, be they the apartheid monolith, patriarchy, colonial supremacy, even the myth of History and meaningful storytelling, the rival discourses of recorded events, or any other discourse. Such a task involves the risk of confronting the Kraken, perhaps the embodiment of all cultural constructs which acquire their materiality from myth. When these myths evaporate, all that remains is the presence of the other. Locally, the new constitution of South Africa is still being tried and globally we are on the eve of a new millennium. It is time not only to feel the stream from the other but to respond!

There have been various interpretations of who is speaking and who is listening in the last section of Foe. I suggest that the specific identity of these characters is deliberately indistinct. By smudging these facts, Coetzee enhances the immediacy of the content and simultaneously distances the narrator and the author. One of his persistent intentions is to undermine the authority of the author. He describes himself as closer to Breyten Breytenbach than to Nadine Gordimer in his writing, because the former accepts more readily “that stories finally have to tell themselves, that the hand that holds the pen is only the conduit of the signifying process” (DP, p. 341). In the final pages of Foe, the sequence of words has a vitality of its own that tells itself. It cannot be used to
encapsulate the position of the author. Coetzee has also stressed that his South African situation is not separate from, but a part of, the rest of the world, hence the unknown narrator can be read as metonymic of the voice behind all words. The identity of the speaker is irrelevant, for it is the independent ‘life’ or body of the words as a cultural construct and comment that matters. I believe that Susan is the audience. As such, she is metonymic of all listeners, including the reader.

Just as the narrator directs the listener to dive down to the wreckage of master discourses in order to discover the heart of her story, so Coetzee invites the reader to listen to Friday, for out of this already authored, but still inaudible, emission will emerge the airy blocks with which new structures can be built. Dunbar points out that “any constructive way ahead for the political agenda may lie in the discovery of new, presumably non-confrontational, modes of discourse. The true way ahead, according to Foe, would appear to be one of words rather than violent action. - - - . The future remains to be fulfilled” (1994, p. 109). I question this statement because I believe that words can be a most violent source of confrontation, hence the censorship of hate speech against specific groups, even in the new legislation in South Africa (R. Louw, 1996, p. 28). I would argue that Coetzee is calling for a sharing between the self and the other that lies beyond the domain of reason, which is also the domain of words.

While I do agree with Dunbar that this novel establishes that oppositional discourses, attempting to secure ‘the truth’ are doomed to remain unfulfilled, I question the value which she places on words. Language is the fountainhead of textual substance, the desire of Susan, and yet language fails to satisfy her yearning, for it is the mediator in Girard’s triangular desire. I quote from Coetzee himself to explain that Susan’s story reveals a
"hidden yearning - for an unmediated world, that is, a world without language" (DP. 138).

I suggest that Susan’s story represents a bifurcated challenge to the reader, which the writer hopes will touch the reader as intimately as it has touched the protagonist. It is as both subjects and objects of desire that we install and subvert the myths of history. I believe that it is as subjects or active agents of desire that we support Coetzee’s project as the author of a narrative in which it is his desire to “demythologize history” (Parry, 1996, p. 37). However, as objects of the desire of others, we are also participants in the myths of our times. Perhaps it is Coetzee’s sole wish to inspire the reader to scrutinise his/her own desires so that he/she will be an agent who accepts responsibility for complicity in the broader historic picture, knowing that they are also the objects or powerless recipients of the times, and remaining ever vigilant to the mediating and confronting power of language.

This bears strong implications for Coetzee’s fellow white and black South Africans in this time of transition in which the past encoding of the region is being re-written and re-evaluated. This vigilance will never establish a final truth about the past, nor will it ensure a fair system in the present, but commitment to the other may assist with reconciliation so that the future can be embarked upon, unencumbered by the myths from the past. Thus Coetzee has provided novelistic substance to serve as a model for the current attempts to rewrite the past and to remain open to the future in South Africa and the wider post-colonial world. While this is an idealised, mediating model, as Coetzee himself says, in a mediated world, it is the models which confirm value (DP. p. 131).
Dovey, and later Attwell, both emphasise the contextual value of Coetzee’s novels. Dovey points out “the discursive conditions of possibility” which are raised in Coetzee’s fiction (quoted in DP, p. 2). Attwell extends this notion by claiming that “Coetzee’s figuring of the tension between text and history is itself an historical act, one that must be read back into the discourses of South Africa where one can discern its illuminating power” (DP, p. 3). I would add that the linkage between the ‘language beyond difference’, feminine imagination and the male body of the colonial ‘other’, Friday, which Gallagher uncovers in this novel (1991, p. 190), signifies a new discursive alignment with unexplored potential.

This attempt to create an identity implies an intimate relationship with another. In Foe, Coetzee has revealed that a subject’s desire to create a self according to only the subject’s desire is doomed, for the subject is also the object of the desires of others. Another character, Michael K (MK), attempts to insulate the self from the other in order to preserve his identity from contamination. Much of his energy is spent evading the desires of others. It is this resistance that provides the strictures that shape his identity.
Michael leads a most solitary and unconnected existence. Attwell claims that he is one of the characters in Coetzee’s novels who lives in exile in his own body (DP, p. 198). He does not seek the touch of another, let alone sexual intimacy. The only times that Michael offers to touch another, are as acts of charity. He assists his obese mother into the home-made cart. When the camp is torn apart by angry police looking for suspected thieves, Michael invites two little girls into “the protective circle of his arms” (MK, p. 90). He seems to enjoy only one opportunity of physical contact in the whole text. This occurs in the internment camp when the little children frolic over his body: “They clambered over him and fell upon him as if he were part of the earth. He found unexpected pleasure in these games. It felt to him that he was drawing health from the children’s touch” (MK, p. 84). He is the passive receiver of this connectedness. Unlike adults, the children make no demands of him. They accept him as he is, a harmless body, lying like a lizard in the sun.

There is no sexual reference until, near the end of the text, a ‘bergie’, one of the homeless, fringe dwellers of Cape Town, imposes a sexual favour on him. Michael would rather push her away and he recoils from contact with her false hair. There is an ironic juxtaposition of his inability even to touch the inanimate wig and her intrusive and vigorous cleaving. This act is a violation, rather than a gratification of Michael’s desire. To reject her would be too confronting for this man who has spent his life evading conflict. Instead, he withdraws and focuses on his sensation of intoxication by “allowing himself to be lost in the spinning inside his head” (MK, p. 179). His response to intrusion into his personal space compares with the behaviour of Eugene Dawn (D). Just as Eugene excludes the external physical reality of his violent action against his son, by
retreating into his inner sensations, so Michael avoids the assault on his lower body by focusing on the feeling in his head.

The favour conferred on him by the young woman represents the desire of the woman and her male companion, rather than of Michael. This is a wish to include Michael in their identity group as an ally on the edge. This reveals a desire by the couple to contain Michael within their own sphere of understanding. This fencing in of his otherness, by including him as one their intimate group, would render him accessible to their comprehension and thereby reduce the possibility of threat to their own identities from him as an unknown, inaccessible and closed other. He would then be comfortably restrained as an object of their desire or a term in their stories.

The young woman’s companion hones in on the dilemma which a character like Michael presents as the other. He says: “It is difficult to be kind to a person who wants nothing” (MK, p. 179). This description echoes the medical officer’s comments about Michael. He also wishes to encompass Michael in his field of vision. He says: “You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weight of you” (MK, p. 146).

There is a similarity between the young woman’s ‘act of kindness’ and the attitude of the doctor towards his patient. Both the ‘bergie’ and the medical officer desire to embrace what they perceive as Michael’s physical needs. Both fail. The young woman achieves her own sexual purpose, but she still fails to understand that he does not share that desire, even though his body responds. The medical officer manages to prevent Michael’s body from dying of malnutrition and, in the short term, he is able to make up a story to satisfy the police that Michael is not a dangerous guerrilla fighter. Yet, in the
long run, he fails in his desire to become the protector of Michael, when Michael evades his grip and runs away from the hospital. Both are intent upon satisfying Michael’s basic bodily requirements of sexual satisfaction, nutrition and physical safety in order better to contain him within their own orbits of familiarity. His evasion of the medical treatment, however, is more complex.

The medical officer’s stubborn refusal to listen suggests that he is not really interested in Michael’s story. This will be elaborated on shortly. Instead, the medical officer’s wishes distort the patient’s narrative to suit his own agenda. Coetzee has said of charity that it is “a way in which grace allegorises itself in the world” (DP, p. 249). The eagerness of the medical officer to restore Michael to health is a form of charity, but it lacks the altruism of an allegory for grace, because the medical officer is inadvertently restricting his representation of Michael to his own monological, imaginary definition of the man’s identity. As Wright suggests, Michael is “a space that he [the medical officer] craves to fill with meaning - - - and thus an index of his own inadequacies” (1992. p. 440). Michael resists occupying a counter-position against which a subject can inscribe his or her own identity. He does not want to become an object to satisfy the needs of another. Just as he has escaped the camps, so Michael says that “if I lie low, I will escape charity too” (MK, p. 180).

His primary desire is, therefore, not to be trapped as the object of another’s desire or intention, be it the collective state purpose to control all threat of ‘otherness’ from ‘non-whites’, or the individual medical officer’s wish to save him, or the young woman’s purpose to offer a sexual favour. Michael wants to be free to author his own narrative, like Susan Barton in Foe. (A comparison of their two stories may yield an interesting mirror image of gendering). Again and again Michael slips through all grasps.
By associating the motive of the humanitarian medical officer with the purpose of the state, Coetzee has shifted his gaze to incorporate traditionally oppositional positions into the same camp. This strategy encourages the reader to examine ‘motive’ from a fresh angle. The intention of the medical officer and the state are quite different. The incarceration officials have little regard for the well-being of the interns of the camps, while the medical officer is intimately concerned with Michael’s recovery. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the medical officer is as disempowering to the frail young man as the heartless actions of the military staff. In fact, I suggest that his motives are dehumanising and transgressive. He criticises the official ideology and yet he also refuses to respect the patient in his care. This is revealed in two aspects of his interaction with Michael: he insists on calling Michael ‘Michaels’, even though the young man corrects him a number of times; and he creates his own imaginary ‘history’ for Michael.

As the primary signifier of recognition, a person’s name embodies the essence of his identity. There is a long history in the West to support this. In Ancient Greece, the numen stone (name stone) at the entrance of a home was believed to contain the spirit of the family who resided there. The model for communication with God, which Christ left for his followers was the ‘Our Father’. This prayer begins with an acknowledgement that the Father’s name be hallowed as an embodiment of his spiritual power. In Jewish custom, God is never named for it is believed that his omnipotence is encapsulated in the word. By repeatedly using the wrong name, the medical officer refuses to acknowledge an essential code for Michael’s identity. His own fabrication of Michael’s past further denies the actual story of his charge. Susan Gallagher says that

in assigning meaning to Michael, in telling his story for him, the medical officer both belabors the obvious and strips Michael of his humanity. His obsessive
desire to comprehend Michael ironically robs him of the very complexity and independence that constitute his being. (1991, p. 164)

I would now like to comment on the apparently absurd connection between the intentions of a vagrant prostitute, a humane medical officer and the state machine. This linkage moves from the most insignificant and weak position of a homeless female of 'non' classification, through the middle position of a white male who bears the authority of his education and employment by the government but who does not identify with his employer, to the institution which generates all legislation in the land. There is an attempt at all three points on the continuum to restrict Michael to the position of object of desire. This connectedness illustrates that control is not only vested in the most obvious power structures, but that it also exists in even the most casual contact with another.

Desire pervades all interaction, hence the starting-point of all ethical analysis should be motive. The blind spot in the medical officer's charity is exposed and his own futile position is revealed. He operates in a no-man's land between official policy, which he criticises but also represents in his capacity as an employee and as a member of the privileged racial group, and the masses of oppressed people. His refusal to listen to Michael and his insistent belief in his own story about the man suggest that he is unavailable to recognise the subjective position of someone like Michael, let alone to identify with that position. Ideologically, he belongs nowhere. In desperation, he hopes that he will be able to accompany Michael back to the country, away from the conflict which is now encroaching on his own life with the changing of the hospital into an internment camp. One suspects that his trust in Michael is not a shift towards a dialogic respect for the man but merely an expression of faith in a self-fabricated myth.
Perhaps the medical officer is an example of so many 'liberals' who remained closed in a monological, marginal position, creating their own narratives of charity. Michael K challenges the local reader to scrutinise his/her 'liberal humanism'. He also challenges the international community to interrogate the motives of charity. As Coetzee has said, 'the only truth in autobiography is that one's self-interest will be located at one's blind spot' (DP, p. 391). This statement can be extended to apply not only to autobiography but also to historical discourse. Michael K does not only offer an oppositional critique of causality, he also provides a position of authentic and persistent life 'outside history' as a metaphor which links survival to the very heart of the landscape. In Coetzee's later novel, Age of Iron, the position of the author's gaze changes. The narrator, Elizabeth Curren, brings the labyrinth of conflict and motive, which the medical officer introduces in Michael K, into closer focus.

In his final musings, Michael exhibits a break in his apparent lack of desire. The chink of longing which shows through is not for sexual gratification. His last dreams are so tentative that they are written in the subjunctive voice, which barely gives them the substance of being. And yet there is the glimmer of a desire for the other. This is a desire that another will share his own dream of a meagre survival. His desire is for companionship, rather than physical intimacy. Michael dreams of taking an old fellow vagrant with him back to the country. He would be a character much like himself, an 'other' not of confrontation but of complement with whom he could share the drops of life which he would retrieve from the well on the dry Karoo farm. This fantasy involves an intimacy of likeness, rather than of otherness. This could perhaps be termed a convergence rather than a confrontation with the desire of an other, hence Michael is still true to his desire to avoid confrontation, while dreaming of a way out of his own isolation.
Michael's liminal identity is defined more by his resistances to the desires of others than by his own expression of self. He is the shadow slipping away from camps of others. On the other hand, Magda (IHC) can be read as a negative image of K, for she is a subject wishing to create her identity out of her desire for others. For her, however, it is the others who elude her grasp.
6.3. DESIRE, TRANSGRESSION AND THE LAW

Magda is the lonely and deranged spinster who fabricates much of her story in order to make her existence meaningful in the novel, *In the Heart of the Country*. The margins between her fragmented fantasies, nightmares and actual experiences are so hazy that this text creates a surreal space. Unlike Michael K, who longs to retain his separation from the history of the times by avoiding the camps, she is imprisoned in her separateness. She says: “Is it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone dessert but of my stony monologue” (IHC, p. 12). The metafictional concern with the textual construction of identity is an explicit form which transcribes Magda’s unstable interior monologue, as it reverberates against the historical contours of her consciousness and the inhospitable landscape which resists colonial penetration.

As her father disappears from the text and the servants leave, Magda is released from her bondage of obedient daughter and supervising ‘mies’. The external structure of patriarchal and colonial obligation is apparently removed. She is freed from all duties, free to roam the wide open space of the farm. Ironically, it is her wish to escape from that solitary ‘freedom’ and to connect with others. But she is still trapped in the external situation of time and place (history) and in her internal self-awareness as “a psyche struggling with its ideological construction [which] announces itself as belonging to a moment of impending awakening and political change” (Head, 1997, p. 64).

She is obsessed with her own unfulfilled desire. She wails, “I am a hole crying to be whole” (IHC, p. 41). Her desire for intimacy is most ardent when she yearns for sexual encounter and yet her wish is for so much more than physical gratification. She seeks dialogic engagement with others and perhaps more than that: she seeks love. However,
her extensive Eurocentric intellectual knowledge and her pervasive local colonial entrenchment have not taught her how to love. This novel is a dramatisation of Coetzee’s belief that “at the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of love” (DP, p. 97). Coetzee expressed this belief in his speech accepting the Jerusalem Prize for Literature in 1987. Apartheid has caused a stunted and deformed sense of identity, which is represented in Magda’s distorted and even deranged sense of self. Her desire is for that from which she is excluded by her external circumstances and her internal consciousness.

Magda embarks on this introspection with hope and a belief that she is responsible for any changes which she may desire. She sees herself as a representative of an oppressive and transgressive colonial ideology. Following a description of her father’s treble transgression in which he has intercourse with the reluctant wife of his servant in the servant’s house, Magda notes that it is an act “which I know enough about to know that it too breaks codes” (IHC, p. 36). Knowing that her father is wrong, she empathises with the violated couple. She muses, “acting on myself I change the world. Where does this power end? Perhaps that is what I am trying to find out” (IHC, p. 36). She even acknowledges that she is not just a passive victim of her father’s domination but a cog in the wheel of oppression. She seems to be quite lucid about her complicity in the monstrous system, when she questions “who is the beast among us? My stories are stories, they do not frighten me, they only postpone the moment when I must ask: Is it my snarl I hear in the undergrowth?” (IHC, p. 50). Her intention is also to author her narrative or create her own identity, like Susan (F) and Michael (MK). She says: “I am not interested in becoming one of those people who look into mirrors and see nothing, or walk in the sun and cast no shadow. It is up to me” (IHC, p. 23). She attempts to
transform her world in two ways: by destroying her father’s hegemony which has kept her so separate and by befriending the servant couple, Hendrik and Klein-Anna.

The apartheid monument was a construction of mutually reinforcing myths of which racist sexual myths were a vital building block. Roland Barthes argues that myth disempowers people from enacting change. He says that myth restrains human beings “in the manner of a huge internal parasite” and “assign[s] to [their] activity the narrow limits within which [they are] allowed to suffer without upsetting the world” (quoted in Barnard, 1998, p. 124). Among these are sexual myths which stifle Magda’s ability to transform her world. In the early entries, sexual encounters symbolise physical knowledge and fulfilment, from which she is excluded in the patriarchal and colonial context which she inhabits. Attwell identifies Magda’s problem as one of impossible social reciprocity in *In the Heart of the Country* (1994, p. 65). Attwell’s stance is a response to Coetzee’s Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, in which he declared that “Fraternity ineluctably comes in a package with liberty and equality” (DP, p. 97). Magda’s own sexual experiences can be read as a failure of reciprocity with the other in a settler-colonial hierarchy.

Magda vents her frustration against her paternalistic father in a series of patricides and burials. At the end of the text, the father is still present as an invalid, passionless and wordless but still a burden of unfulfilling responsibility for the lonely spinster. This final scene casts a pall of doubt over the veracity of much of the dramatic action of the previous pages. Dick Penner says that it is impossible to tell if any of the events actually occur or if they are merely flights of Magda’s fancy (1989, p. 56). The imaginary and the real have become so muddled that they cannot be disentangled. Magda admits her game:
“I make it all up in order that it shall make me up” (HHC, p. 73). Yet the yoke of her isolation persists. There are no words of another in reply.

Just as the real and the unreal are wound into a textual knot, so the fulfilling and transgressive elements of the sexual encounters are also entangled. The gaze of the reader picks up the threads of satisfaction and violation but these soon become so intertwined that the boundary between them is lost. Without containment, transgressiveness seem to leak out of the actual events to stain the whole text with a sense of lawlessness and impending anarchy.

Sexual myths have performed a significant function to justify the position of the coloniser. C. Stember said:

the notion that his [a black man’s] sexual drive and capacity are greater than that of the white man serves to provide a rational link between the cognitively inconsistent images of the black as both socially inferior and sexually privileged. - - So, the institutionalised inequality of the society provides the structure on which hostility, the emotional dimension of attitudes, is based. It is this social structure that converts sexual desire in the black man into obsession for the white woman and sexual excitement in the white man into anger and violence toward the black. (1976, p. 197)

These world views have led to legislation in some settler-colonial states to protect the ‘perceived vulnerable’ white woman from the ‘apparent threat’ of the black man.
In South Africa there have been a number of laws restricting intercourse between Blacks and Whites, which culminated in the total banning of all extramarital interracial sexual relations between Whites and ‘Non-whites’ in the “immorality Act” of 1927. “From 1928 to 1938 about 550 Europeans (among them 75 women) and 600 natives (among them 510 women) were punished” (Sollors, 1997, p. 407). These figures reveal two interesting points which contradict the myths: few black men were charged and, even then, it remains uncertain if the relationships were, in fact, consensual; and the charging of so many black women implies the very converse of the myth, namely that white men were the ones with the appetite for black women. In 1949, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act made intermarriage between Blacks and Whites illegal and an amendment in 1950 extended the act to cover relations between Whites and all ‘Non-white’ groups. (Sollors, 1997, p. 408). The real intention of the law was to keep Whites apart from other race groups. As recently as the last five years, preceding the repeal of all laws prohibiting sexual relations between race groups in 1985, there were as many as 918 prosecutions.

What this investigation exposes is that the interpretation of ‘transgressive’ depends upon the position of the gaze. This position is frequently duplicitous. Sexual fantasy and reality in In the Heart of the Country weaves the different meanings of ‘transgressive’ into a mangled web which traps the narrator in her isolated colonial consciousness and challenges the hermeneutic perspective of the reader. There are four sexual transgressors in the novel but each is also transgressed, hence they are the violators and the victims of others. This novel spans the time-frame during which sexual relations between Whites and Blacks changes from being considered immoral to becoming illegal. Sexual encounters in this text are fraught with contradictory desires and transgressions in which
natural laws of physical integrity and desires for intimacy with another have become entangled with, and thwarted by, the man-made laws of segregation and taboo.

The father’s sexual relations are both transgressive. In the first episode, he brings home an eager young wife. While this is a legitimate intimacy, the presence and the youth of the wife are transgressive of Magda’s position, for the bride displaces the daughter as the woman of the house. The Calvinistic heritage of the Afrikaner farmer would have condemned any extra-marital relations. As the harbinger of the social structure, there is an expectation that he will uphold the law. When he entices Hendrik’s wife, Klein-Anna, into his bed with trinkets, he is defying the moral and legal codes on extra-marital and interracial sexual intimacy. This transgression serves to corrode the respect which the patriarch has commanded. Nevertheless, I maintain that the authority of the old father remains unchallenged in the novel, precisely because Magda never confronts him verbally. The murder of the head of the house by his child represents her imaginary attempt to wrest control, even though she does not succeed in upsetting the hierarchy of power, as the old man is still there, pathetically and silently demanding care, at the end of the novel. The external pyramidal structure remains intact. That hierarchical form now imprisons the father in the apex, yet its very existence has become meaningless, because he is ironically now unable to perform the tasks of the master, nor is he able to communicate the requirements of that role to his daughter, the sole heir to his legacy.

In a bitter further irony, the control which Magda has wrenched so violently from her father in her imagination comes to naught, for she lacks practical knowledge of the working world of farming, productivity and finance. In effect, she has no control over the estate. She cannot even access money to pay the servants or to buy basic essentials. Indeed, her utter ignorance reduces the value of the farm, for Hendrik extracts his
payment by slaughtering one sheep a week and, when he leaves, Magda neglects the crops.

Hendrik transgresses the law of the land and the integrity of Magda’s body when he rapes her. His action is a fulfilment of the colonial myth. It is this very myth and the fear and loathing which it fosters, which Magda has tried to dispel by befriending the servant couple. Ironically, her colonial heritage has fenced in her consciousness. Condemnation of Hendrik’s repeated penetration of Magda is compromised, for the narrator has also repeatedly yearned for intimacy with a male and she has often self-consciously sought to compromise Hendrik’s privacy with her presence. When Hendrik beats his wife for her infidelity with the ‘baas’, Magda follows them to their hut. She observes them coupling and Hendrik declares: “Mies has surely come to watch” (IHC, p. 77). After the initial attack, she pleads, “Please don’t be cross any more. I won’t say anything” (IHC, p. 109). She is desperate to please him, thereby transforming his actions of rage into desired intimacy.

Magda is transgressive of the bodies of her father, Hendrik and Klein-Anna. In her imagination, she disregards the privacy of her father and his sexual activities. By coveting their intimacy, she admits: “I have broken a commandment, and the guilty cannot be bored” (IHC, p. 11). Her transgression against her father goes deeper. She stabs him to death. This can be read as an feminist inversion of a rape, with the knife representing the phallus. It is perhaps even more foul, for it is an act of incest. The usual form of the father imposing himself upon the daughter is inverted. The transgressiveness in her violent attack is extensive, for she defies numerous discourses from colonialism to patriarchy to religion. The fact that her father and the law which he represents does not die, in spite of a series of parricides, suggests that her solitary voice remains unheard.
This comment on her powerlessness to challenge existing discourses will be examined in chapter 7.

Magda also ignores the established social code in the master-servant relationship by seeking a closeness without the consent of the servants. She desires more than closeness. She imagines scenes of sexual intimacy with both Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Thus she transgresses the boundaries of their marriage, the law of the land and even the limits of heterosexual relationships. She imposes her will as the ‘superior’ authority. While she does succeed in changing the external features of her relationship with Hendrik and Klein-Anna, even to the extent that she gets into bed with Klein-Anna and holds her, her desire for community is not returned. She is so articulate in her own privacy, when she writes the journal, but, when she comes in contact with the servants, she cannot verbalise her need for sharing. This will be more closely observed in the next chapter.

In a bizarre final attempt at sexual encounter, she makes obscene advances on the one visitor to the farm, a twelve year old messenger. Once again, her words re-create the scene with such lucidity and yet her actions are those of one deranged. There is a huge aporia in her story between her skill to communicate with written words and her failure to connect orally and physically with people. Attwell points out that her words rarely resemble the language of social intercourse (1993, p. 58). The irony is that her writing reveals that she understands what is happening but she is unable to alter her behaviour. It is as if her thoughts are free to roam but her body is trapped in the deforming context of the times. As Coetzee has said: “The deformed and mutilating relations between human beings, which have been created by the colonial regime and which have been exacerbated under what one summarily calls apartheid, find their psychic reflection in an internal life that is deformed and mutilated” (quoted in Gallagher 1991, p. 15).
Essentially, Klein-Anna does break the law of the land and of the Christian church by engaging in interracial and extramarital sex. She accepts the gifts and physical demands of the white man but she seems to remain unresponsive. The verb 'transgress' is active and implies an act of will to defy a boundary. Since the legislation of the land and the church are settler impositions on her people, I suggest that her integrity remains untainted when these laws are broken. I favour the use of the passive voice here, because I maintain that she is merely the passive recipient of the will of the 'baas'. I therefore claim that Klein-Anna was the only one in the pathological foursome who did not act transgressively.

In fact her desires remain well hidden throughout the text. Magda spends many entries pondering over the thoughts and actions of the young brown woman. She occupies a central position in the text and yet her identity remains opaque. She initiates very little and her responses are minimal. When she abandons the farm with her husband, her dark presence moves out of sight but her unexplored shadow stays with the reader. One wonders about her unexplored presence in the 'New South Africa'. What does this woman have to say about the legacy of transgressions to which her people have been subjected? Is her voice any more audible than Magda's voice was under a different set of laws? How has her voice matured? Parry asks why there are so few black women writers in South Africa (1994, pp. 11-24). The character of Klein-Anna raises the question again today.

Magda sets out to be an active agent in changing the structure of her farm society. But she cannot control the form of that change, just as she is unable to direct the actions of the servant, Hendrik. As Head convincingly states, Magda turns away from the portents of the sky-gods, for she fails to see through the political significance of her narrative
Head goes on to suggest that the reappearance of the father in the text symbolises her failure to embrace change, the transformation that she so desperately hoped to effect at the beginning of her journal (1997, p. 64). Coetzee implies that Magda is caught in an alienated historical impasse. As the daughter of apartheid, she does not know the language of transformation. The sexual connotations of the text signify her failure. The patriarch is an incontinent invalid. Magda, the heir to his dominion, remains. The object of her desire and the subject of her violation have fled, leaving a vacuum of otherness in the empty and barren desert. Magda’s unfulfilled desire and her father’s impotence are contrasted with the virility and passion of Hendrik and Klein-Anna: “While myth can produce a wealth of images to forestall the transformation of the status quo, the oppressed ‘has only one language: the language of his emancipation’” (Barthes quoted in Barnard, 1998, p. 125).

This text is a portent of things to come. In the Heart of the Country was first published in 1977, one year after the Soweto riots, perhaps the seminal moment in the process of dismantling of apartheid. For the next fourteen years, the Nationalist government resorted to a series of desperate actions to defend a policy of repression, restriction and exclusion of all those who were racially classified as non-white. Coetzee’s novel exposes the impotence of all oppressive measures and it shifts the gaze of the reader beyond the text itself, beyond the couple Hendrik and Klein-Anna, to the potent, as yet unheard words of the oppressed, the language of emancipation.

Dovey argues that the implicit function of all narratives is to create an identity for the speaker (cited in K. Wagner, 1989, p. 3). Language is the mediator between the narrator and his/her story. This triangular desire between the authoring subject, the mediation and the object is both a metafictional reflection on the process of writing and the formation
of the narrator’s identity. Again, as Dovey points out, the self is “always constructed in relation to the Other within the context of a social totality, making the achievement of an autonomous or essential identity entirely illusory” (quoted in K. Wagner, 1989, p. 7). This relationship in which the self is continually being reshaped by the other has been brought into close focus in the sexual desires of some of Coetzee’s narrators. At times, however, the interfacing between identities fades and the I and the You seem to merge into a common pool of consciousness. Such moments offer insights which lie beyond binary confrontation.
SECTION V: LEAKAGE BETWEEN IDENTITIES
In a general reflection on the current debates about South African culture, Jolly and Attridge consider the role of ethics in critical judgement. They state that, in some sense, every judgement is made prematurely, before all evidence has been considered and that specific instances of this limitation are provided in literature (1998, p. 6). According to these critics, judgemental writing fails in the sense that “it has produced a paucity of options for creative responses to post-apartheid freedoms and their attendant challenges” (1998, p. 7).

Judgement is the consequence of a confrontation of identities. If judgement is to be ethical, it can only ever be a provisional and precarious balance between the two extremities of response to the other. On the one hand, the call is “for the always imperfect attempt to understand the other without turning the other into a version of the self” (1998, p. 6). On the other hand, the warning is against fetishizing difference. The editors of the text, Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995, argue that much post-colonial writing is essentialist in its antipathy towards the coloniser, for it makes the recognition of difference the final purpose of the writing and they conclude that authors of such works can fail to respect the subjects of their scrutiny (1998, pp. 7-11). I would add that this lack of respect can exacerbate confrontation between identities and can lead to a reluctance to change. I believe that a resistance to such closure is perhaps the most fundamental ethical obligation of all writers today.

The possibilities and problems associated with this balance, which Jolly and Attridge describe between reducing the other to a version of the self and fetishizing their differences, are finely represented in the fiction of John Coetzee. Every subject position
which Coetzee creates is deeply provisional. He uncovers the cracks in the foundations of all positions of judgement occupied by his fictional characters. These cracks are exposed in their encounters with others.

There are moments in the novels when identities merge. The merging between identities neither turns the other into a version of the self, nor does it reduce the characters to two essentialist camps: those that are the same and those that are different, precisely because the moments are fleeting, rather than fixed and static states of being. Instead, this merging erases the binary divisions and opens up potential interchange, understanding and acceptance between identities.

In this, Coetzee’s work offers a vital literary example at this time of transition in his country when the old is not yet put to rest and the new not fully emerged. His example is also of global relevance in this era of attempts at reconciliation on the brink of a new millennium. I suggest that, by exploring this dynamic flow between identities, Coetzee is tilling and transcending the fertile silences which Andre Brink considers to be the outcome of the dominant discourse of white historiography and the possible effect of a counter-discourse of black historiography (1998, pp. 14-28). Coetzee is acutely aware of the risks involved in taking up both existing and new critical positions. In White Writing he says, “Our ears today are finely attuned to the modes of silence. - - It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn” (p. 81).

One of Coetzee’s core focuses is the permeability of the self or the protean dynamic in which identity is continually being created in the flow between the self and the other and the implications that a blurring of the edges between identities may have upon those
specific identities and the world around them. In his latest non-fictional text, *Giving Offense*, Coetzee uses the example of a poem written by Breyten Breytenbach soon after he was released from prison to illustrate that interchange between the self and the other can be continuous, to the point that the separate identities cannot be differentiated. This is a translation of the poem entitled “n Spieêlvars” or “a Mirror poem”:

Must I wait still longer?

o my snow-white shadow Death

o my own secret police

I will be yours forever

and you are

mine mine mine (cited in GO, p. 227).

Breytenbach has called this poem “the exteriorization of his imprisonment” (cited in GO, p. 228). Facing the reflection in the mirror is like facing his gaolers. Coetzee describes this as “a poem of accelerated dialogical frenzy in which it is not clear what is self and what is image” (GO, p. 228). He observes that Breyten’s daimon and his demons confront each other, for the boundary between the self and the other in the image has become erased and the identity of the poet absorbs all (p. 228).

This chapter will concern such a blurring of boundaries between the self and the other in the novels of Coetzee. For each of his characters there is a sense of anxiety and self-consciousness about the permeability of their contours. There is a movement between the inner and the outer world in which the markings of others and their physical and ideational milieux seep into the self, and the attitudes and habits of the self leak out to others and the external environment. This existential anxiety exhibits itself in two ways.
Some characters attempt to arrest the interflow by reinforcing their representation of a fixed, impervious self-identity. I suggest that this is a negative definition, an attempt to secure and restrain that which the self is not and does not wish to be. This resistant mode was explored in chapter 3.

Such an assertive oppositional circumscription of the other is, I maintain, a defensive resistance, aimed at protecting the self from ‘contamination’ by the other. I believe that it is based on a myth that fluidity between identities can be arrested. And I repeat Barthes claim that myth alienates people from their power to act upon the world (cited in Gallagher 1991, p. 155). Hence this myth of identity has, in fact, trapped these characters in their closed, self-defensive isolation.

Nevertheless, each of these characters enacts a failure to resist osmotic sharing with others. The ‘I’ cannot preserve itself as a separate, impervious construct of the self. The identity of the self cannot be controlled by the will of the subject. Permeability is a feature of identity: while it can be manipulated to a certain extent by the circumstances which individuals choose, the relationship between the self and others cannot be directed, for the edges of difference continually mutate and adjust to each other.

The second pattern of existential anxiety stems from a fear of separation, of being trapped in isolation. There is concern by some characters that, by remaining unconnected, they will stay unformed. This is an acknowledgement that the ‘I’ only comes into being when it is in relation to the ‘You’. This is most clearly represented in Magda in In the Heart of the Country. She is the most porous of Coetzee’s characters. She feels that she has no substance of identity other than her words. She says: “this monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until
someone else gives me a lead” (IHC, p. 16). These yearnings for release from her imprisoning self will be further explored later in this chapter.

I consider this to be a ‘receptive’ mode of interaction. This includes a desire to become one with another, or to enter into the identity of the other in order to explore the inner labyrinths of their identity and to share their gaze outwards. This response indicates an acceptance of the fluidity of identity and a willingness to follow the flow. In Coetzee’s work, one can trace the ramifications and the limits of such merging in examples of attempts by the main characters to merge with other identities in the texts. Their reasons for this desire, their findings and the implications of their discoveries can be read as having a triple effect: within their own situational orbits of personal narrative; in the metafictional context of authorial and reader responsibility and in the wider political sphere. These implications bear both local South African and more global significance.

The early twentieth-century Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, wrote extensively on this dialogue between the self and the other. In the introduction to Bakhtin’s The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Wayne Booth stresses that Bakhtin’s vision for the world is enacted in the modern polyphonic novel, of which Dostoevky’s work is taken as a primary example (1984, p. xxii). Here a chorus of voices is not a finished entity but is in a vital state of flux in which there is no authoritative authorial commentary. The ‘idea’ is a living event which occurs in the moment of dialogic communion between consciousnesses (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 88). The affirmation and the non-affirmation of the other’s ‘I’ leads to a variety of ideas, or a multiplicity of voices (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). Polyphony is “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses - - not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 6-7).
Bakhtin's theory is based on the metalinguistic assumption that words are always mobile and never free. They are imbued with past and present intentions and values of the whole society and the individual user (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 201). This theory stresses the protean dynamic in which all identity is continually being formed. Bakhtin says, "A man never coincides with himself", for each subject has a sense of his "inner unfinalizability" and is continually re-forming his/her 'I' in dialogue with others (1984, p. 59). Bakhtin's theory suggests that merged identities, or voices imply the closure of a monological stance. However, I would argue that receptivity to the words and self-representation of the other require a process of mutual openness in which moments of merging afford each 'I' insight into the gaze of the other. It is here that dialogic sharing occurs. Bakhtin places the 'idea' at the intersection between consciousnesses (1984, pp. 88-93). I suggest that it is in this inter-subjective space that receptive identities merge briefly in a continual process of flux.

Julia Kristeva's work has been briefly alluded to in former chapters. She has expanded on Bakhtin's theory and has formulated the idea that identity is not fixed but is rather continually in a process of being formed in confrontation with the other. (1992, pp. 128-129). The gap between two speakers is the site of creative ambivalence with the potential of both obliteration and generation of identity. I suggest that the former 'risk' might be regarded as the primary fear that motivates a resistance to connect with the other, while the latter potential is essential to the receptive mode of being.

Some of Coetzee's characters are more receptive to the other. They long to understand the other's inner feelings and motivations so that they can share their gaze upon the outer world. By this dialogical mirroring, they hope to plumb deeper depths within themselves. Merging is usually materialised in the texts in physical terms. These may be
represented in the sexual connotations of entering the body of the other. In this regard, a
desire to merge identities with another may sometimes be deemed synonymous with a
desire for physical intimacy.

In Dusklands, Eugene Dawn describes the failure of his marriage. His desire for physical
satisfaction appears to be quite remote from his mental consciousness. He defines his
physical desires in terms of the necessary bodily function of an “evacuation” (D, p. 8).
He understands the theory of discovering the self within the other, for he says, “When
for my part I convulse your body with my little battery-driven probe, I am only finding a
franker way to touch my own centres of power than through the unsatisfying genital
connection” (D, p. 11). His disconnectedness from “the length of gristle that hangs from
[his] - iron spine” (D, p. 8), let alone the body of Marilyn, keeps all opportunities of
understanding her beyond reach. Besides, he does not want to merge with his wife in
order to know her better. He merely wishes to exert control over her. His physical
aggrandisement echoes the territorial ambitions of the United States in Vietnam.

The magistrate, in Waiting for the Barbarians, demonstrates a different form of physical
closeness. He spends hours massaging and caressing the broken feet and body of the
‘barbarian’ girl. His intention is to heal her physical injuries and to penetrate her
consciousness in order to comprehend her pain. By stopping short of sexual invasion of
her body for some time, he hopes to redeem his own position as a benign imperial
employee, different from the aggressive coloniser, Col. Joll. Ironically, the girl remains
passive and impervious to his efforts and he realises that his attention becomes yet
another form of colonisation. In Foe, Susan tries to reify Cruso as a merged identity of
the two of them, with herself as the writer and Cruso as the substance of the story. She
describes herself as “a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso” (E, p. 51).

The desire to merge with the other is a desire to re-create the other in terms which are accessible to the self. It is the dual desire to understand the consciousness of the other, their inner feelings and to share the angle of their gaze. This gaze also includes an image of the self. Again, the characters in Coetzee’s novels, who hanker to unite with the hidden folds of another’s ‘self’, fail in their enterprise to secure a stable union, although they may experience moments of merging. The light of these instances sheds a triple-ringed penumbra upon the text: the identities of both the self and the other; the real context or the historical placing of the novel, which includes the identity of the author; and the metafictional environment, which is the language of the text, the process of writing and the interpretive complicity of the reader.

Before this ripple effect is examined, I would like to consider Attwell’s critical stance on the corpus of Coetzee’s work as a whole. Attwell identifies what he calls “three seismic shifts” in Coetzee’s fiction (1993, p.118). The first regards the dilemma of how to be heard without claiming a position of authority from which to speak. Attwell asserts that Friday’s silence is the culmination of Coetzee’s creative representation of “self-conscious deference, marginality and abnegation” (1993, p. 118). He maintains that the earlier novels tend to focus on the confinement of the individual identity within ideological discourses, while, in the later works, the gaze of the reader moves away from the fixed structures of historical consciousness to the self-generating dynamic of textuality, “until the limit, the impossibility of further elaboration, the limit of silence or death [Friday (F)]” (Attwell, 1993, p. 118). The third shift occurs when Coetzee rejects liberal
humanism and hones in on the need for a reconstructed ethics (Attwell, 1993, p. 118).

These may be interpreted as shifts and I do agree that Coetzee’s novelistic artifice has maintained close dialogic linkages with critical and political developments over the last quarter of a century and that his fictional representation of his own critical position has sharpened. In chapter 3, I pointed out that Coetzee himself has identified a change in his own focus, since writing the article on confession in 1985. I would also like to stress the common terrain within which these shifts have occurred. I will elaborate on this in chapter 8.

I believe that Coetzee’s project in all of his novels remains largely the same, even though he takes up a quite different angle in each text from which to position the gaze of the narrator. This reveals some similar and other quite different textures, patterns and mouldings of identity. While his concerns with the fictional representation of the self and the relationship between the self and the other are basically unchanged, the internal and external historicity of each novel shifts with the temporal, social and geographic frame which he selects for the fiction and with the international intellectual and local political context at the moment of writing.

My purpose in examining moments of merging between identities in three novels will be twofold: to trace the three ‘seismic shifts’ which Attwell observes and to highlight the essential features of some of Coetzee’s perennial concerns with the construction of the self and the responsibility of the self for the construction of the identity of the other. The differences and similarities between the three examples will illustrate this duality.
Magda’s desire to “climb into Klein-Anna’s body” (IHC, p. 108) represents the first focus of an individual identity trapped in an ideological discourse. Elizabeth Curren’s wish to merge with Vercueil (AI, p. 153) enacts a relinquishment of the entrapping discourse of liberal humanism in which the self-generating flow of textuality reaches to the edge of understanding. This zone, where boundaries defining and restricting identity dissolve, is, if I read him correctly, the next field of exploration which Attwell identifies. Coetzee’s last area of interest is revealed in a scrutiny of ‘Dostoevsky’s’ yearning to revive the spirit of his deceased step-son in his own corporeality and the pervasive merging of historical and textual identities. These multiple mergings expose the need for a reconstructed ethics which reflects differences between the self and the other differently.
7.1. HOW REAL IS OUR POSSESSION?

Magda asks this question a few entries after Hendrik has ravished her body and she has tried to merge in her imagination with Klein-Anna (IHC, pp. 104-107, 114). This question is the fulcrum around which all real and imaginary construction is negotiated in this novel. It defines the problematic moment at which her identity coalesces, a moment of convergence of the external situation and the internal consciousness of the self. Head states that Magda is a “metafictional device to facilitate the exploration of character construction” (1997, p. 59). The settler-colonial expectation of this young woman comes into jarring confrontation with the realities of her needs. Head says that “essentially, this is an unstable interior monologue in which the narrator enacts the psychological breakdown attributable to, and representative of, the divisive colonial mind” (1997, p. 51). In her clumsy efforts to fulfil her external, learnt role and to satisfy her inner longing for community, Magda finds herself caught in the web of her historical placing and consciousness, unable to connect with the servants and eventually being abandoned by them. Her identity is trapped in the strictures of her colonial history.

Ian Glenn focuses on the complex stylistic game of doubling the ‘I-figures’ in the text: Magda is both the I-as-narrator of a novel and the I-as-subject of the journal entries (1996, p. 123). Magda is the main character in her story but she is also the self-conscious author of her journal, who repeatedly refers to her own textuality. In this multi-faceted role, she plays the parts of author, character and critic. Glenn asks “what do we do when we cannot keep an analytic distance through invoking our usual critical kits or parameters, as they seem to have been invoked already by the characters concerned?” (1996, p. 125). He notes that In the Heart of the Country is a reflection on what he refers to as “the sociology of literary creation” in which the colonial, psychological,
gender and class bases of literary creation are questioned (1996, p. 125). I agree with Glenn’s conclusion, in which he states that “Coetzee’s aim here is to prevent, anticipate, those answers (psychological, historical, sociological) that might allow us to avoid following Magda’s spinning of her tale, that might permit us to fit her into some pre-established critical category” (1996, p. 135).

Bearing in mind Glenn’s call for the critic to surrender to Magda’s story, I shall examine some of the confines of her temporal and regional location or historicity, within which she deludes herself that she is ‘free’ to create an identity for her multiple, mirrored I’s.

Magda is removed from all dialogical interaction by her marginal role in a patriarchal, settler-colonial society. This marginality is the result of the flimsiness of her legitimacy. In fact, she only gains legitimacy by default of a vacuum in the hierarchy which needs to be filled to prevent the whole structure from collapsing. She is the mistress of the house only because there is no wife. As the daughter, she is heir to the land merely because there is no son. She is in charge of the farm because her father is absent. Even though she is well versed in the European literary canon and informed in local oral mythology, she is the legitimate heir to neither legacy because, as a colonial child, she cannot claim unequivocal descent from either. She achieves a position from which to speak by claiming the roles officially intended for others. As herself, she does not have a recognised space in any discursive schema, out of which she can begin to create meaning. She has not learnt the language of the mother, for the mother is absent in death. She takes up a creative position outside the law of the father, a position that disturbs logical scrutiny. She says “in the cloister of my room [her place of creative production] I am the mad hag I am destined to be” (IHC, p. 8).
It is also difficult for others around her on the farm to relate to her, for she does not occupy a familiar and therefore comfortable position in the hierarchy. As a consequence, she cannot interact easily with those around her. Attwell argues that, because she is so isolated and lacks reciprocity, her sense of self can only be achieved by auto-suggestion (1993, p. 65). This freedom to create her own identity is an illusion, for identity is only formed in interaction with others and her colonial heritage has created a barrier between herself and the others on the farm, hence Attwell concludes that reciprocity between Magda and the others on the farm is impossible (1993, p.65). While I agree that the character-Magda fails to establish reciprocal fraternity with Hendrik and his wife Klein-Anna, I maintain that the writer-Magda is able to construct an imaginary moment that even goes beyond reciprocal caring to a momentary merging with Anna. This will be examined later in this chapter.

Magda's legitimacy is tenuous and her position is not clearly recognisable within the parameters of given master-servant discourses. Both Pennner and Attwell have stressed the significance of transgressiveness and disregard for the law in Magda's tale (Pennner, 1989, pp. 63-65; Attwell, 1993, pp. 60-66). I suggest that Magda upsets the whole external hierarchy by transgressing the boundary between master and servant, in order to shift her position from the margin to the centre, so that she can claim the right to belong. She does this by involving herself in a domestic squabble between the servant couple (AI, pp. 73-77). This incident will be examined shortly. She fails in her intention to dismantle the structure because, as Attwell suggests, she still remains imprisoned in an internalised pyramidal, colonial consciousness (1993, pp. 60-66). In her attempts to subvert her entrapping, outer reality, she installs an inner prison of isolation. She cannot break down the ideological barrier that separates her from the others. I do, however, assert that she imagines one visionary moment of release from her inner gaol: she
imagines merging with Anna so that she too might experience the fulfilment which the servant woman’s legitimate roles afford.

In contrast to Magda, Klein-Anna occupies an ironic, central position of legitimacy in the fiction. She is the legal wife of Hendrik. She performs the clearly defined function of maid of the house. Even as the sexual mistress of the master, she gleans a semblance of legitimacy from his final patriarchal authority. In the ‘real’ context of a troubled South Africa, she represents the role of the black woman in the struggle of her people for a political voice. By slippage, I would even go so far as to compare her position with that of one of the first black woman liberationists, Winnie Mandela, who has claimed the identity of ‘mother of the nation’. There is great legitimacy vested in such a title, for it implies that she is the bearer and nurturer of the future. Klein-Anna’s racial grouping and her gender carry a similar responsibility for the country. A metaphoric interpretation of her character invites the reader to listen to the feint but focal rhythms which may emanate from her feminine presence, in the hope that they will become more audible, now that some of the restraints of apartheid have been razed.

I contend that her presence is the catalysing hub of the text, and yet she is almost silent. She only intervenes to check the sequence of events once, when she tells Hendrik to stop hurting Magda (IHC, p. 98). This action allows the white woman an instant of recognition: ‘she is a woman, therefore she is merciful. Is that a universal truth? (IHC, p. 98). Ironically, the narrator, herself, enacts the fallacy of such a universal maxim, in her own lack of mercy for Klein-Anna when her husband beats her for being unfaithful. Magda has no insight into this discrepancy between her representation of herself and the other. In fact, for Magda, the self becomes a contradiction of the self’s construction of the other.
When Magda watches the intimate reconciliation between Hendrik and Klein-Anna after he has beaten his wife for her infidelity, she performs the duplicitous role of a ‘liberal coloniser’. She judges that she has the right to witness the reconciliation of the couple. She justifies her decision to transgress the social barrier of privacy by representing herself as the protector of an unfaithful wife against the wrath of her spouse. But her position is deeply flawed. This desire to become entangled in the domestic quarrel of the servants is starkly ambivalent, for she has been ruthless in her own condemnation of Klein-Anna. Her journal reveals that she is fully aware of the fault running through her position. By blaming the maid for her infidelity with the master of the house, Magda does not have to face her own guilt for committing the more heinous crime of stabbing her father.

Her abuse of justice and of her position of authority subverts all sense of order. She appeals to the hierarchy of authority which holds her little society in such tight control for her own security, but she inverts the rules and destroys the structure by her total disregard for the code of behaviour required of such a tiered society when she watches the couple from the doorway. This meticulously organised society provides an external space for each member, hence identity is largely shaped by the rigid pattern of the structure as a whole. As I have shown, Magda only fits into that framework uneasily. Now, in addition to her already tenuous position, Magda actively ignores the divisions which this structure imposes by flouting the rules of conduct. This collapses the framework within which her marginal identity has been defined.

Her sense of self now appears to be open to the flow of experiences and influences which she chooses. The restrictive binding of the social fabric has been undone and she is hopeful that she will be able to engage freely with the other company on the farm. In
this, she has deluded herself, for her freedom is still on her own restricted terms, the terms of her superior feudal self-image.

She asks “How real is our possession?” (IHC, p. 114). This rhetorical question strikes at the heart of her own multiple task of literal narration, literary creation, psycho-analysis, feminist interrogation and attempted post-colonial enquiry. She says:

To the spur of desire we have only one response: to capture, to enclose, to hold.
- - - all I ask myself, faintly, dubiously, querulously, is whether there is not something to do with desire other than striving to possess the desired in a project which must end in vain, since its end can only be the annihilation of the desired. (IHC, p. 114)

Ironically, her own ambivalence is another re-enactment of (post-)colonial entrapment. This is the writer’s dilemma. Earlier she wrote: “Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it” (IHC, p. 26). The confrontation between identities is a game of words or, as Glenn says, “at the heart of the country lie country matters. - - But at the heart of both geography and sex, in turn, lie the multiple structures and powers of language” (1996, p. 136).

This novel critiques the ramifications of all oppositional positions. All the sexual transgressions, which were described in chapter 6, dramatise the one objective to dominate by taking possession. This desire to dominate may be colonial in the demands of the master, counter-colonial in Hendrik’s rape of Magda, textual in Magda’s attempts at mastery over the symbolic order and specifically the name of the father and post-
colonial in her wish to satisfy Hendrik’s passionate needs and her imaginary union with Klein-Anna. Her weakness is that she cannot shed her colonial mantle. She wants a relationship of reciprocal caring, but her example is one of carelessness and insensitivity. She still sees the others as adversarial. She has a binary view of the world, in which she is caught as “the reluctant polestar about which all this phenomenal universe spins” (IHC, p. 116). Thus, to her own consciousness, she represents a fixed position and the rest of the world as the oppositional ‘other’ which is in motion. Her narrative position reflects light onto many discourses, such as history, colonialism, post-colonialism, settler society, feminism and psychology, linguistics and literary creativity.

I maintain that Magda does enact briefly the possibility for a non-oppositional stance. While her external position denies her this possibility, her inner consciousness glimpses it. The actual settler-colonial context of her narrative and the post-colonial situation of the text require that the external forces of chronicity, the discourse of history and attendant theoretical inscriptions overtake her inner musings. Nevertheless, Magda does fill that transitional gap between coloniser and colonised briefly, when she occupies both positions simultaneously as the heir to her father’s land and as the forcibly possessed other, by the counter-colonising act of Hendrik.

However, I believe that her imagined merging with Klein-Anna is even more significant. She asks, “how much keener does my question become when woman desires woman, two holes, two emptinesses” (IHC, p. 114). This union does not represent a binary desire for the other, as complement. Instead, it represents a desire for recognition of the other as the same, a sharing of the same essential femaleness. The two emptinesses cannot create a whole. The female identity of Magda does merge fleetingly with the femaleness of Klein-Anna, when she says, “If that is what I am then that is what she is too, anatomy
is destiny: an emptiness, or a shell, a film over an emptiness longing to be filled in a world in which nothing fills.” (IHC, p. 114). A Hegelian synthesis of opposites cannot be achieved. This union is hence a ‘logical’ failure.

But it is more! Magda intuitively knows that “it is the first condition of life forever to desire, otherwise life would cease. It is a principle of life forever to be unfulfilled” (IHC, p. 114). This momentary imaginary merging with Klein-Anna opens up an opportunity for Magda-as-writer and her trapped colonial consciousness to listen to the other, without anticipating ‘solutions’ but with a willingness to find similarities in Klein-Anna’s difference. As I have already intimated, in chapter 6, Klein-Anna leaves a shadow with the reader, after she departs from the text. I also wonder where her ‘metaphoric presence’ is now, in the ‘real’ post-apartheid world? I believe that she, as a representative of the indigenous woman, occupies a most significant, if still uncertain position, in her immediate geographical and political location and in the broader theoretical context.

Belinda Bozzoli suggests that, historically, there has not been a significant feminist movement in South Africa (1975, p. 119). Yet the editors of the text, in which her chapter is published, suggest that Bozzoli may not have given adequate attention to the protest movement among women in the country, the heart of South African patriarchy (Beinart & Dubow, 1995, p. 9). Acknowledging the political power that Coetzee invests in the aporias in his novels as more than mere passive resistance but rather as counter-strategies that interrogate the dominant discourses (Marais, 1996, pp 74-75), I contend that Klein-Anna’s silence attests to the resistant power of rural African women.
Eva Hunter says that “black women are defining themselves, and their opposition to sexism, in their own terms - that is, in resistance to any hegemony of western feminism over and above the oppressions of race, class and patriarchy” (1993, p. 12). In the intellectual realm, there is an audience keen to hear their voices which have historically been silenced, overruled or ignored. Hunter elaborates on the debate between black and white feminist writers in South Africa. Sisi Maqagi is wary about white women usurping the right to theorise about black women’s work, while Jenny De Reuck responds to this reluctance to hear white feminists speak, by stressing the urgency for all South African women to resist silence and speak up (1993, p. 12). Hunter concurs that, given the continuing marginalisation of women of all cultures from the ‘peace’ negotiations:

women must meet the challenge to move toward a condition in which difference is no longer equatable with separateness, as under apartheid. This transformation, moreover, must occur within the context of as full a recognition as is possible of the facets (class, culture, race, and age, for instance) that constitute their difference. (1993, p. 15)

Watson identifies a passionate hunger with which Coetzee’s protagonists seek to escape their colonial bondage (1996, pp. 22-36). I propose that Magda’s fleeting awareness of a metaphoric merging of her femaleness with the femaleness of Klein-Anna embodies a vision of transcendence beyond the warped relationships of colonial subjects and beyond the discursive confines of language. The imaginary physical union offers an instant of hope to Magda-as-writer, in spite of the overwhelming pessimism at her colonial shackles.
In this one transient moment of fusion, feminine emptiness becomes the transitional opportunity for new modes of dialogic connection. Attwell comments on the strong sympathy which Coetzee has with feminism and, in a contemplation of Glenn’s chapter on this novel, he states that the feminine in Coetzee’s narrators “serves to dramatise Coetzee’s own self-positioning with respect to the versions of authority, both social and discursive that compete around him. In other words, we have the feminine as a sign for other kinds of difference” (1996, p. 215). One might take the purpose of the brief imaginary merging of Magda’s body with that of Klein-Anna to be for the receptivity and the creative potential that ‘similarity in difference’ offers, rather than for confrontational attempts to fill the space of the other with meaning established by the self. Thence the imagination of the reader takes Coetzee’s cue and moves beyond the text.

Magda’s entrapment in the ideology of colonialism does represent the first category of focus which Attwell identifies in Coetzee’s fiction. Yet her textual moment of merging with Klein-Anna also reveals an early hint of Coetzee’s perennial conviction that the imagination can transcend the confines of the dominating ideology of the time and offer a glimpse of identifying with otherness.

This creative potential is further explored in the attempts by the narrator of Age of Iron, Mrs E. Curren, to relinquish her position within the dominant social order by embracing the other. Attwell maintains that Coetzee shifts his focus away from the restrictive structures of the historical site to the textual momentum in which identity is generated (1993, p. 118). Like Magda, Mrs Curren is a marginal member of the dominant ideology. She is also the double ‘I’ figure: the I-as-narrator and the I-as-subject of the letter. Unlike her predecessor who was composing a private journal, Mrs Curren is addressing an audience, her daughter. Her writing is a more linear justification for final responses to
the external events, rather than another fanciful meandering in an historic site. Mrs Curren is more self-conscious in her determination to assert her own ideological position. She is only successful in embracing the margins, when she merges with Vercueil at the end of the text. Once again, the merging is only fleeting for the end of her agency, the end of the text and her immanent death will separate her from this union.
7.2. EMBRACING THE MARGIN

Vercueil is the catalyst who exposes the cracks in Mrs Curren's liberal-humanist identity, through which indefinable otherness can then seep. She cannot ward off his intrusion and perhaps she does not want to. She says: "My mind is like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs. Without that finger stillness and stagnation. A way of indirection. By indirection I find out direction" (AI, p. 74). He can be read as an opaque aporia that defies her nice rational construction of herself and the world which she inhabits. The abject is materialised in his person. Kristeva has said that the abject is lined with the sublime (1982, p. 12). Using the abject Vercueil as a guide, her angel of death, Mrs Curren hopes to slip over the edge of life, into a sublime afterlife.

As the story progresses and her demise looms, so Vercueil occupies more space in the text and in her home, until, in the end, he shares her bed. Concurrent with his expanding occupation, Mrs Curren's sense of a stable, meaningful self diminishes. Her own limits soften and flow and she becomes more like him. The definition between her identity and his blurs and finally disappears in the last sentences and she merges with him. She has become the abject emptiness that he is. Her faith that the abject is lined with the sublime has provided hope throughout the text and yet that hope is not fulfilled in the final words. Instead, she is left hovering in a state of inertia, as was explained in chapter 5. Any fulfilment of that hope lies in the future, beyond the text for both the narrator and her ailing people, the liberal white South Africans, for whom she is metonymic.

The title of this section implies a magnanimous action from the 'centre' outwards, towards those on the outskirts. In the realist mode of re-enacting the violent conflict between different groups in South Africa in the late 1980's in Age of Iron, Mrs Curren's
attempt to embrace the margin is more disturbed than the heading might suggest. The text is a tracing of these difficulties, with her finally achieving an end to her confession, and a momentary union with the margin. But that margin, like her unconventional guide, Vercueil, does not offer the comfort of redemption which she seeks, for she is 'not-yet-dead' by the end of the text. As Coetzee, himself, has suggested, the end of this novel is more troubled (DP, p. 251).

Mrs Curren simultaneously occupies positions at the centre and on the edge, depending on the angle of the gaze. There are, in effect, two 'centres' in this text. The obvious one is the dominating hub of the white government. The other 'centre' is the competing black resistance which confronts the authority in power. Mrs Curren does not belong to either. Although her racial identity classifies her as a member of the ruling white group, she does not concur with the ideology of the state. So, too, she condemns the injustices of police actions. She empathises with the suffering victims, yet she does not identify with them for two reasons. She is not one of their racial group and she is adamantly opposed to violence as a resolution to the conflict. Hence she is marginal to the activities of both groups. Hers is an ambivalent position. Like Coetzee, himself, she accepts her historic complicity in the shameful crime of racial discrimination. She says: “it is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it. - - Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name” (AI, p. 149).

Within the social structure, she occupies a similar position to that of Magda in In the Heart of the Country, as a well-read woman in the segregated and hierarchical society of South Africa. Just as the recurring irritation of the fly trope in the text has no impact on the course of the narrative, so Mrs Curren’s actions, like those of Magda and the insect trope in the earlier text, are irrelevant to the dramatic outcomes of the times.
At the outset, Mrs Curren encounters two things in the space of an hour: the news of her cancer and the presence of the tramp in her garden. She describes him as: “The first of the carrion-birds, prompt, unerring. How long can I fend them off?” (AI, p. 4). She regards him as a sign of decay and ultimately death, that she must keep at bay or under control if she is to avoid contamination. This is a resistant stance aimed to protect her own sense of self, like the other resistances described in chapter 3. Initially, she offers Vercueil charity as the humane gesture of an occupant of the ‘centre’, reaching out to the weak and degraded boundaries. This action suggests that she believes she has the upper hand as the dealer of basic human dignity. By his unpredictable response to her generosity, he subverts the stability of that position of ‘noble benefactor’. He will not play the part of the indebted recipient in a paternalistic game of charity, in the same way as Michael K avoids becoming the object of the medical officer’s own charitable agenda.

Her weakness lays her open to the meagre support which Vercueil’s presence affords. He is a personification of the fringes of this confrontational society, a man of indistinct racial identity, whose name is confused with the Afrikaans words of ‘verkul’, meaning to cheat, and ‘verskuil’, meaning to conceal or hide (Head, 1998, p. 140). These associations enhance his enigmatic, shady identity. He provides the only support available to her and she embraces the thin comfort which he offers.

Vercueil embodies the characteristics of the alcohol that he imbibes. Alcohol dissolves iron, the rigid substance of fences that entrenches rules of division and enforcement. Mrs Curren muses: “Alcohol that softens preserves. *Mollificans*. That helps us to forgive” (AI, p. 75). Ironically, alcohol was condemned as the anaesthetic of their parents by the black children of the revolution (AI, p. 75). They believed that alcohol was to blame for the acquiescence of the older generation in their own oppression. Vercueil embodies the
contradictory elements which his drinking implies. He is both the releaser (from intransigent iron laws) and the imprisoner (in apolitical torpor). He is the ambivalent chora of possibilities and nullity.

Mrs Curren oscillates between being repulsed by his physical condition, and depending on the meagre support which his presence grants. She creates an elevated role for him in her story as her guide, the angel who goes before (AI, p. 153). Thus she is able to justify her continuing and increasing physical and psychological dependence on this filthy drunk. Throughout the text, she comments with distaste on his unkempt condition. Only right at the end does she not notice his foul smell for the first time (AI, p. 198).

Interspersing her repulsion by, and dependence on, his presence, there are moments which reach beyond reluctant acceptance to willing embrace, when the gap of disgust melts away and the unlikely couple become united. Shared music and alcohol dissolve the social differences between them. Mrs Curren listens to a record of Bach’s Goldberg Variations. Vercueil sits outside listening. She thinks: “I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love” (AI, p. 27). Peter Reading points out that the roles of Mrs Curren and Mr Vercueil are “slyly reversed”, with the protector becoming the protected as the presence of the tramp gradually increases in importance (1990, p. 1037). In her despair, she accepts the comfort of the bottle that Vercueil offers her (AI, p. 115). By following his example, ironically not as a model of purity implied in the angelic references, but as the tainted social pariah who abuses his body with alcohol, she learns to soften her own rigid judgements.

When she spends the night under a bridge, like a tramp, after John has been murdered in her back room, she abandons any claim she may have had as a member of the dominant
social group. Her physical location reinforces her mental decision to align herself wholly
with the margin. She is unable to join her dwindling forces with those of John's people,
for they represent another group to which she does not belong. But she does become one
of the true fringe dwellers, who resist the violence between the competing centres. There
is nothing superior or noble about her action. It is merely a blind relief to escape from the
conflict. Again, Vercueil has led the way. His vagrancy provides the example of non-
alliance (AI, p. 147). She is now no longer deluded by her sense of her own position of
moral authority, the magnanimous voice of liberal charity. Emptying her bladder where
she lies symbolises her yielding, the leaking out of her rational self-construction. She
yields up her position at the centre of her public and private stories.

Marriage to this vagrant is a recurring reference in her story (AI, pp. 64, 174). After her
catharsis, her relinquishment of the colonial order, she publicly proclaims her link with
Vercueil. In defiance of the young policeman's scorn, she takes Vercueil's damaged
hand, and declares him to be her "right-hand man" (AI, p. 157). Seeking the bodily
warmth of another to ease the pain, Mrs Curren asks Vercueil to sleep beside her. She
calls him her "shadow husband" and signs herself Mrs V. He takes on the role of carer,
cooking and washing for her. Thus the conjugal relationship is secured.

At the end of the novel there is a shift. In the last two sentences she breaks free from the
bondage of reason, when she is rendered breathless and the mediating power of her
words is relinquished. Here, I assert that Mrs Curren's identity merges with that of
Vercueil. For the first time, she does not smell him, nor does she feel his warmth as
another, because they have become one. Her union with her unlikely partner is complete.
Her early wisdom that "what we marry we become" (AI, p. 64) is realised. This embrace
of the margin is only achieved when she becomes silent. In this union, she hopes to
release her soul from the bondage of a body which is scarred by its heritage of domination. She has, in fact, united with the abject aporia that is Vercueil. This silent union also signifies the relinquishment of a primary tool of colonial domination, language.

Graham Huggan calls the coming together of Mrs Curren and Vercueil a “charade of reciprocity”, for Vercueil’s last embrace “yields no warmth, still less the promise of a purifying conflagration” (1996, p. 203). I agree that Vercueil offers no promises: neither of posting her letter nor of releasing her from suffering. However, I do believe that this is not a “charade of reciprocity”. I would rather say that the reciprocity which they share is unconventional, in that the offering is traditionally not valued. What Vercueil offers is an opportunity for surrender. Elizabeth responds by surrendering her breath, the force behind her voice. While there is no apparent result of mutual release in this union, it does represent a receptivity to the other, or a willingness to open the self to the other differently beyond the security of words, the fundamental substance of all discursive encounters.

I repeat a most important statement of Coetzee that I quoted in chapter 6: “The only truth in autobiography is that one’s self-interest will be located at one’s blind spot” (DP, p. 391). In Age of Iron, as in Waiting for the Barbarians and the medical officer’s narrative in Life and Times of Michael K, Coetzee sets his sights on the blind spot in liberal humanism, which many white South Africans, particularly those of educated, English-speaking background, like Mrs Curren, have taken pride in claiming. As I explained in chapter 5, Mrs Curren’s narrative exposes the flaw in her attempts to stake a superior position and redeemed space for the self. Her story, however, reveals that this task is doomed for, as Coetzee has indicated in his work on the triangular structures of
desire in advertising, there is no separate, inviolate space for the mediating self (DP, pp. 127-138).

She relinquishes any elevated platform of authority from which to be heard in the narrative of historic events occurring around her. So, too, she surrenders her self-justification and her logical explanation of the times, up to an “easy birth” (AI, p. 144) into the new life of ‘mollificans’. This new life trope echoes the final Christian gift of reconciliation, which concludes a linear process of confession and forgiveness. It also hints at a redeemed life after death. This comforting religious connotation is perhaps the narrator’s unspoken wish. Yet, in spite of the snatches of relief, such religious absolution eludes her secular confession.

Coetzee identifies secular confession as a never-ending process (DP, 249). Mrs Curren’s story supports this, but Head suggests that Coetzee creates a ‘textual’ or metafictional end to her confession. Head regards John’s death as pivotal in her narrative:

Mrs Curren - is in sympathy with the authoritative moment before death experienced by another. This sympathy already installs a validity beyond the imprisoning self-consciousness of double thought, since the idea of the final moment, of courageous authority, is based on the example of another [John]. (1997, p. 140)

Double thought implies that all attempts at total honesty are compromised by a blind spot of self-justification. At the moment of death, such self-motivation is irrelevant. By affording Mrs Curren an opportunity to share the moment of death with John, but still giving her time to make her confession which is true, because it is not directly heard by her confessor, Vercueil, Head argues that Coetzee is able to construct an end to
confession (1997, p. 140). As the silent witness, Vercueil is the catalyst who brings forth her confession. Head writes that a “notionally untainted confession [is] - logically impossible, but [is] produced by narrative artifice - in which the self is alone with the self, without comfort or pity” (1997, p. 143).

I would add that Mrs Curren is only really ‘the self - alone with the self, without comfort or pity’ in the last two sentences, when she merges with Vercueil. I believe that this is a moment of creativity. This moment re-enacts the death of Christ on the Cross, an instant that transgresses the boundaries of language, but in which the body remains. Is this a moment of reconciliation between the self and the other? I maintain that, while Coetzee skilfully erases any podium of authority from which Elizabeth can be heard, he retains for Elizabeth and for his novel the most abject crack from which her soul, and the soul of the text, can emerge: “Vercueil and his dog, sleeping so calmly beside these torrents of grief. Fulfilling their charge, waiting for the soul to emerge. The soul, neophyte, wet, blind and ignorant” (AI, p. 170). Vercueil has become the mediator. This moment of final release is doubly important. It defies all discursive negotiation, for it lies beyond language and it is embedded in the mediating presence of the silent other.

In the same article on confession, Coetzee declares that “all autobiography is storytelling and all writing is autobiography” (DP, 391). Within the logical convolutions of Coetzee’s novelistic enterprise, the identities of Coetzee himself and the critic become implicated by their own body of work, their writing, which is all, in Coetzee’s own terms, autobiographical. By creating a textual strategy of merging the two identities in Age of Iron, Coetzee has cast new retrospective light onto each separate identity, and the unexpected possibilities which their merging might represent.
Mrs Curren's disease can be equated with Coetzee's own perception of violence. He says:

I can only say that violence and death, my own death, are to me, intuitively, the same thing. Violence, as soon as I sense its presence in me, becomes introverted as violence against myself: I cannot project outward. -- I cannot but think if all of us imagined violence as violence against ourselves, perhaps we would have peace --. (DP, p. 337)

The use of the passive voice at the end of this novel ends the agency of Mrs Curren. Is this an invitation to those present, Vercueil and his dog within the fiction, critics and fellow writers and readers as metafictional witnesses, to take up her 'idea' (in the Bakhtinian sense)? This surrender to the other offers a novelistic example to the present generation of literary practitioners and theorists.

Graham Pechey speaks of the post-apartheid South Africa entering the last of its neo-colonial phases (1998, pp 57-74). He states that the present moment in South Africa needs what the dying Bakhtin called "unexpectedness" and "absolute innovation, miracle", a need to imagine the unimaginable so that writers can "resist the birth of a constricted future out of a constricted past" (1998, p. 73). Such a response to difference, as is enacted in Age of Iron, is not only of local significance but also of universal relevance. Here Coetzee's writing extends Bakhtin's ideas on dialogic mirroring, to include the metaphoric possibilities of non-verbal sharing among the miracles that might open up the future. Surely this tangible example of relinquishment and embrace in Age of Iron calls for more than lip service? I believe that it invites action.
Vercueil becomes the fulcrum around which the future hinges, the future for Mrs Curren, the text itself and the transitional society in which it is set. He is also the mediator via whom the letter will or will not be delivered to her daughter in the USA. This letter is a metaphor for the threads of connection between this local story and global complicity and significance. The daughter is a trope for the reception of this wholly South African story by the wider post-colonial world.

The uncertain outcome of her letter is perhaps a reflection on the precarious position of all literary work in South Africa at the time. Elleke Boehmer asseverates that writing in South Africa during the last days of apartheid was caught in "a suspension of vision - - -.

This sense of delimitation is perhaps pointed up most clearly at that place in the narrative which involves both retrospection and anticipation - the ending" (1998, p. 45). Among the examples which she quotes, Boehmer refers to the ending of Age of Iron in which the anticipated end or death is postponed. She calls for

a return of endings that allow for new beginnings, for gestative mystery, the moments and movements following apocalypse, also the dramatisation of different kinds of generation and continuity - - no longer the inevitable interregnum, arrested birth, the moment before death - in short, the foreclosure of the frozen penultimate. (1998, p. 51)

Yes, Mrs Curren's own narrative is suspended a moment before death, but I do not agree with Boehmer that the ending of Age of Iron forecloses on new beginnings. As I have explained, Mrs Curren's silent presence offers an example of both relinquishment and receptivity. Besides, Vercueil remains. I suggest that Coetzee's open-endedness to new ways of embracing the future are embodied, or should I say hidden, in the expanding
presence of Vercueil. Coetzee has also chosen Vercueil as the emissary of his own writing. By avoiding the competing centres, Coetzee is opening his writing to the unknown and unpredictable possibilities of such a marginal mediator.

Unlike Magda (IHC), Mrs Curren is able to act as her own agent of change, by merging with Vercueil. She is able to abandon the ideology of binary conflicts, which has been the mark of the colonial order. Her new alignment with the margins also shares the restrictions of marginality, namely insignificance and immanent demise. This is a relinquishment of fixed historical discursive structures and a textual exposure of the flaws of liberal humanism. It also introduces the possibility of a reconstructed ethics, although it does foreclose on any exploration of that option. In The Master of Petersburg, the pervasive merging of identities and oppositional moralities reaffirms the need for ethical scrutiny and most particularly self scrutiny and non-binary negotiation. Head has said that Coetzee’s style is determined both by his particular political moment and by “the broader intellectual moment, with its emphasis on the world as text” (1997, p. 161). Coetzee’s local and international, individual and community foci elide in The Master of Petersburg.
7. 3. THE DETECTIVE GAME: MERGING AND SEPARATING MOTIVES.

Watson describes the main character of The Master of Petersburg, 'Dostoevsky', as "a soul in mourning, a soul avid for metamorphosis, yet courting darkness, a more absolute knowledge of its own evil, even as it seeks omnivorously, compulsively, for that which will serve its own creative purposes" (1994, pp. 58-59). This is a detective story which explores three facets of a fictional representation of the master writer's life: the private, internal suffering of a man grieving the death of a son; the external intrigue of rival political manipulations in which the young step-son had become embroiled and which led to his suspicious death; and the metafictional study of the process of writing. The novel is an investigation of the possible motives which may have led to Pavel's murder or suicide. Barry Unsworth calls it a classical quest novel, which contains the sequence of arrival, labyrinthine search and revelation (1994, p. 31).

Coetzee combines his interests in Russia and the revolutionary movement, Dostoevsky, transgressiveness and confession into an intricate 'pastiche of hybridity'. Boundaries of perception are deliberately indistinct. The real and the imaginary, the historic and the current, the textual and the actual, the public and the private, the famous and the insignificant, even the self and the other are blended into this tale of discovery, in which 'Dostoevsky' sets out to learn the truth about what happened to Pavel, but ends up discovering some painful truths about himself.

Perhaps the key to uncovering the mystery behind the master's narrative is to be found, not in methodical distinguishing between identities or separating individual motives, but rather in accepting the direction which the pastiche of merging seems to reveal, namely, a non-oppositional space for negotiating new and changing patterns of individual and
community identity or culture. This is an area of dynamic experimentalism which challenges all premises upon which systems of meaning are based. I claim that *The Master of Petersburg* maps this fluid metafictional site in which the understanding of otherness is unsettled and continually mutating.

Homi Bhabha maintains that cultural identity is a social function which is not sufficient unto itself. Rather, it is a construct of language which is never merely transparent or mimetic of that which it represents (1994, p. 207). He redefines Franz Fanon’s description of

the zone of *occult instability* where the people dwell [as] that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meanings and symbols of culture [and identity] have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew. (1994, pp. 207-208)

While Bhabha clears this conceptual space, Coetzee creates the fictional identity, the master of Petersburg, in that void. The implications and responsibilities of this shared theoretical and imaginary location are enormous.

If I read him correctly, Bhabha concludes that this dynamic and hybrid space creates an opportunity in which binary confrontation is disempowered and the identity of the self can allow the otherness within the self to emerge (1994, p. 209). I suggest that this otherness includes the shameful, dark side of the self or the inner devil which ‘Dostoevsky’ acknowledges. This is a confession of complicity with ‘conflictual otherness’. I maintain that it is this self-disclosure that appears, on first glance, to betray
the other but that, in fact, disarms the binary which perpetuates the politics of polarity. I believe that it is this possibility towards reconciliation which Coetzee is flagging. This will be explored further in chapter 8.

It is in such an unsettled and indeterminate space that I understand Jean-Phillipe Wade to be suggesting that South African literary history can be rethought in order to create new, less rigid tracings of past representations (1996, pp. 1-9). I believe that the dynamic re-readings of the canon will open up dialectical opportunities for cultural creation, but the freedom to create new identities requires the personal commitment and receptivity of each agent, whether as a writer or reader to the other. Kristeva articulates this possibility as the foreigner living within us: "He is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity flounder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself" (1991, p. 1).

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky was the father of the modern polyphonic novel. The milieu in which the Russian master wrote bears significant similarities to Coetzee’s own historic placing, thereby providing a mirror to the South African writer’s on-going interests in the role and responsibility of the author and the relationship between fiction and history. The grim poverty of the underclass in Tsarist Russia, censorship and the power of the bureaucrats resemble the context in which the culture of apartheid bloomed. Russia has also held a fascination for Coetzee since childhood. In Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life, he comments that his interest may have begun as mere perversity to choose differently from everyone else when they sided with the Americans in 1947 (p. 18-19). Z. Zinik says that the Russian political activi•t. Nechaev, who has influenced both the Russian and the South African authors and is fictionalised in
Coetzee's novel, has been a source of inspiration to many revolutionaries, including some members of the ANC (1994, p. 19).

Coetzee's continuing interest in Dostoevsky lies in the fact that he was one of those "who not only lived through the philosophical debates of their day with the intensity characteristic of an intelligentsia held down under censorship, but also were the heirs of a Christian tradition more vital, in some respects, than Western Christianity" (DP, p. 244).

J. Frank stresses that Dostoevsky dearly wished that his country would be healed from the self-destructive conflicts in which it was embroiled (1995, p. 412). He claims that Dostoevsky always tried to maintain a balance between the ideals of the revolutionaries and the agitation which they stirred up (1995, p. 500). I contend that Coetzee has similar commitments to reconciliation in his own country.

Much of the content of The Master of Petersburg is gleaned from a controversial chapter, entitled "At Tikhon's" in the novel, The Possessed (also called The Devils), by Dostoevsky. It was censored by the publisher, Katkov, on the grounds that the contents relating to Stavrogin's suggested rape of his landlady's fourteen year old daughter, Matryosha, were pornographic. Two versions of this chapter IX were finally published in 1922-23 (R. Lord, 1971, pp. 102 - 104). Konstantin Mochulsky said that this novel is "one of the greatest artistic works in world literature" and the omitted chapter is Dostoevsky's loftiest artistic creation and Nicholai Stavrogin, one of his strongest characters (1967, pp. 459, 463). It is into this outstanding example of literary creativity that Coetzee insinuates his own fictional tale about the author.

In his essay, "Confession and Double thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky", Coetzee undertakes an analysis of Stavrogin's confession to the monk, Tikhon, in the
controversial chapter of Dostoevsky’s novel. At the core of his essay is an interest in “the self’s presence to the self” (DP, p. 240), in other words, the extent to which the self recognises the truth about the self. Coetzee observes that the spiral of self-accusation can continue forever, for as soon as self-forgiveness is scrutinised to assess the possibility of self-delusion, the game begins again. As he says, “Dostoevsky indicates that the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self deception” (DP, p. 291). He concludes that, through Stavrogin’s confession, Dostoevsky is establishing the point that the Christian sacrament of confession is the only means of coming to rest, because it is followed by absolution. Dostoevsky himself commented on his own creation: “the unique freedom is conquering oneself” (Mochulsky, 1967, p. 426).

In the novel, Stavrogin tells Tikhon: “I believe, as in the scriptures, in a personal devil, not an allegorical one” (from a translation of chapter IX of The Devils in Lord, 1970, p. 113). Mochulsky elaborates on this text: “Yes, this is the whole thing: Stavrogin canonically believes in the devil, without believing in God; the proud and strong spirit, God-like in his grandeur, has renounced the Creator and closed himself off in selfness” (1967, p. 459). The tragic embodiment of the Anti-Christ was very important to Dostoevsky. In a letter to his publisher, Katkov, he said: “I have taken him [Stavrogin] from my heart” (quoted in Mochulsky, 1967, p. 409). Coetzee has responded to the Russian author’s cue and woven threads of Stavrogin’s identity and the nineteenth-century author’s own focus on self-scrutiny and confession into his (Coetzee’s) own fictional character of ‘Dostoevsky’.

This merging of the Russian author’s biography and fiction elides with the factual biographical details and fictional constructions of Coetzee himself. Coetzee is interested
in the Russian Orthodox Church's process of confession, reconciliation and absolution, which resembles the similar pattern in the Roman Catholic church, with which he was familiar from his secondary school days at a Marist Brother's college, St Joseph's. He has said that he is not yet a Christian (DP, p. 250) and yet, as I mentioned in chapter 3, he believes that the presence of the body of Christ on the Cross "overwhelms" all theoretical reduction (DP, p. 278). I even consider Coetzee to be a kindred spirit of the Dostoevskian character, Stavrogin. Tikhon says that the confessor, Stavrogin, "reminds one of a man - - seeking after a cross [which] seems incongruous in a man who does not believe in the Cross" (quoted in Lord, 1971, p. 117). In spite of his non-belief, Coetzee's fascination with religious absolution prompts him to attempt to create a form of secular confession in fictional text. In the previous section, I explained that Head points this out in a discussion of Age of Iron (1997, 129-143).

I contend that The Master of Petersburg is an attempt to extend secular confession. The Crucifixion symbolises the moment of absolution for believers. Coetzee is representing a textual alternative for the Crucifixion, without immanent death. He is, in fact, representing the process of writing fiction as the crucifixion of the writer, in the hope that self-forgiveness and reconciliation with the other will be achieved. It is, as 'Dostoevsky' says to Councillor Maximov, "a private matter, an utterly private matter, private to the writer, till it is given to the world" (MP, p. 40). Just as the character 'Dostoevsky' challenges God with his transgressive story, so the writer lays bare his soul before the reader in the form of the text. The allusions to the Crucifixion in the novel will be further explored at the end of this section.

In The Master of Petersburg, Coetzee is again trying to extend the boundaries of self knowledge. Watson suggests that Coetzee creates a psychic schism in the character of
‘Dostoevsky’ in this novel (1995, p. 52). His “trail of shame” [reaches a kind of] critical mass — where the weight of his transgressions is such that they come to form something of an autonomous complex — which then proceeds to split off, establishing a separate self, an anti-self, a double, a devil” (1995, p. 52). This splitting off is the source of the writer’s creative energy which reveals itself when the master begins to write at the end of Coetzee’s novel and he is possessed by a demon. Watson asks: “It is to know that his “I” is broken and that there is a stranger who has usurped his voice. Is that stranger the Devil or himself?” (1995, p. 153). The writer has become two: the self and a mirroring other. This leads to a never-ending self-reflection, such as the form which Coetzee considers in his essay, “Breyten Breytenbach and the Censor” (GO, p. 227), which was examined in chapter 5. Again here, the boundaries between the self and the other disappear.

I would add that ‘Dostoevsky’s’ trail of shame is only open to the scrutiny of the anonymous narrator (his story is told in the third person) and reader, because he already resides on the abject margins, like his fictional predecessor, Vercueil, between that which is redeemable and the damned, where shame has no currency: “First in his writing and now in his life, shame seems to have lost its power, its place taken by a blank and amoral passivity that shrinks from no extreme” (MP, p. 24). In these words, ‘Dostoevsky’ is strikingly similar to the sinner, Stavrogin in The Devils, who says: “I suddenly thought of a Jewish proverb: ‘One’s own excretions do not smell. — I came to the startling realisation that I was not aware of the difference between good and evil” (quoted in Lord, 1971, p. 126).

In The Master of Petersburg, the transgressive story about the violation of a young girl is a goad to force God to respond. Perhaps such openness and courage to recognise the
evil within himself is the seed from which his redemption might sprout. Could it be that Coetzee is presenting a textual goad to the reader to respond so that ethical boundaries can be re-negotiated? I intend to demonstrate that, by creating a textual merging of different identities in the novel, the differences between the self and the other disperse and new opportunities for defining identity flourish. The implications of this challenge for each identity and whole societies is historically significant. This will be addressed in the next chapter.

Head asserts that there is a sustained, inter-textual confrontation of the limits in The Master of Petersburg (1997, p. 149). As in Coetzee’s other novels, transgressions of the limits pervade the text. In fact, this novel can be read as a pastiche of ignored, violated and erased boundaries between identities. The division between accurate historic representation and imaginative fabrication is unclear. Some of the historic ‘facts’ of the story have been changed. Ted Solotaroff says that the real Dostoevsky’s son, Pavel, outlived him and was reputed to have been a financial leech, too lazy to have even dabbled in political activism (1995, p. 170). Bakunin and Nechaev were revolutionaries in Dostoevsky’s time, whose ideas are represented in Dostoevsky’s work and in the embodiment of the character of Nechaev, the nihilist in Coetzee’s novel. Even the actual historic incident of the murder of Ivanov by Nechaev is woven into the recent novel. Raskolnikov from Crime and Punishment, by Dostoevsky, is also misrepresented by ‘Nechaev’ in The Master of Petersburg (201). Thus the master author’s own creation is misappropriated and used against him. Solotaroff points out that the deliberate distortions of the historic and fictional backgrounds create cognitive dissonance in this apparently realistic novel (1995, p. 19). Michael Dirda summarises the disorienting effect as “a trap to catch readers” (1994, p. 48).
In The Master of Petersburg, the merging of identities becomes a focal device to extend some of the ideas which are represented in earlier works. Coetzee erases all ‘safe’ positions from which judgements can be made with impunity. Each of his main characters exhibits a flaw or crack in their carefully constructed sense of self, thereby undermining their own stability and self-justification. This weakness can be the point at which the defining and separating boundaries of the self dissolve and characteristics of the other flow in, while aspects of the self disperse. The magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians is incarcerated by his own people for his ‘suspicious’ relationship with the ‘barbarians’. He has relinquished his self-image as colonial servant and embraced the position of the foreign other. Ironically, his imprisonment is both a sign of his inability to be free from his colonial bindings and a sign of his thwarted merging with the other, for the other has not opened to him. He is caught in the gap between the two positions. So, too, Elizabeth Curren (AI) comes to align herself with a vagrant who belongs nowhere. Michael K (MK), and Friday (F) also inhabit this dialogical no-man’s land.

The main character in The Master of Petersburg, ‘Dostoevsky’, comes to be defined by this same political, philosophical and even social homelessness. Like Mrs Curren’s cancer, Michael K’s hair-lip and Friday’s mutilated mouth, his disability (epilepsy, in his case) is a physical expression of the pathology in his society.

Throughout the text, there is a blurring of the outline of identities. This is a threefold process which is most evident in the identity of the main character. First there is a perceptual shift within the individual where the boundaries of the self seem to be disappearing. ‘Dostoevsky’ notes that “something has been ebbing out of him that he thinks of as firmness. I am the one who is dead, he thinks; or rather, I died but my death failed to arrive” (MP, p. 19). Then there is the disguised appearance, whereby an
individual claims to be other than himself, either in name or appearance. ‘Dostoevsky’ misrepresents his own identity, claiming to be Pavel’s biological father, Isaac. Finally, there is a disintegration of margins separating different people, leading to a partial merging of identities.

The most significant of these mergings is the attempt by ‘Fyodor’ to become one with Pavel. Essentially, he wants to revive the spirit of his deceased step-son by using his own corporeality to fill the young man’s clothes with life. He attempts to fuse his own identity with that of Pavel by wearing the white suit of the young man. His sense of self becomes overwhelmed by his obsession to connect with the deceased boy. He says: “—his ghost is entering me” (MP, p. 4). This grief resembles a swamp in which his own identity seems to dissolve. Throughout the text, Pavel is gradually raised to textual life in the body of his step-father, through the inner discoveries of ‘Dostoevsky’.

This novelistic rebirth performs a bifurcated function. It reflects ‘Dostoevsky’s’ inner exploration and desire for self-forgiveness, and it offers another angle of observation or interpretation of past events for dialogue with the ‘master’s’ own memory. ‘Dostoevsky’ states:

From somewhere to somewhere I am in retreat; when the retreat is completed, what will be left of me? He thinks of himself as going back into the egg, or at least into something smooth and cool and grey. Perhaps it is not just an egg: perhaps it is the soul, perhaps that is how the soul looks. (MP, p. 19)

The text is an allegory of his re-creation. Unlike Mrs Curren, he does not have to die for his identity to be created anew. He acknowledges that there are different conflictual
facets to his identity and he wishes to reconcile these disparate parts. The dilemma of the self telling the truth to the self is re-enacted in the mirroring of the father and the son. In fact, the lead which ‘Fyodor’ takes in trying to resurrect Pavel and trace his life of political commitment is subverted, when Nechaev tries to persuade the master to issue a statement for print about his son’s death. ‘Dostoevsky’ suggests yet another loop to the mystery by questioning whether Nechaev has laid “a devilish trap” with Pavel’s death as the bait to lure the father to Petersburg, and to use his famous name on the propaganda pamphlets (MP, p. 203). The labyrinth of intrigue and motive becomes knotted and confused in much the same way as the separation of individual identities becomes smudged. The mirroring creates a sense of doubleness, ambivalence and the repetitive blurring of edges.

This fluid merging and separating of the identities of ‘Dostoevsky’ and Pavel is repeated in other dynamic erasures and restorations of boundaries which ‘Dostoevsky’ observes between identities in the novel. At times, ‘Fyodor’ conjures up the image of Nechaev when he tries to summon up the face of Pavel (MP, p. 49, 60). Pavel is also brought to life in the odd gesture or movement of another (MP, p. 152). When he first reads Pavel’s Siberian story, he comments on the similarity between the Maximov and the old landowner in the story. Later in the text, he reads the story again and observes that the character of Sergei is an imitation of Jesus Christ. By slippage, he extends the comparison to include the atheist Nechaev.

This movement of connection and separation of identities is not restricted to the gaze of the master. The other characters also display such shifting forms of identity. ‘Dostoevsky’ observes that this is “an age of acting, this, an age of disguise” (MP, p. 195). Nechaev appears first in the disguise of a woman. Later he dons the white suit of
Pavel in order to evade the notice of the authorities. The tramp who is murdered is actually Ivanov, an under-cover police agent. Disguise, inter-textual allusions and intra-textual linkages between identities are repeated throughout the text. This prevents the representation of any distinct, unperforated position. The boundaries between binary oppositions fade and the similarities between disparate, often conflicting characters emerge.

The pervasive merging of identities and shifting ideological positions and motives subverts any idea of a stable arena within which a contest between different positions can be staged. Actually, ‘Dostoevsky’s’ investigation fails. He does not track down a succinct motive for suicide, nor does he single out a murderer. All he succeeds in discovering is a confusing maze of mutations, which all implicate himself. This novel is an extended excavation of otherness which ends up exposing the otherness of the self. The volatile boundaries between the I and the you continually shift so that differences become similarities, opponents become accomplices, and identity dissolves into the cracks between the self as the subject and the self as the object of scrutiny. The self and the mirroring other merge and become one.

I asseverate that this repeated evasion or excavation of a secure podium of authority, the position of a fixed identity, from which to speak represents a deliberate, public refusal on the part of the author, Coetzee, to submit to the violence of polemical confrontation. Such confrontation might be political, as in the clash of ideologies, or academic, as in the conflict between discourses. Nevertheless, the focus remains a struggle for supremacy, the ‘I’ seeking mastery over the ‘you’. I suggest that, throughout the three shifts which Attwell identifies in Coetzee’s work, Coetzee has maintained a sustained and expanded and refined representation of confrontation between identities and avoidance of such
confrontation. The primary confrontation, which underlies all other encounters that Coetzee has consistently traced, is this encounter of the self and the mirror image of the self. All confrontation with others in all the novels is a mere reflection of the "self's presence to the self" (DP, p. 240). Coetzee's text reflects a diversity of subject positions. Hence he affirms Bakhtin's notion of the polyphony of the modern novel and yet he also challenges and extends Bakhtin's theory by establishing that a mirroring of the self lies at the heart of all other confrontation.

In chapter 3, I pointed out that 'Dostoevsky's' betrayal of others like Pavel is actually a public betrayal of himself as signified by the taste of gall, when he confronts God with his transgressive writing. Throughout Coetzee's novels there are dual, contradictory themes of retributive violence and attempts by characters to evade this confrontation. In each text, he installs positions which resist such binary oppositions, often leaving the presence of the wordless, suffering body to make its own meaning (Foe and Age of Iron). This third position will be discussed in the next chapter. Perhaps the most powerful presence of all in Coetzee's fiction is the image of the 'Dostoevsky' writing the controversial chapters of The Devils. The author is mirrored in his writing. This is a confrontation between his demons and his daimon, like the mirroring of the self and the gaoler in the Breytenbach poem which was quoted earlier, in chapter 5.

Coetzee has confessed that he is troubled by violence. In chapter 2 I discussed his confession that any trace of violence in himself becomes introverted, as violence against himself (DP, p. 337). His writing is perhaps just such an introverted violence against himself, for the very reason that it is a public exposure. He sees the Crucifixion as a refusal to participate in retributive violence which can also be described as violent confrontation with the other (DP, p. 278). I would even go so far as to argue that all of
his writing is a form of 'secular crucifixion' for Coetzee for two reasons. He persistently seeks ways to represent alternatives that resist confrontation with the other; and he regards all writing as autobiographical (DP, p. 391). Hence he is creating a space for himself from which he can refuse to participate in conflict with the other. For believers, the Crucifixion is the moment of absolution, the reconciliation between the self and the other. Could Coetzee be attempting to secure a textual, secular absolution? And is that absolution a cathartic release for all cultural and political theoreticians and practitioners, himself included, from the traps of our flawed and divisive heritage of how we make meaning?
7.4. CONFRONTING DIFFERENCES DIFFERENTLY OR THE SIMILARITY OF DIFFERENCE.

The three detailed examples of merging between identities, described above, reflect the development of Coetzee's theoretical position and the continuity of his intellectual preoccupations. He progresses from representing attempts by individuals who are caught within the structures created by the dominant ideology of their time and place, to find a voice that will be heard without using the rostrums of authority, created by history. Magda's narrative is a textual effort to create an identity which is free from the restrictions of colonial hierarchy, from within the consciousness of a coloniser. Mrs Curren's embrace of the margins marks a shift away from the hierarchy of the centre to the options on the edge of society. In The Master of Petersburg, the foundations of all positions continually mutate, so that the only ethical basis of response can be its provisionality and openness to re-negotiation.

Throughout his work, Coetzee repeats the pattern in which the body of an identity claims its own authority, either with or without the conscious consensus of the individual. Eugene Dawn's body defied his meticulous logical self-justifications; Michael K's consciousness is also quite remote from his physical needs. Other characters like Mrs Curren and Susan are, at times, finely tuned to their bodily sensations and requirements. Physical self-representation offers a presence with the means of recognition that transcends the limitations of verbal self-representation. This authority of the body evades the confrontation of discourses, for it lies beyond the limitations of language and yet it can still be textually represented. The text provides a mirroring other in which the self can be reflected, without the intervention of the consciousness of the self.
Each of Coetzee's novels ends with the ambivalent presence of a damaged body, which is both trapped in the confines of its situation and which also occupies a space beyond the limitations of the symbolic systems which it inhabits. The most enigmatic physical presence at the end of a novel is that of Friday at the end of *Foe*. This ambivalence of textual representation is significant to the specific meanings of each narrative, to the historic setting of the novel and the current literary and sociological reception of the text, and to the metalinguistic implications of representation.

While there may be three shifts in Coetzee's focus, as Attwell suggests (1993, p.118), I maintain that the moments of merging in the novels represent a geological fault running through the entire body of Coetzee's work, through which his perennial concerns shine. His fundamental strategy is to create a textual space in which the violence of confrontation with the other, whether as another individual or as an oppositional system, can be resisted. Watson suggests that all of his protagonists share an "insatiable hunger - - for ways of escaping from a role which condemns them as subjects to confront others as objects in interminable, murderous acts of self-division" (1996, p. 23).

Throughout his novels, characters attempt to evade confrontation. Each character fails to secure such a safe haven. Magda cannot escape the shackles of her colonial situation. Mrs Curren cannot evade her fate and 'Dostoevsky' is caught in his diabolical challenge of God. Nevertheless, each of these characters glimpses moments of revelation beyond the confines of their individual positions, in imagined or enacted physical union. I assert that this enlightenment occurs when each identity relinquishes the security and gaol of itself as a separate stable and oppositional identity, and risks opening up and flowing out to the difference of the other. The non-verbal aspect of physical representation, which
lies beyond the scope of polemical debate, affords the opportunity for a textual merging
with otherness, which transcends the limitations of divisive, discursive practice.
SECTION VI: THE PRICE AND THE PRIZE OF BETRAYAL
8. A WRITER CONFRONTS HIS WORLD

J. M. Coetzee occupies a unique temporal, spatial and ethnic position at this most significant moment in history. His writing spans the last twenty-five years, during which both his homeland and the wider world have undergone significant change. This time frame includes the high years of Nationalist government in South Africa, when apartheid was hailed by its champions as the most effective form of maintaining close control over a disenfranchised 'non-white' majority, the demise of that repressive system, and the introduction of universal suffrage under the ANC. In the international arena during this time, the tension between the two superpowers of The United States of America and the USSR has dissipated, as there has been some agreement on nuclear disarmament and the Eastern Block has been fractured by multiple local struggles for national self-determination. Nevertheless, tensions in the Middle East persist and the intervention of NATO in the conflict between the Serbs and the Kossovars may have extended the costs of confrontation. In the cultural field, the proliferation of interdisciplinary theories and the post-structural emphasis on relativity has opened up new possibilities for speaking and listening.

This chapter will deal with the known, public or revealed identity of the author himself, his own marginality in the changing world which he inhabits, and its relevance to his writing. The identity of the author and the political, academic and ethical site which he occupies will be examined to establish the context of the production of his novels and to trace some interfacing between the author and his work. The wider intellectual background which both influences and is challenged in the novels will be addressed, when some of the reception of his work is considered.
While shifts in emphasis, such as Attwell’s observation of three phases in Coetzee’s work (1993, p. 118), may serve the purpose of a specific enquiry, such as the one undertaken in the previous chapter, I nevertheless concur with Head who says that the preoccupations that have come to be associated with Coetzee are all present in the first novel (1997, p. 3). A critical negotiation of his fiction reveals that, throughout the novel sequence, there is a sustained intellectual continuity.

I suggest that the debate about whether his focus changes or remains the same and my own ambivalent response to that debate highlights a deep ontological dichotomy at the heart of the novels. Watson best describes this contradiction as the paradox which Coetzee opens up between being and becoming (1996, pp. 28-36). He defines ‘being’ in terms of cyclical time. Many of the novels introduce a fascination with the interiority of stones and the self-contained activity of insects, which embody the passive and cyclical world of nature. Watson suggests that contemplation is a cyclical mode of being (1996, pp. 28-36). On the other hand, ‘becoming’ is required by the linear process of engaging with sequential events (1996, pp. 28-36).

To choose the cyclical life of contemplation, removed from the relentless march of chronology, is to be caught behind locked gates in a petrified garden of self-invention like Magda (IHC, p. 139) or in a mental asylum like Eugene Dawn (D, pp. 45-51), unable to enter into significant dialogue with the changing world of events and trends. Ironically, each of these characters has not been able to evade the thrust of history, for they are each scarred by the violent context of the times in specific incidents of confrontation with another. Even Michael K’s hope of withdrawal from the world at war around him, to a minimal subsistence on pumpkins in isolation at the end of the text, is
overshadowed by a remembered threat, the threat that his haven will be discovered and misinterpreted as part of a war strategy by others, as it was once before (MK).

For each of these Coetzee characters, there is a split or contradiction between the stagnation of thought without action and the inability to act meaningfully within the greater movement of history. Watson also discusses the notion that this ambivalence in Coetzee’s work represents a failed dialectic, which is this point of convergence of the cyclical and the linear or the contemplative and the historical (1996, p. 13-36). I am of the opinion that this is the paradoxical, ever-present moment, when identity is simultaneously constructed and eroded.

Coetzee’s writing is situated at the junction of many more confrontations. Much of the critical debate about Coetzee’s fiction engages with the contestation between binary opposites. Ross Chambers describes the axiom of oppositionality thus: “what is mediated can always be re-mediated” (1994, p. 1). He concludes that “change arises - to the extent that the recognition of mediation itself produces cultural agents as split subjects, that is as sites of awareness of the doubleness that constitutes them (and of the blindness to which this gives rise)” (1994, p. 27).

Perhaps the most enduring feature of the novels of Coetzee is that they highlight the problems of such an intermediary position, the position of a split subject. This is a site which both the author and his work occupy on the transitional cusp between the colonial and the post-colonial, the post-colonial and the postmodern, the Eurocentric and the African, the academic and the literary, the Afrikaner and the English-speaking South African, the patriarchal and the feminist, the theoretical and the political, the expedient and the ethical. While I do not presume that the two positions of the author and his
writing are synonymous, the metafictional nature of his texts and some of his statements, to which I have referred in chapters 2 and 3, suggest that there is some elision between the two. I will elaborate in this shortly.

Throughout the work, there is a sustained and continually renewed and renewing focus on the intermediary position and the role of the writer in relation to that position. This has been explored in an examination of the formation of identity as a construct of the self in isolation in chapter 3 and as a result of confrontation and momentary merging with the other in chapters 4-7. Even though Coetzee’s own position is marginal to the labyrinthine tracings in the novels, the metafictional games draw not only the author but also the reader into the orbit of responsibility of the fiction. All of the players in these games, from the characters to the author to the reader, are implicated in the persistent and penetrating scrutiny of complicity and conscience in the texts. Again I quote Ross Chambers: “If reading is that recognition of mediation, then it is inevitably a phenomenon of oppositionality and at the same time the motor, itself culturally and politically produced, of political and cultural change” (1994, p. 27). It is for this reason that most critics would agree on the ethical nature of his work (Attwell 1990, Attwell 1993, Carusi 1991, Head 1997, Parker 1996, Huggan 1996, Pechey 1998 and Van Zanten Gallagher 1991 and others). The sustained trajectory of Coetzee’s work points to the ethical imperatives of resistance, complicity, ambivalence and paradox.

As the earlier discussion of the novels has revealed, they offer no comfortable formulae or safe corner from which the other can be judged. The writing is inherently dialogic, in that the self always remains in view in the mirror held up to the other.
In the preface to a collection of essays on the works of Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer asserts that the critic often imposes his/her intention upon the intention of the writer (1996, p. ix). She defends a separation between the creative enterprise of the writer and the analytical task of the critics: “His readers receive these visions directly, unencumbered by any theoretical reflection upon them, by any alienating hint of how they were achieved” (1996, p. ix).

Attwell offers a rejoinder that the boundaries between critic and writer have become less and less distinct in the wake of post-structuralism, because mutual interrogation between different cultural discourses, such as fiction, theory and criticism, has broken down the divisions (1996, pp. 213-216). He says that more important than the problem of Us (the writers) and Them (the critics) is the self-consciousness in Coetzee’s novels “about how to understand the power and resourcefulness of fiction in relation to the discourses of criticism and theory (1996, p. 214).

Head concurs with Attwell. He refers to Coetzee as one of a new breed of “critics-as-writers”, whose academic and literary identities are indistinguishable (1997, p. 24), and, as such, Coetzee is able to pre-empt much criticism. Head intimates that Coetzee’s fiction offers a representation which defies critical colonisation and this underscores the problematic and evasive role of the intermediary for Coetzee’s work repeatedly slips beneath the barbed-wire fences of theoretical hegemony and critical tags (1997, p. 24-27). Coetzee himself distrusts criticism and refuses to view it as a process that deserves respect and he is ever wary of the echoes of colonial aggrandisement in the desire for interpretive mastery, even though he frequently transforms theoretical ideas into fictional motifs (Head, p. 26-27). However, as I have repeatedly stated, there is much more at
stake in the novels than a mere contest of intellects. The very identity of all players is at stake.

Graham Pechey asserts that "the valency of literary modes depends almost altogether upon the context of their production and reception" and he adds that Coetzee, himself, regards the novel as a valuable resource which is neither a partisan tool nor an exercise of non-engagement (1998, p. 66). While the primary concerns regarding the relation between the 'I' and the 'you' remain the same throughout the novel sequence, I maintain that there is also a progression in the fictional exploration, from the entrapment of the self to attempts to free the self from its chronotopic or historical burden of complicity, as both a perpetrator and a victim of transgressions, in metafictional representations of secular confession.

The author offers his own most private confession up for public scrutiny in his writing. This is not a presumption on my part. I repeat two statements which I have made earlier in chapters 2 and 7. In Doubling the Point, Coetzee's says that "all writing is autobiography" (DP, p.391). The master of Petersburg says that a work of fiction is an utterly private matter for the author, until it is given to the world in a published text (MP, p. 40). These two utterances lead me to deduce that Coetzee might consider his works of fiction to be private reflections of his own position, which he yields up to an audience when the texts are published. In fact, his penultimate text is a memoir of a few years of his own childhood. However, this is not to suggest that the author's present gaze is synonymous with the gaze of any of the characters or narrators in his novels, not even that of the child representation. These are rather a more blurred reflection of the author's ethical and theoretical concerns. Perhaps the ever elusive 'true' identity of Coetzee has been a merging of all the provisional positions which he represents.
'Has been' is the essential core of this attempt to trace the vital position which this famous author occupies at such an important juncture in world, as well as local time. Coetzee has been all of these things and more. Since identity is always incomplete, any retrospective frame is always fractured as the identity breaks through past definitions and flows into future and as yet unknown directions. Speaking of the author's position, Coetzee has said that it is the weakest of all: "Neither can he claim the critic's saving distance - that would be a simple lie - nor can he pretend to be what he was when he wrote - that is, when he was not himself" (DP, p. 206). Again the elusive author slips beneath the fences of containment. He reserves a private space for himself. Since the signifying process is peculiar to the situation in which meaning is being created, I suggest that the intermediary position which the author and his work occupy is only a glimpse at the wider context of the times.

It is, nevertheless, my thesis that the finite texts of the novels do provide a self-conscious public exposure of aspects of the author's identity. I maintain that Coetzee is offering his fiction, and with it, his own historic consciousness up as an example, not a model, but an ever struggling, deeply provisional and limited disclosure of the self's attempts to be present to the self. I believe that this is an example of a process of self discovery and self formation, in which the past and the present elide and open up a way into the future. It is a painful and frequently frustrated and unsuccessful project.

I repeat that Coetzee describes the flaw in white South African discourse as a "failure to love" (DP, p. 97). This causes a lack of reciprocity between the self and the other. This isolated subject position results in a deformed and stunted identity which even imagination cannot free. This was explored in chapter 3. Here Coetzee is very clear in his political and ethical commitment: a price must be paid for the lack of fraternity. As a first
step, the unnatural power structures of apartheid had to go. This has been achieved with universal franchise and the appointment of an ANC government. However the high crime rate and the pervasive anxiety about the future indicate that South Africa is still a deeply scarred and divided society. Fraternity has not been restored.

It would appear as if Coetzee is claiming that each individual in the society is bound to pay for his/her release from the bondage of their history. Just as the master of Petersburg pays for his defiling imagination with his soul, so perhaps Coetzee offers his own soul in his writing for the deformity of his historic placedness. I quote Breyten Breytenbach’s letter to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a fitting complement to the task which I perceive is Coetzee’s undertaking:

The minimal guideline growing from the minimalist convictions of the sceptic: It is wrong to kill, because the rub-out doesn’t solve the riddle of being born alone to die alone. By extension, that it is self-defeating to smother freedom of dreams of decency. Let the riddles multiply! The way forward can never be to commit crimes against the stories of history and culture, nor to stand by when these misdeeds are done...

The way forward is to keep moving! (1997, p. 165)

Coetzee has not stood by when the misdeeds have been done. While I do agree with Watson that the contradictions in many of the positions represent a failed dialectic (1996, pp. 13-36), which seems to create a motionless impasse, a suspension or petrification of action, I asseverate that Coetzee’s novels each and collectively enact moments of
resolution or synthesis which, however slight, fleeting and only imaginary are nevertheless movements forward. Some of these moments have been described in previous chapters.
8.1. ELUDING THE BINARY

In the quoted excerpt from Breytenbach’s letter, I suggest that he sets up the opposing possibilities of an active or passive response to the stories of history. This encapsulates the problematic task faced by the white writer in post-apartheid South Africa or, as Head says, “the post-coloniser as writer” (1997, pp. 158, 189). Coetzee has written on this dilemma of “either looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall or turning one’s eyes away” (DP, p. 368). For him, the challenge is “how to write about the dark chamber of torture - which in one sense ‘is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se’ - without reproducing the brutalities of the state” (Head, 1997, p. 159). In his writing, Coetzee offers imaginative and prophetic examples of entrapment and a desire to escape the bars of history. From his disclosures, he enacts novelistic ways to evade or transcend (en)closure and to keep opportunities for negotiation and reconciliation open.

“Opposition is predicated on hierarchy and duality” (Worth, Nestor and Pavlyshyn, 1994, p. i). The apartheid era legitimised hierarchy and duality. Coetzee persistently resists oppositional thought. As an example, he has said that he does not want to embrace an ethical position in opposition to a political position. He adds: “I do say that if I speak from a pole-position, from the negative pole, it is because I am drawn or pushed there by a force, even a violence, operating over the whole of the discursive field that at this moment (April 1990) we inhabit, you and I (DP, p. 200). The overarching opposition is between the past and the present or the grand narrative of History and current representations of consciousness. Among the interconnected binary confrontations which occur frequently in the novels, there are three which I wish to explore. These are: history versus fiction, the colonial versus the post-colonial and the patriarchal versus the feminist. The most overtly ‘theoretical’ of Coetzee’s novels is Foe.
This text provides a metafictional nexus or (plat)form on which the contest between opposing discursive positions is staged, and is therefore a good starting point from which to begin such an exploration. It must nevertheless be borne in mind that these contrapositions are repeated throughout the novel sequence.
8.2. EITHER HISTORY OR FICTION?

There has been extensive discussion on the oppositional relationship between history and fiction in Coetzee's novels (Attwell 1990 and 1993, Gallagher 1991, Marais 1996, Parker 1996, Watson 1996, Head 1997 among others). It is generally agreed that Coetzee has attempted to undermine the hegemony of the discourse of History by establishing fiction as an equal discourse, which offers new possibilities as the myths of the past crumble. As Dovey states: “Coetzee’s novels acknowledge their own historicity in a way in which many discourses, including most discourses of criticism, do not” (1996, p. 140).

‘History’ has three related meanings. It refers to the actual past event which cannot be recaptured or relived but which is only recoverable in language. Then there is the discourse of history, which includes the narrative of the past, the methods of acquiring information and validating representations or recordings of the past. Finally, the historicity of the discursive practice of history itself places the discourse within a context of production. Gallagher believes that history is a commonly agreed upon story which is defined more by its current function than by its veracity and that it can be a powerful form of societal myth-making (1991, p. 27). She elaborates on the role of myth-as-history in the service of apartheid legislation in South Africa.

I agree with her claim that it is Coetzee’s purpose to assert the validity of fiction as an equal and balancing discourse to history and that by refusing “to tell the same story that history does, imaginative storytelling provides a rival vision of reality” (1991, p. 22). Gallagher writes: “In a world of few models of non-oppressive discourse Coetzee struggles to reclaim language and storytelling for responsible action” (1991, p. 48).
Coetzee’s project, then, is not to oppose history but, as he, himself, has said, to “demythologise history” (Parry, 1996, p. 37). According to Watson, Coetzee might be described as being both “obsessed with history” and a most ahistorical writer for he deconstructs reality “in his conflation of historical moments, in his metaphysical preoccupations and his modernist leanings” (1996, pp. 18-22).

His fiction offers possibilities of telling the stories of the past without re-enacting the brutality of the state in the torture chamber. In a review on Kafka’s “The Burrow”, Coetzee said: “Is it not what is left after the interrogation that should interest us, not what the interrogation reveals? Is it not what Kafka does not speak, refuses to speak, under that interrogation, that will continue to fuel our desire for him (I hope forever)?” (DP, p. 200). In fact, such novelistic silences can inform the discourse of history on the incompleteness of re-enactment and analysis.

I suggest that, in his work, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Attwell undertakes a skilful shift in his perspective, away from the position of many other critics who set up a confrontation between fiction and history in Coetzee’s novels. He has changed the angle of his gaze. For Attwell it would seem as if the oppositional poles which other critics have identified as history and fiction, share the same polar position, in which text or discourse is opposed to history as past event, whether factual or fictional. In his excellent book on Coetzee, Attwell asserts that his novels explore the tension which exists between the polarities of history, as the past sequence of events and text (1993, p. 3). Attwell selects the term ‘situational metafiction’:

This would be a mode of fiction that draws attention to the historicity of discourse, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and, finally, to the
interpretative process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation. Of course, all these things have a regional and temporal specificity. (1993, p. 20)

In a review of Attwell's book, Marianne de Jong suggests that Coetzee investigates what forms of subject position or self-definition are available within a specific culture for a writer. She says that there is "a consistent awareness of the restrictions one's discursive placedness as a writer imposes on one" (1994, p. 234).

Coetzee does not wish to privilege fiction over history. He is sceptical of all hierarchical terminology, for he is all too aware of the conflictual potential of pyramidal structures, given his own historical positioning. In a reworking of Daniel Defoe's novel, Robinson Crusoe, from a post-colonial perspective in Foe, Coetzee performs what Head calls a double operation in which he associates literary and historic colonialism (1997, pp. 112-128). In this novel, the current academic interest in post-colonial issues engages with an eighteenth-century, English setting and colonial form. Susan's encounter with Crusoe is the act, the historic event, while her encounter with Mr Foe is the inception of the recording (1997, pp. 112-128).

Susan refutes the claim of a young woman that she is the narrator's daughter, even though the facts which Mr Foe presents about the younger woman's past appear to be accurate and her appearance confirms her existence. The question is: who is telling the truth or do the facts of the younger woman's presence and Mr Foe's research into her background hold more weight than the word of Susan? Such elision between the different meanings of history and fiction opens up negotiation between the respective discursive practices. There is no definitive 'truth'. The counter-discursive presence of Friday also points to the shared aporias in the discourses of both fiction and history. In
these elisions, Coetzee defies the very opposition between history and fiction which some have associated with his work. Thus he evades this hegemonic attempt of some of his critics.

From the earliest of Coetzee’s novels, the shadow of History seems to hang over the narrative in the colonial consciousness of the subjects. Jacobus Coetzee in Dusklands, the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians and Magda in In the Heart of the Country are all mindful of their heritage. They each attempt to break out of the clench-like grip of history. As an early explorer, the subject of later history book myths, Jacobus Coetzee annihilates the others who stand in his way as he opens up the hinterland of Southern Africa, thereby hoping to take the land from its traditional occupants, unopposed. He hopes to be free from the past, however he cannot escape from the consequences of history. Jacobus describes himself as “a tool in the hands of history” (D, p. 114). In a further irony, Dr. S. J. Coetzee says in an introduction to Jacobus’ narrative, included in the novel as an afterword: “Man’s thrust into the future is history; all the rest is dallying by the wayside, the retraced path, belongs to anecdote, the evening by the hearthfire” (p. 128).

For both Coetzee characters, Jacobus and Dr. S. J., there is an assumption that the grand narrative of History is territorial aggrandisement. The history of the others who counterpose this dominant discourse is either silenced, ignored or relegated to the incidental. The significance of the incidental will be examined later in this chapter. As Dovey states, Coetzee has to deal with two histories: “the history of his own discourse, rooted in the discourses of imperialism and the suppressed history of the colonised, which has to be recuperated without being arrogated to colonial discourse” (1996, p. 139).
The magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* focuses on the dichotomy which history represents, that is the dichotomy of *whose* story is being told and *whose* is unheard. He says: “Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history” (*WB*, p. 132). The magistrate wants to live outside history (p. 154) but he cannot. The truth is that he is not a part of the cyclical time of nature but of the linear time of Empire, the time of confrontation and domination. In *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda’s erasure of her father, whether by his actual murder or by his mere imaginary erasure from the text, is an attempt to dismantle her patriarchal heritage, however, as I have shown in chapter 3, she remains trapped by the structures of her historic location.

Head argues that Coetzee’s resistance to history may be a challenge to any consensus about what the word ‘history’ denotes. He maintains that Coetzee offers an even more fundamental challenge to the idea of history than a post-colonial revisionist interpretation in which “hidden history resurfaces in the process of decolonization” (1997, p. 11). Head suggests that Coetzee is attempting to focus on history as unrepresentable. He quotes a significant statement made by Coetzee to support his claim: “History may be . . . a process for representation, but to me it feels more like a force for representation, and in that sense . . . it is unrepresentable” (quoted in Head, 1997, p. 12). Head adds that such an idea bears an ethical requirement to resist the dominant literary momentum to represent history.

Nevertheless, Head warns against casting Coetzee in the easy oppositional role of resisting the dynamic of history, for he says that “Coetzee acknowledges that the unmediated presentation of history *is* imaginable” (1997, p. 12). I agree and add that
Coetzee has created textual voids, unmediated by language to adumbrate the 'unrepresentable'. This has been referred to in earlier chapters in the repeated images of a hole at the centre of the narratives of Susan Barton in *Foe*, Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K* and Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* and the crack in the bell which tolls the master’s story in *The Master of Petersburg*. These aporias evade oppositional engagement with some post-colonial debate and yet they add significantly to the theory, which, in turn, might inform the social and political negotiators in the future, both locally and abroad.
8.3. THE POST-COLONIZER-AS-WRITER

Imported theories of post-coloniality have been sceptically received in the South African critical context. Some, such as Chapman and Oliphant, have judged this theoretical labelling as an intellectual game of the privileged (cited in Collis, 1994, p. 2). Others, like Collis and Gordimer, have considered that much of the theory is apolitical and not relevant to the specific complexities of the South African situation (cited in Collis, 1994, p. 6). Alan Lawson asserts that the Eurocentric perception that the world is encoded in binary, is an “investment of interest and it is time to call for epistemological deregulation” (1994, p. 69). The binarism of Europe and its others creates restrictive camps which overemphasise difference. Many post-colonial critics, such as John Thieme and Homi Babha, have noted that to invert the binaries of colonialism and its others is only to perpetuate the oppositional duality (Lawson, 1994, p. 78). Nevertheless, as the editors of Literature and Opposition argue, post-colonial theory is endlessly problematized, for each critical position is reinvigorated by oppositional critique (Worth, Nestor & Pavlyshyn, 1994, p. xiii).

While it is generally agreed that Coetzee’s writing is post-colonial, some critics focus on the echoes of an inherent colonial voice. As the master player, the intermediary at the centre of his own meticulous games of reflection, Coetzee has been variously criticised. In spite of his efforts to subvert all dominant orders, his very resistance echoes the liberal-humanist academic voices of a dominating European tradition. Parker has argued that Coetzee is “entrapped by the invariably uncritical rhetoric of an overarching binarism between ‘European’ - - and ‘African’” (1996, pp. 83-84). Parker further maintains that Coetzee is a dissenter, but only insofar as his privileged position as a descendant of Cadmus equips him to dissent (1996, p. 101). In a review of White
Writing, Clayton argues that Coetzee's reception by an international audience, eager to hear and align itself with anti-apartheid voices within the country, further enhances his privileged position as a spokesperson. She asks: "Are there not deserving and valid Black (and "Coloured") viewpoints that are not being as widely articulated, circulated and listened to?" (1994, p. 156). Coetzee has also been criticised for his failure to invite dialogue with the critical voices of black South Africans (Parry, 1996, p. 61). The temporal and spatial defamiliarisation strategies in the texts undermine possible links with historical realism. For this evasion of the most immediate and urgent national political needs, Coetzee has been further criticised (Gordimer 1996, and Parry 1996).

In spite of these criticisms, the very elusiveness and self-scrutiny in Coetzee's novels continues to inform the post-colonial debate. In a review of Doubling the Point Jeanne Colleran affirms Attwell's stance that Coetzee has founded a reconstructed ethical position in fiction with which to encounter the political (1994, p. 579). She points out that the essays reveal that Coetzee is primarily engaged with the "politics of language, but which Coetzee would address in larger terms as the complexities of truth-telling" (1994, p. 579).

Colleran highlights an article, "A Note on Writing", written by Coetzee, in which he extends "a middle voice poetics (and by extension, politics) in which the middle voice operates between the active and the passive voices (pp. 582-583). Macaskill charts this third position in Coetzee's novels in which the middle voice struggles to exercise it own agency, while avoiding both negation and concordance with ideological determinisms (1994, pp 441-475). He says that the fiction of Coetzee "is a doing-writing that takes place in the median between "literature" and "theory"" (1994, p. 471). He argues that this "doing-writing" allows for a middle-ear "doing-listening" and he believes that this
middle voice offers the opportunity for us to read and use our socio-historical maps in order to make new ones (p. 473). Coetzee continually evades the confines of binarism in an attempt to find a third voice which may mediate a new position, not through confrontation but through a convergence of purpose. I would add that this is much like Michael K’s dream for himself and his imaginary companion (MK). This convergence of purpose is the tiny seed of hope from which, I suggest that Coetzee’s fiction germinates. Macaskill concludes that Coetzee’s method invites engagement by participants in the new government of South Africa “to listen as well as to act in order to bring about a new topopolitics, but also more generally on behalf of the topopolitical sight, or insight, of critical theory world-wide” (p. 472).

Annamaria Carusi maintains that, whilst postcolonial liberation literary discourse highlights the “irretrievability of otherness”, this does not mean that there is no otherness and she argues for a “reconstructive programme” which focuses on the present and the future rather than on an analysis of past origins of otherness and she suggests that Coetzee offers such a creative site which lies beyond, or ‘transcends’ the oppositional debate (1991, p. 103). I have explained that Head argues for the intermediary nature of Coetzee’s postcolonialism (1997). He relates Parry’s argument for the unapproachability of the confrontation between the identity of the postcolonising self and the silence which surrounds the other to Coetzee’s claim for the ‘unrepresentability’ of a force of history, the force of the post-colonial (Head, 1997, p. 157). As I have explained earlier in this chapter, Coetzee uses imaginative, textual devices to adumbrate this aporia. Clayton argues that the self-conscious awareness of difference in the individual narrative voices in Coetzee’s work not only deconstructs the myths of national identities and Eurocentric assumptions, but also invigorates local creative production (1994, p. 165).
For Head, the ambivalent position which the post-coloniser occupies is able to offer an alternative site of creative transcendence, beyond the endless opposition inherent in all theoretical debates (1997, p. 156). Head also stresses the ethical nature of Coetzee's work, where the emphasis on textuality involves the need to renegotiate the identities of both the self and the other (p. 156). Head describes the site, occupied by the post-coloniser-as-writer, as:

The familiar postmodernist dissolution of the subject-position [which] is rooted here in the moment in which the colonised recognises being contaminated by the coloniser who is simultaneously confronted. It is a moment of doubling which is essential in the process of decolonisation, because the given of colonial history can be arrested, as the materials for its supplanting are assembled: this, it seems, is the transcendence of which Coetzee speaks. (p. 149)

It is from this transitional site that "Coetzee gestures continually towards newly conceived political identities, through fictions which are themselves pointed acts of hybridity" (Head, 1997, p. 20). Marianne de Jong says that Coetzee is primarily interested in the subject position (1994, pp. 234-236). She adds that the very acknowledgement of the restrictions and relativity of discursive positionality open up discourse, the means which enable and position the writing, to an awareness of what that discourse excludes and silences (pp. 234-236). I would add that this is surely the local and universal significance of Coetzee's own subject position as the post-coloniser-as-writer?

In a criticism of the novel Foe, Pamela Dunbar points out that the white Prospera figure of Cruso dies, leaving the woman, Susan, and the black man, Friday, to author the future
I agree with Dunbar’s post-colonial interrogation in which she says that Susan’s treatment of Friday echoes colonial domination and, “even in its synthesising and possibly apocalyptic moment the text still renders Friday as passive and as a fertile field of play for other significations” (1994, p. 109) and that Coetzee’s defence against a post-colonial critique could be that the text is ironically conceived “by being placed within the embattled and deeply erroneous consciousness of the coloniser” (p. 109). Head concurs with such a position. He calls this novel “a transitional model of decolonisation” or a “maze of doubting” (1997, p. 128).

So Coetzee has created a position from which fiction can speak to other discourses on its own terms, without claiming the moral high ground in a binary confrontation. He has created a new intermediary space for the novel in which the fiction is able to engage with other discourses such as theory, history and politics, not in confrontation but in concert, to acknowledge the aporias which are mutually reflected and to negotiate possibilities of reconstruction together. Head extends this idea that Coetzee has opened up an intermediary space. He claims that Coetzee has created a new subject position in the character of ‘Dostoevsky’. He says:

The censor/writer confrontation, which includes a self-confrontation with the internalised demon-voices, is thus a new figure for the moment of post-colonial writing as it is manifested in Coetzee’s work. Significantly, it also elides the resisting writer (white or black) with the oppressed Other more generally. (1997, p. 149)

Again Coetzee asserts his resistance to confrontation with the other, while opening up an internalised site for the limitations and exclusions and finally the accountability of conflictual discourses to be accommodated.
I suggest that this is an exciting contribution to post-colonial theory, for this site is only occupied by one individual identity, confronting his local and global world. This is not only an opportunity for renewed theoretical discussion. The whole sense of self of each of the players is also implicated. By this, I mean that Coetzee does not merely stimulate academic debate about this new subject position. Instead, the internalised demon-voices of the character reflect similar demons in the identities of the debaters, the writer and the reader. These inner devils will continue to unsettle and provoke admissions of culpability and a desire for reconciliation within each participant.
8.4. A SPACE FOR WOMEN

The position occupied by women is the focus of much of Coetzee’s writing. Many of the narrators are women. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, Susan Barton in *Foe* and Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* each tell their own story. In male-narrated texts, the role of the women characters is pivotal. In *Dusklands*, Eugene Dawn’s wife and the sexual partners of Jacobus Coetzee’s slaves precipitate a reaction by the protagonists, which highlights a crisis of identity. The Barbarian girl is the other against whom the magistrate attempts to define himself in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Even the various women in *The Master of Petersburg*, from the widowed landlady, Anna Sergeyevna, to the impoverished mother-cum-prostitute, to the revolutionary Finnish girl to the child, Matryona, each mirror an(other) angle of refraction to the confused and mourning stepfather and each is, in turn, redefined by that reflection. Some of the opposition between patriarchal and feminist positions is clearly verbalised, as in the articulate penning of Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, while another silent presence, such as that of Klein-Anna in *In the Heart of the Country*, offers a body of resistance to the paternalistic world which Magda inherits.

This opposition is most overtly represented in *Foe*. In a discussion of Dunbar’s feminist criticism of *Foe*, I wish to demonstrate how Coetzee undermines such conflicting theoretical stances.

Dunbar expresses disappointment in Coetzee’s feminist recuperation in *Robinson Crusoe*, because he subverts familiar gender placings from within the traditional structure. In Dunbar’s opinion, Susan Barton should not merely submit to prevailing masculine attitudes, such as the use of the phallus of the pen to ‘father’ her text, but she
should rather try to find new possibilities of identity (1994, pp. 101-110). Dunbar suggests that this "fondness of hegemony implicates Coetzee also; in spite of the novel’s projected feminism, Foe (Defoe) - and, we understand, Coetzee also - seek to retain hold of the image of author" (Behmer, Chrisman and Parker, 1994, p. xvi). In defence of the validity of Coetzee’s position, I wish to quote his own later reference in Giving Offense to Luce Irigaray’s theory that a woman cannot substitute feminine power for masculine power for she would still be 

cought up in the economy of the same. - - - [He adds that] There is no simple manageable way to leap to the outside of phallogocentrism, nor any possible way to situate oneself there, [on the outside], that would result from the simple fact of being a woman. Unless the woman’s utterances are to remain ‘unintelligible according to the code of force,’ they must be borrowed from a model that leaves [her] sex aside. (GO, p. 27)

The editors of Altered State? Writing and South Africa also defend Coetzee’s method by stating that “the ‘language’ of the non-verbal body - - - the visual vocabulary of experience which is represented on mutilated flesh, the ‘text’ of those silenced - - - becomes a means of representation, the inscription of an as-yet-inarticulable-subjectivity” (Boehmer, Chrisman & Parker, 1994, p. Xvi). Once again the body asserts its own position, a position that transcends the limitations of discourse.

I would add that, by retaining the hegemony of the paternal grand narrative, Coetzee has imploded Susan’s story. There is little substance of the masculine other (whether Cruso or Daniel Foe), against whom a rubbing of her self can be achieved. By occupying positions of both male and female genders, with herself as the subject of the narrative (a
woman) and as the writer representing the masculine with Mr Foe as the female muse, Susan becomes both the subject and the object of desire. I suggest that Coetzee exposes a crack in the inviolability of discursive hegemony by making a woman the subject and the object of phallogocentric desire, for Susan is able to subvert patriarchy from within her restricted female subject position. Thus Coetzee opens up feminist discourse to its own beyond. The political ramifications of this textual strategy to expose the flaws from within are as pervasive and elusive as the bubbles which issue from Friday's mouth.

I do, however, agree with Dunbar that Coetzee has done more than undermine the foundations of dominant discourses. By exposing the feminist agenda to seize male power, he has revealed a weakness in any system in which the positions of the participants change, but the system remains the same. Coetzee may be anticipating the future for his own country and internationally. Merely to change the players but continue to use the old forms of hierarchy will only cause the entire structure to collapse inward.

The peculiar value of fiction is that it has no rules of observation or pattern of acceptance. The imaginary does not have to conform to binary logic. It is apparently free to open up unknown opportunities for discovery. But here I present another rejoinder: Coetzee exposes the difficulty which the author has in embracing such unfettered verbal opportunities. Magda claims "while I am free to be I, nothing is impossible" (IHC, p. 8). Her tale refutes this claim, for even though she says that her father, "the censor snores, [and] to the crazy hornpipe I dance with myself" (p. 8), she shows herself to be bound by her confining colonial consciousness throughout the narrative. This demonstrates the rigorous objective of Coetzee to undermine the authority of the speaking subject in his novels (Attwell, 1996, p. 214). Instead of creating a freed, new discursive position, the novels offer glances of new possibilities of communication and understanding in the
bodies, rather than the words of the subjects. These moments have been discussed in previous chapters.

Jolly suggests at the end of her introduction to *Writing South Africa* that creativity is unbounded in the post-apartheid South Africa. While this may be an admirable ideal, I propose that Coetzee might be uncomfortable with such a sweeping claim for his own creative production. Attwell introduces his text, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, with a quotation from *Doubling the Point*, in which Coetzee says "I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) from which he constructs shadow representations - which are shadows themselves - of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light" (1993, p. 1). In the primary text, Coetzee goes on to say "I do not imagine freedom, freedom *ansich*; I do not represent it. Freedom is another name for the unimaginable, says Kant, and he is right" (DP. p. 341).

All identities, whether they are the writer, the fictional subject or the reader, are shackled to the material conditions of their construction, their discursive positioning and, as Coetzee suggests, can only glimpse reflections of the Platonic ideal of universal truths on the prison cave wall. Perhaps it is as Parker says, the continuing "highly principled and self-effacing fastidiousness" of J. M. Coetzee throughout his writing that makes his fiction reflect the polyphony of ordinary, unimportant and incidental voices (1996, p. 106), which, Njabulo Ndebele believes, embody the textures of life beyond the confrontational epic of heroes (1994, pp. 41-59). These voices echo insouciantly through the cracks of a country ravished by an epic history of violent confrontation.
In the introduction to *Rethinking South African Literary History*, Jean-Phillipe Wade provides a double definition for the term ‘disclosure’, which is to reveal that which is concealed or marginalised and to resist closure (1996, p. 1). He adds that it is within the space opened up between these two divergent meanings that a reconstructed literary history of South Africa can be sought (1996, p. 1). Post-colonial revision has ‘disclosed’ a wealth of new retrospective analyses of literary efforts undertaken in a segregated society which also create radical new ways for encountering the future. I suggest that the elision of Coetzee’s theoretical and fictional enterprises in his novels anticipates this current metafictional focus on re-reading difference. Throughout his creative work, Coetzee has embroidered around the mutating meanings of difference. At the core of this task is the difference between the self and the other. The diversity with which the self is confronted in this post-apartheid time when all structures of the society are being challenged by a vibrant experimentalism, from the political to the economic to the cultural and social, renders a response to change and difference unavoidable. It has been demonstrated in earlier chapters that Coetzee’s novels provide a rich polyphonic resource of responses to difference: from conflict to evasion to identifying with the other in moments of merging.

Graham Pechey has hailed the South African author, Ndebele, as “a prophet of the post-apartheid condition” (1994, p. 1). Indeed, Ndebele has been widely acclaimed for his insight into the requirements of a restructured state and the scope of his vision for new directions of his country. The most frequently quoted work, entitled “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa” (written in 1988), continues to be as relevant today as it was when it was written 10 years ago. In this article, Ndebele
points out that the overwhelming injustices within the social makeup of South Africa have, in the past, led to a sense that all writing had to make a strong, epic, political protest and he reminds the reader that such complex dilemmas cannot be reduced to a set of basic formulations (1994, pp. 141-159). Instead, he advocates a rediscovery of ordinary, non-heroic stories “because they constitute the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions” (1994, p. 157). He goes on to predict that, as the effort to install a new society intensifies, “every individual will be forced, in a most personal manner, to take a position with regard to the entire situation. - - It will be the task of literature to provide an occasion within which vistas of inner capacity are opened up”(1994, pp. 57-58).

The revolution, which everyone foresaw in the 1980’s, has not eventuated. In spite of the increasing pressures from the liberation movement, it was the Nationalists, the architects of the intricate net of apartheid legislation and the government in power who initiated the demise of their own political monolith. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu states, “South Africans have seen a miracle unfold [the negotiated dismantling of the institutionalised racism of apartheid] - . It is an achievement that has inspired the admiration of the world” (1997, p. vii). This dramatic change is of universal importance for the relatively peaceful manner in which it was achieved. However, the means whereby the miracle might endure is perhaps of even more substantial significance, for it implicates everyone, not only the political leaders in the society.

Ndebele says in a preface to a collection of his essays:

The fact of the matter is that the liberation movement has been denied the ultimate experience: to witness the resounding defeat of an enemy. The Bastille
Instead of political purgings of the vanquished, the all too usual result of a violent overthrowing of a government, there has been a far more complex process of negotiation between the 'redeemed' position of the nationalists and the voices of the struggle against apartheid legislation. This process of negotiation has trickled down and opened up potential for meaningful dialogue between different groups and individuals. In this new game of transition, in which neither party is the victor or the vanquished, injustices of the past cannot be redressed with summary punishment of perpetrators, since the aim is to heal and not perpetuate antagonisms. Ndebele's call for a rediscovery of the incidental stories of ordinary people was an accurate prediction of the present need. By telling their stories and listening to the stories of others, new understandings might be formed.

In another article, Graham Pechey has called Coetzee's epic subject matter in the novel, The Master of Petersburg, a complement to Ndebele's call for a literature of the ordinary (1998, p. 57). Far from being a neglect of the most significant sequence of events in recent South African history, when all racial groups were able for the first time to participate freely in the election of the government, Pechey claims that the digression from the 'South African' theme opens up the wider international field of history and theory for comparison (1998, p. 57). He says:

We will not understand the tasks and possibilities of any literature of the colonial margins without first understanding the deep-structural freight of meaning which
such a discourse brings with it in its transplantation from the centre and which that transplantation creatively renews. (1998, p. 57)

While, on the one hand, Pechey elaborates on this complementarity between the extraordinary and the ordinary, or the centre and the margins, on the other hand I suggest that all of Coetzee's work can also be read as a compliment to Ndebele's foresight. Each text does transgress the boundaries of immediate local representation by introducing extraordinary features such as temporal distancing, either in historic or futuristic placing, geographic or social displacement. Nevertheless, each novel also represents the ordinary, for the narratives are unheroic and the characters are insignificant. I would even include the text on the great nineteenth-century Russian author as such an ordinary story, for it can also be read as the private and unsuccessful life of a grieving step-father (MP). The epic account of the public exposure of a famous writer may be read as only a shadow of the other incidental tale. Hence Coetzee's work is, indeed, deeply complementary to Ndebele's neo-political position in its difference as well as its similarity. Both South African authors, Ndebele and Coetzee, are prophets who imagine community differently. Both advocate a literary style in which binary confrontation is undermined, when ordinary people risk being heard and incidental stories become significant.

The main political forum for this sharing in South Africa has been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which has completed its two year task of conducting hearings on crimes committed in the name of the old regime. The function of this commission was detailed in chapter 3. It offered a venue in which contrition, confession and forgiveness could be publicly witnessed. It has been hoped that these stories of ordinary people would help towards a reconciliation between victims and their torturers,
so that the future could be embraced without "the cobwebs of the past interfering". I suggest that J.M. Coetzee's attempts at secular confession in his three later fictional works, *The Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, enact just such a possibility. It is not my intention to consider the 'success' or 'failure' of the recent commission, but rather to focus on the example that Coetzee presents.

I believe that Coetzee's example also performs a vital and immediate political and ethical function: the attempts of Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* and 'Dostoevsky' in *The Master of Petersburg* to secure release from the never-ending cycle of secular confession provide another example of complementarity and, one would hope, of the prophetic voices of confession. Mrs Curren represents the unastonishing non-heroic position of a female liberal-humanist in the apartheid society. Her classical heritage has inspired her with a liberal vision of a just and conflict-free society. She repeatedly condemns the young comrades' use of violence to Mr Thabane, a black school teacher and defender of the youth. 'Proof' that she is relinquishing her judgmental stance is provided when she tries to contact Mr Thabane to warn him of the dangers. I believe that it is this action of fraternal concern that releases her from her historic entrapment. It is because she has yielded up her rigid ideological position and connected with the humanity of the other that she earns forgiveness. In a sad irony, she cannot reach Mr Thabane, and her reconciliation with him is suspended. Nevertheless, her blind spot of self-interest (for the inter-racial violence was threatening to her own safety) has been removed and she is now open to share her confession with Vercueil.

'Dostoevsky' can be seen as the mirror image or complementary half of Mrs Curren's identity. He is a male literary hero of mythical status. He is a writer of modern novels,
whereas she is a scholar of dead languages. In spite of their differences, he too reveals his soul when he begins to write. His self-betrayal was discussed in the previous chapter. This is an exposure of his blind spot, a desire for sexual knowledge of a young girl. His public confession is his attempt to undo the pathological vice in which he is caught.

These two characters are juxtaposed and yet they are similar, in that they are both able to confess their faults. Their absolution or release from their burden of guilt is more troublesome. As Head asseverates, both secure a textual end to their confessions. However, might I add that they are each suspended on the cusp between condemnation and redemption. Both fail to receive their release: she is not yet dead and he still tastes the gall of self-betrayal at the end of the text. Remembering that these two texts were written before the momentous changes of 1994, they can be considered to offer examples of confession to the process recently undertaken in the ‘new’ South Africa, although, in both, the author wisely forecloses on predicting an outcome. Instead, the reader is left to respond, not to the confessions, since Coetzee has already hollowed out all positions of judgement, but to the example of self-disclosure and a herald of the future.

Here I maintain that Coetzee takes up the cue of his own novelistic challenge and is again a forerunner in the disclosure of scenes from his past.
9.1. THE AUTHOR’S CHALLENGE TO THE CENSOR IN THE MIRROR OR THE PUBLIC CONFESSION OF A MOST PRIVATE LIFE

At the end of his 1994 novel, The Master of Petersburg, the famous author contemplates the taste of betrayal. This was discussed in chapters 3 and 7. It is with the lingering bitter-sour taste of betrayal of the other and self-betrayal that the text ends. Perhaps this is the self as it is ‘secured’, the identity of the master as he is known and defined by others and by himself, hitherto. The emergent man, whom even he no longer recognises, departs into the unknown beyond the text. It is with the same shared taste of gall, and all the implications of betrayal of the self of the past and the unknown sense of the self in the future that Coetzee and his reader approach his next creative work. This taste is an acknowledgement of the unpleasantness and vulnerability of such inner confrontation.

In chapter 2, I explained that I have chosen to include Coetzee’s latest text, Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life, among his fictional works for, even though it may be a historical account of Coetzee’s own childhood, the question of whether it is an accurate representation of the facts or a merging of imagination and time-tainted memory cannot be answered. Besides, it is my thesis that there is an extended, yet indistinct elision, between the author’s private life and his public works.

While the style of narration resembles much of his other writing, the content of this latest work is quite distinct. Like other novels, it is written in the third person. This has the effect of removing the story from its author. Just as there is a gap between the unseen narrator of The Master of Petersburg and the intensely personal experiences of ‘Dostoevsky’, so the public figure of this famous late twentieth-century South African author is kept apart from the private and provincial life of the protagonist. This distance
keeps sentiment and adult evaluation or critical scrutiny of the story at bay. The book is a sequential record of the growth of the boy from his move to Worcester in the Cape Province to his family’s return to Cape Town, his change of schools and finally the death of his aunt Annie. This linear narrative is interspersed with random memories of stark significance in the style of oral narrative. The temporality of this narrative mode implies spontaneous recollection, rather than a calculated self-justification. Dialogue is noticeably absent. I suggest that this aporia is filled by the reader. Thus Coetzee has set up a mirroring or a dialogic engagement between the unseen narrator, the boy and the reader.

This is a direct, simple confession, uncomplicated by the presence of the intellectual author. His international stature and his extensive literary knowledge are ignored. Instead it is a straight-forward recollection of a boy’s troubled encounter with his world. The boy confronts the paradoxes of the highly divided society in which he is raised. There are many margins between different, often antagonistic camps. The ethnic groups are quite distinct: the English and the Afrikaans, the Coloured people and the Africans. Religion also offers its divisions: the Dutch Reformed, the Jews, the Catholics and the non-religious. Socio-economic factors create yet another stratum of distinctions. The overlaying of these grids of division creates a complex pattern of inclusions and exclusions, in which the multiple margins are extensive.

In numerous different situations the boy has continually to re-negotiate his own position in relation to the positions of those around him. His sense of belonging is repeatedly compromised by his own marginal history and the peripatetic example of both of his parents. To his inherited marginality he adds his consciously chosen marginality as a child. The identity of the boy is shaped by confronting and avoiding that which it is not.
In this, Michael Wade was accurate when he said that the English-speaking South African defines himself by what he is not (1993. p. 150). But Coetzee cannot be so easily drawn into this camp either. In a final twist of irony, Coetzee also defines himself as not an English-speaking South African, when he accepts that he is complicit with the history of the Afrikaners and he refuses to contest any qualifications to such naming because he is “so sick of contestation - contestation and the spectacle of contestation” (DP, p. 342).

Wade also defined the English South Africans by their lack of connectedness to the land (1993. P. 150). Coetzee’s love of the countryside and his sense of belonging to the land also set him apart.

Coetzee’s formative years set in motion a pattern in which his own identity truly does seem to slip beneath the fencing of all camps. But that does not imply that he occupies an elevated position of judgement. On the contrary, I maintain that Coetzee is telling his own story as directly as he can. In fact, I strongly disagree with David Kurnick who says that this text “belongs to two literary traditions - - - that have become notorious as vehicles of self-justification: Boyhood is both an adult’s memoir of an unhappy childhood and a white South African’s memoir of life under apartheid” (1997. p. 1).

Ironically, I believe that the great value of this text lies precisely in the fact that it includes none of the novelistic devices or theoretical games at which Coetzee is a highly skilled master. I would argue that this work is a masterpiece in metafictional refinement. This is far more serious than a textual game of wits. It is far more than an intellectual exercise. It is an issue which implicates his own most private identity. This is the honest confession of a man who has spent the last 26 years addressing the problem of how the self can tell the truth to and for the self, in a world in which identity is usually seen to be created in confrontation with the other.
The price of Coetzee's novelistic game is high. It is a game of souls or essential identities. As 'Dostoevsky' muses: "They pay him lots of money for writing books, said the child, repeating the dead child. What they failed to say was that he had to give up his soul in return" (MP. p. 250). Coetzee has involved his audience, his readers, in a long and tortuous process of seeking out meaning as an intermediary between the international academic community and the local political exigencies. Now, when his countrymen are searching for new ways to interpret the past so that they can more willingly embrace the future, and when the wider world is doing likewise, in the hope that the twenty-first century will be purged of the seeds of radical evil that spawned such violence in this century, Coetzee offers simple fragments of his own ordinary story.

As I explained earlier in this chapter, Coetzee has posited a new position of non-confrontational post-colonial authority, in which a shared sense of human qualities and frailties encourages a willingness to listen to and embrace the other, rather than to judge and challenge the other. From this third position, there is a common sense of complicity in all acts of goodness and evil, in which the body or the human presence, rather than the vying of discursive conflict, is heard. Now Coetzee offers himself, without rational justification or judgement. The memoir of his boyhood on the edges of so much history is the textual 'body' which he offers.

Ronald Wright suggests that the technique of telling the narrative in the third person and the historic present resembles "a single character study from a larger braided work, perhaps of fiction" (1998, p. 6). I would like to extend this idea by adding that such braiding might signify Coetzee's hope that others will respond to his lead. This confession confronts the identity of this reader-confessant (the author of this thesis) with
a challenge. The rules of the game have been established in the former novels. Throughout his work, Coetzee has exposed the flaw in all confrontational positions which set up one identity or discourse in opposition to another. He has meticulously revealed that all positions of judgement are tainted and therefore unworthy of casting judgement. Now he offers his own childhood for public scrutiny. It is a brave move! Perhaps the ultimate lesson from his example is to hear the confession and to respond to the light which may shine through the cracks, without resorting to the confrontation of a discursive game of words. Like the body of Christ on the Cross, which Coetzee has honoured (DP, p. 337), Coetzee offers Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life as an alternative to the violence of confrontation. It, too, is a body of work which transcends all analysis.
SECTION VII: CONCLUSION
10. THE VALUE OF THE GAME

In this thesis, I have explored confrontation and its implications for the formation of identity in the novels of J. M. Coetzee. Since identity is not fixed, the self is forever adumbrating itself in its etchings of the other. My method has been to examine how Coetzee’s various characters either embrace or resist contact with others and the unavoidable imprint of this touch or lack of touch upon themselves. In the process, I have found a crack or flaw running through each of the characters. It is in tracing this crack that I have discovered, what I believe to be, the heart of Coetzee’s ethics. However, this is not a universal, fixed, rationally defined and defended stance, for such an ethics could elicit a counter-position and so the whole process could be reduced to a mere academic game of point scoring. The most exciting feature of Coetzee’s ethics is that it is characterised by leakage. His sympathetic imagination seeps through the boundaries that define and separate otherness. In the precious moments of merging between identities, I contend that Coetzee is offering us an opportunity to share the being of the other, thereby blurring the divisions which create confrontation and violence. Coetzee uses fiction to lead all other discourses from literary theory to history to politics away from opposition towards empathy and reconciliation.

My discovery is best described by Coetzee’s latest fictional protagonist. Mrs Costello begins her lecture by reflecting on why she has been invited to talk on ethics before this prestigious assembly. She says, “If you had wanted someone to come here and discriminate for you between mortal and immortal souls, or between rights and duties, you would have called in a philosopher, not a person whose sole claim to your attention is to have written stories about made-up people” (L.A, p. 22). While her lecture is
ostensibly a defence of animals against human consumption, it is also a defence of otherness. All the logical convolutions of different ‘moral’ positions are explored and yet, finally, it is the sympathetic imagination which is best able to represent the being of animal otherness. Given recent global and local history, this reflection on our individual complicity, and responsibility for, the brutality against animals bears a poignant human mirroring.

This latest writing of Coetzee is the most explicit, metafictional address of his own fictional undertaking. In one of the critical commentaries included after Coetzee’s lecture, the embedded fictional account of Elizabeth Costello’s lecture, Majorie Garber suggests that Coetzee is asking: “What is the value of literature?” (1999, p. 84). I maintain that Mrs Costello is giving voice to the profound value of Coetzee’s own literature. The fable is a narrative of philosophical debate. While Mrs Costello has to enter into discursive engagement to defend her position, it is the experiences of Barbara Smuts, the primatologist, which conclude the reflections on Coetzee’s lecture and affirm Costello’s metalinguistic position (and, I would add, Coetzee’s). Smuts enacts Costello’s suggestion that “there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another” (LA, p. 35). In his merging of identities, I have shown that Coetzee creates these opportunities of imagining difference differently.

Our long philosophical tradition appeals to our rational faculties but Costello is arguing that this grand discourse has failed to lead us beyond confrontation and the potential for horror which polarity can effect (LA, p. 22). Costello hints that the ‘father of reason’ was shocked by the evil at the core of man’s consciousness. She says: “Even Emmanuel Kant - - had a failure of nerve at this point” (LA, p. 23). This radical evil is essential to man’s will, consequently we are burdened with full responsibility for our foul actions
(Copjec, 1996, p. xi). But the repeated atrocities of history seem to show that logic continually fails to enlighten us: "How we could each time consent to our undoing, why we ceaselessly allow ourselves to abandon all hope, these are the most difficult questions the human animal poses to the philosopher" (Rogozinski, 1996, p. 35).

I asseverate that Coetzee does not try to answer these questions. Instead, he moves beyond them and provides examples of hope in his novels. Having traced confrontation and all the ramifications to individual and collective identity, Coetzee leaves us with the unavoidable and uncomfortable awareness that betrayal of the other is also betrayal of the self. But he also offers glimpses of redemption in sympathetic imaginings of otherness. How the theorists will respond to the lead which Coetzee takes awaits reply.

There are some aspects or points of entanglement in the novels which might also yield interesting extensions to my work on confrontation and identity. One such arena is the representation of family relationships. Father-to-son, mother-to-daughter, daughter-to-father and son-to-mother relationships form an integral feature of most of the narratives. I suggest that an exploration of these relationships might reveal some interesting knots of confrontation, responsibility, and intertwined histories and some shared sense of familial identity. Similarly, a tracing of Coetzee's frequent embrace of a woman's voice and the various roles of women in his fiction could offer new insights into his game. The relationship of the protagonist to 'God' is also complex and focal in some of the novels and well worth closer scrutiny.

With the ANC gaining more than a two-thirds majority in the elections in June 1999, they may now be able to rewrite the constitution of South Africa. What changes they will effect and how these will impact on the South African society has yet to be seen. In the
wider scope, there is also uncertainty. The outcomes of the conflict in Kosovo and the elections in Indonesia have yet to be felt. The Y2K bug has prompted international concern. So, too, the next millennium will bring new, as yet unimagined, challenges.

Coetzee's perennial concerns transcend these temporal shifts because his work has been persistently transgressive of all laws. And yet, while Coetzee's writing has never been directly oppositional in terms of resistance, it has always engaged, if only obliquely, with current systems, whether political or social. I believe that Coetzee's fictional example will take a theoretical and practical lead in engaging with the challenges of the times. It is up to the reader to follow that lead. As Linda Hutcheon declares: "To read is to act; to act is to interpret and to create anew - to be revolutionary, perhaps in political as well as literary terms" (1984, p. 161).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


