



From your reading of Gordimer and Coetzee, do you think they have discharged their responsibilities, as novelists, effectively?

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The question of authorial responsibility arguably arises as soon as a work of literature is committed to the public realm, especially when the novelist is as prolific, and as publically engaged, as either Nadine Gordimer or J.M. Coetzee. Add to this the burden of offering an unprecedented insight into their native South Africa at a time of social, political and humanitarian crisis, and it becomes incredibly difficult to view the works of Gordimer and Coetzee as blessedly untouched by responsibility and duty. Paradoxically, it is the very freedom with which one is able to approach and interpret their works that encourages a view of the novelists as somehow ‘held...by the claims of different concepts of morality — artistic, linguistic, ideological, national, political, religious — asserted upon [them]’.¹ These notions of responsibility are arguably impossible to eradicate, for they define the very sensitivities and subjectivities that diversify reader responses and yet, in their prescriptive nature, threaten the ‘Eden of creativity’² that the novelist inhabits.

It is the existence of this exterior pressure, of these expectations, demands and anticipations, that distinguish Gordimer’s notions of responsibility most clearly from Coetzee’s: the former recognising the implications of this code of expectations, and ‘whether [the novelist] should respond’³ to such demands, the latter railing against any notion of duty foisted onto his identity, for Coetzee is ‘not a herald of community or anything else [but] someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light’.⁴ Any form of restriction demands an opposition in freedom, and it is with this dichotomy in mind that this essay will proceed, in an attempt to discern how far Gordimer and Coetzee can be seen as conscious of, or indeed responsive to, the ‘dynamic collective conscience’⁵ to which their novels inevitably speak, and how far their exploration of restriction and control calls attention to the demands and responsibilities that they themselves face as novelists.

The inner turmoil and exterior pressures faced by the novelist are most explicitly foregrounded in the novelists’ depiction of fictional writers; the notions of responsibility that plague these characters inevitably calling attention to Gordimer and Coetzee’s own conflicted senses of duty. For Will, the writer-protagonist of *My Son’s Story*, the act of writing is an unavoidable duty, not predetermined, but dictated by the experiences that exterior events and stimuli thrust into his interior world. According to Will, ‘what he did - my father - made me a writer’,⁶ not in the immediate sense of Sonny’s actions, but in the repercussions that his

¹ Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility*, ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), p. 3

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 6

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 341

⁵ Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, p. 6

⁶ Nadine Gordimer, *My Son’s Story* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 274

transition from school teacher to revolutionary exerts upon the family. Having strived against his father's assertion that 'my son's going to become a writer',⁷ Will is condemned to living 'the sham ordinary life'⁸ that his family, in their commitment to the revolutionary cause, have eschewed. He is equally stifled by his determination to play the role of the good son: forbidden to fight 'for my people...for my freedom',⁹ Will cannot allow himself to defy his mother's wishes, for if he 'withdraws, she is without support',¹⁰ just as by concealing Sonny's infidelity and 'the mystery of his absences [Will] could not evade being drawn in'¹¹ to his father's duplicity. Writing, therefore, provides a means of articulation for Will's revolutionary beliefs; an act that implicates a duty to 'record...what it was really like to live a life determined by the struggle to be free'.¹²

The refuge of the family unit is ultimately sacrificed to the greater revolutionary cause, its exterior pressures made interior in the microcosm of the home. Sonny's politics pave the way for a full-scale invasion of their interior lives: the communal atmosphere of their Benoni home gives way to the secrecy and 'privacy [Sonny] deserves',¹³ as they move from the familiarity of the ghetto to the white suburbs, in a purely political gesture at inequality. Similarly, Sonny's infidelity poisons the sanctity of his marriage to Aila and, in 'a final spurt of anger...sperm turned to venom',¹⁴ his racially provocative relationship with Hannah is allowed to invade their union. Revolutionary action usurps emotional engagement in favour of a 'sexuality of commitment'¹⁵ that extols the danger of conflict above the familiar domesticity of the home. For Elizabeth Costello, the position of the novelist must be defended against the interrogation of these exterior pressures, requiring the novelist 'to perform' their identity as such 'at the same time as [they] write'.¹⁶ Yet Will's identity is not so much jeopardized as dictated by this public invasion of the private realm; the paradox being that his struggle for freedom is what burdens him with the duties of the novelist.

For Gordimer, the desire for freedom is inextricable from the fundamental restriction of physical space, and much of her fiction is concerned with the viability of individual freedom beyond the confines of defined spaces. In *The Pick Up*, Abdu and Julie search for a neutral space, beyond the geographical boundaries that dictate their identities. In South Africa, Julie's freedom and privilege is ensured by the existence of a less fortunate class; an antagonism that elevates her status as native above Abdu's as foreigner. Similarly, the religious and familial restrictions of his home country dictate a prescriptive code to which Abdu, on the principle of free will, refuses to adhere. Therefore, the only viable chance for equality lies with a third, neutral space, wherein Julie and Abdu would be united as *equally* foreign, *equally* striving for belonging. Maureen and Bam extol the virtues of such a space in *July's People*; their white privilege tempered with liberal politics. However, their idealism is destroyed when the loss of their material possessions brings about a crisis in the 'affluent white South African'¹⁷ identity that defines them; without the bakkie or the gun, Maureen is 'in no possession of any part of her life'.¹⁸ Both visions of shared ethnic space are undermined by a return to identities defined by their confinement: Julie sacrifices her freedom for the 'temptingly dangerous'¹⁹ prospect of submission 'for one who has believed

⁷ Gordimer, *My Son's Story*, p. 36

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 254

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 276

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 44

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241

¹⁶ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 57

¹⁷ Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 6

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170

¹⁹ Nadine Gordimer, *The Pick Up* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 239

she has never submitted',²⁰ just as Maureen abandons the fledgling diversity of the village for the helicopter, the ambiguous presence of which offers the possibility of reinstating her privilege and the inequality that such a position implies.

Gordimer's most optimistic depiction of this elusive shared space can be found in *My Son's Story*. At the grave blessing, both black and white mourners join as 'one ultimate body of bodies...inhaling and exhaling [beneath] the freedom of the great open afternoon sky';²¹ a utopian ideal of equality wherein the discriminations of the colonial regime momentarily fall away. However, this image is swiftly exposed as no more than an illusion and, just as the Smales's liberal idealism is destroyed by the realities of their fall from privilege, Sonny and Hannah make the 'terrible discovery'²² that their instinctive sense of self-preservation is stronger than their commitment to the collective, abandoning the shooting victim to save themselves.

By exposing neutral space as an insufficient resolution to racial inequality, Gordimer seems to suggest that the gulf between communities runs far deeper than the superficial division of space. Instead, this external control is made interior as the oppressor is able to use space as a tool for foisting certain identities onto the individual - colonized, oppressed, black - in order to compound and institutionalize their own authority. I would argue that, by foregrounding the vulnerability to the individual's notion of self to such exterior demands, both Gordimer and Coetzee call attention to the expectations imposed upon the novelist, and the threat that a prescriptive view of their responsibilities poses for their fictions. This is not to suggest that the novelists equate their responsibilities with the plight of the oppressed, but that both seem to respond to such exterior pressures by depicting characters whose very sense of self is dictated by the ruling authority. The word 'respond' here is a tentative choice, as to view Coetzee's work as a reactionary force against such demands is to acknowledge their dictatorial influence, however minor, over his writing; an influence that he himself fundamentally rejects. However, taking the example of sexual violence in Coetzee's fiction, it is arguable that, by foregrounding this oppressive taboo, he is able to expose the restrictions that abuse imposes upon the individual, while considering his own limitations as a male refractor of female oppression.

The female protagonist of *In the Heart of the Country* falls victim to a two-pronged form of sexual oppression that ensures her complete subjugation. In sequestering the role of master, Hendrik subverts the ownership that Magda's patronage, as white woman, assures; sexual violence and degradation is his only means of asserting the proprietorial power that he, as a black worker, does not inherently possess. This abuse also invites a view of paternity as a perverse form of masculine dominance, 'one of those stifling stories where...daughter and concubine prowl and snarl around the bedside, listening for the death-rattle'²³ that would announce freedom from paternal control. Moreover, Magda retreats from sexual desire into a state of near-asexuality; maintaining her virginity is the only modicum of control she can hope to exert. By violating her, Hendrik robs Magda of this last vestige of power, for no 'deeper invasion and possession'²⁴ would be possible, thus rendering her wholly subservient to a wrongful master. For Coetzee, to be sexualised is to be victimised and rendered submissive, whereas in Gordimer's *My Son's Story* and *The Pick Up*, female characters are liberated from paternal control by their sexual maturity; whether this be through motherhood (Baby) or the freedom to choose sexual partners across social and racial divides (Julie). In *In the Heart of the Country*, Hendrik's continued abuse operates as a means of maintaining the pretence of a power that, through its brutality and degradation, converts the racial inequality

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Gordimer, *My Son's Story*, p. 110

²² Ibid., p. 117

²³ J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 77

²⁴ Ibid., p. 117

that ensured Magda's father's power into a more conventional gender disparity. This interpretation of sexual abuse as a means of establishing wider power relationships seems a precursor to the violence intrinsic to Coetzee's post-apartheid fictions, namely the depiction of rape in *Disgrace*, where 'the violence against Lucy should be read...as the context through which other sites of gendered violence get normalized (and deracialized)'.²⁵

Yet, for Coetzee, sexual oppression does not always necessitate depravity. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate's obsession with the barbarian girl does not stem from sexual desire, but from the way in which she resists interpretation beyond the superficial; her physical injuries 'a surface across which [he] hunts back and forth seeking entry'.²⁶ However, as is dictated by the Imperialist regime with which the Magistrate finds himself inherently complicit, one must possess the unknown in order to fully understand it and, as such, understanding is promised by the physical possession and invasion of the barbarian girl. Yet despite consummating their relationship, the Magistrate is never fully able to understand his desire, suggesting that meaning was not the barbarian girl's to conceal, but that which the Magistrate projected onto her physical being. To this end, just as her body is the corporeal site of trauma, her interiority is subjected to the Magistrate's desires rather than her own, and as such she remains faceless, robbed of a most basic sense of humanity.

Coetzee finds an unlikely champion of resistance in Michael K, whose innate rejection of any form of authority provides a canvas onto which various attempts of control are projected, yet never painted. Fundamentally blind to the very existence of oppression, K is 'a hard little stone...enveloped in itself and its interior life',²⁷ never implicated, and hence never suppressed, by the oppressor. Quite simply, he 'is not in the war'.²⁸ This naturalised state of resistance has drawn criticism from Gordimer as a wasted opportunity on Coetzee's part, an oversight of 'what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves'.²⁹ For Gordimer, the novel lacks the revolutionary action that the resistance of its protagonist promises and yet, I would argue that such an uprising has no place in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Crucially, K's desire to 'be out of all the camps at the same time'³⁰ idealises an existence beyond the reach of authority, either through physical or ideological means, that refuses the identity of victim. However, K merely passes 'through the intestines of the war',³¹ his engagement limited to the exterior implications foisted onto him by third parties; a form of resistance to which Coetzee himself seems to aspire as a novelist. To this end, K never actually professes himself to be victim, or as oppressed by any form of authority, and so holds no interior notion of imprisonment as to spark his desire for freedom. Indeed, Gordimer's criticism itself is of a slightly hypocritical nature, given that her own characters have, in their oppression, exhibited behaviour closer to passivity than resistance. In *The Conservationist*, Jakobus seems unfazed by, even indulgent of, Mehring's lacklustre attempts at maintaining control over the farm. However, despite his superior knowledge of the land and Mehring's frequent absences, Jakobus and his workers are never shown to acknowledge, let alone consider the viability of, a possible chance at uprising and revolution.

K's unwavering resistance draws a stark contrast with Coetzee's depiction of the land as somehow condemned by its versatile nature. Subjugated to the whims and demands of authority, the land is relegated to a position of subservience; divided, defined and exploited according to its function. As such, the confinement of Jakkalsdrif serves as

²⁵ Carine Mardorossian, 'Rape and the Violence of Representation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Research in African Literatures*, 42.4 (Winter 2011): 74-5

²⁶ J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 46

²⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), p. 185

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 189

²⁹ Nadine Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening', *New York Review of Books*, 2 February 1984.

³⁰ Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 248

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189

‘prison...camp...place of abode...Welfare’³² to its inhabitants, just as the ambiguous ‘distinction between rehabilitation camps and internment camps’³³ allows the smooth transition of Kenilworth from refuge to prison. The pastoral idyll of the South Africa seen in other fictions is not so much dismantled here, as exploited as a collusive tool for the corrupting agents of authority. Yet K heralds cultivation as an alternative to the restrictive chains of exploitation, where raising ‘children behind the wire...on earth baked so hard by the sun’ ensures ‘that nothing [will] ever grow there again’.³⁴ Cultivation is perhaps the revolutionary force that Gordimer was searching for in her reading of the novel, a revival of the connection between man and land ensuring his freedom and yet, when broken, causing the earth to ‘grow hard and forget her children’.³⁵

Positions of authority are consistently interrogated through their interactions with K, whose unwavering elusiveness leaves the powers that be railing against him. As with the sexual abuse of women in Coetzee’s fiction, to possess is to oppress, and yet K’s fundamental incompatibility with the oppressor’s definitions of resistance ensures that he can never be assimilated into their system of understanding. The key to oppressing K is the discovery of his story, a history that apparently conceals his elusive purpose: at Jakkalsdrif he is ‘besieged with questions’,³⁶ the soldiers demand ‘Tell me your story!’,³⁷ while the interrogator at Kenilworth beseeches K to ‘talk, make your voice heard, tell your story!’³⁸ Yet K is ‘unyielding to any type of colonisation, either mental or physical’³⁹ thus ensuring his freedom by way of an otherness that creates the ultimate barrier to oppression, both in its abject refusal to conform to a prescriptive identity and through its ability to incriminate any opposing agents of authority.

This otherness exists as a gap in the individual, a space into which the oppressor attempts to pour his own sense of meaning and yet who, in doing so, commits the fatal mistake of presuming that ‘you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of another’.⁴⁰ K’s ‘was a story with a hole in it’,⁴¹ a sense of incompleteness encountered elsewhere in the ‘blank, featureless’⁴² face of the barbarian girl and the emptiness, ‘dark, save the glint of teeth as white as ivory’⁴³ of Friday’s mouth. This space is concealed and preserved by silence; a refusal to vocalize trauma in the language of the instigator. Silence introduces an unknown variable in the equation of power, threatening the totalitarian nature of oppression through its elusiveness. The Magistrate ‘cannot let go’ of the barbarian girl ‘until the marks on [her] body are deciphered and understood’,⁴⁴ while the coherence of Susan’s trauma is jeopardized by the ambiguity surrounding Friday: ‘till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story’.⁴⁵ In bearing the exterior signs of oppression - a hare lip, disfigured feet, no tongue - the victims, or should that be receptacles, of such abuse must exert their resistance in preserving their interiority, denying entry to the agents of oppression.

Crucially, though he depicts the physical results of torture, Coetzee never takes the reader inside the torture chamber, where such injuries are exacted and the identity of victim is

³² Ibid., p. 106

³³ Ibid., p. 210

³⁴ Ibid., p. 143

³⁵ Ibid., p. 150

³⁶ Ibid., p. 108

³⁷ Ibid., p. 168

³⁸ Ibid., p. 192

³⁹ J. M. Coetzee and T. Kai Norris Easton, ‘Text and Hinterland: J.M. Coetzee and the South African Novel’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21.4 (December 1995): 592

⁴⁰ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 46

⁴¹ Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 151

⁴² Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 40

⁴³ J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 22-3

⁴⁴ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 33

⁴⁵ Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 141

forged, as doing so would suggest that ‘the novelist participates vicariously in the atrocities, validates the acts of torture...by sharing its oppressive methods in detail’.⁴⁶ Here we are back to the novelist’s personal sense of responsibility and the limits they exact upon their own descriptive abilities. For the novelist, imagining the brutality of the torture chamber is a means of colluding with the oppression and subjugation enforced therein; a moral dilemma that the writer Elizabeth Costello herself faces. Reading West’s depiction of the degradation and execution of would-be assassins in Nazi Germany, Costello declares the work ‘Obscene...[it] ought not be brought into the light but covered up and hidden forever in the bowels of the earth’,⁴⁷ for she believes it possible for an author to be somehow polluted by the violence of their own creation. Just as Costello views the work of the novelist as capable of compromising the integrity of its creator, Coetzee is reluctant to implicate himself by disrupting the equilibrium of the duality or ‘double demand - the first from the oppressed, to act as a spokesperson for them, the second...to take punishment for the act’⁴⁸ implied in the act of writing.

The fear of falling into this complicity hangs over the works of Gordimer and Coetzee, and the inevitable culpability that their heritages - white, immigrant, middle-class, Afrikaner - impose upon their roles as novelists. The act of writing arguably requires a consciousness that actively calls forth, and makes a productive force of, this biological complicity with the oppressor. Moreover, the position of the novelist is rendered all the more problematic by their treatment of the oppressed; the identity of whom is defined by its opposition to the privilege that both Gordimer and Coetzee implicitly possess. In light of this complicity, the novelist is presented with the minefield of representing an identity subordinate to their own: any attempt to expose the ‘truth’ of such an experience is inevitably refracted through a language native to both novelist and oppressor. Indeed, the very act of fictionalizing these identities risks their glorification, again reaffirming the distance between oppressor and oppressed. However, this is not to say that complicity obstructs the novelist’s creativity. Instead, by infusing their fictions with their personal sense of restriction, both novelists call attention to instances where those beyond the grasp of the oppressor are able to subvert and undermine its authority, slipping through the gaps that such a reductive and systematic approach to understanding fails to close.

Both novelists expose the language of the oppressor as a fundamentally inadequate means of expression; the organic language of the oppressed moving in to fill the gaps. Unable to decipher these instances of foreignness, the reader is forced into a position of incomprehension alongside the oppressor, and is thus drawn into the inherent culpability to which the novelist’s own language alludes. In *July’s People*, Maureen’s native English fails to adapt beyond the confines of the master-servant relationship she has forged with July; when he is exposed to her as Mwawate, whose ‘measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others’,⁴⁹ only his language is capable of defining the parameters of their new relationship. Here, inequality can be seen as forcing ‘inflexible registers’⁵⁰ onto language, a restriction that ultimately results in its failure as a ‘medium for the exchange of ideas and feeling’;⁵¹ a failure seen elsewhere in the blurring of interior and external monologue, fuelled by a lack of punctuation and structural markers, in Gordimer’s *The Pick Up*. In *July’s People*, while July’s native language lacks this same sense of accuracy, and the constraint of Maureen’s, he is able to vocalize the very essence of their relationship, for as ‘he began to talk to her in his

⁴⁶ Susan V Gallagher, ‘Torture and the Novel: JM Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 29.2 (Summer 1988): 277.

⁴⁷ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, p. 159

⁴⁸ Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, p. 4

⁴⁹ Gordimer, *July’s People*, p. 186

⁵⁰ Sophie Harrison, ‘Nothing Terrible Happened’, *London Review of Books*, 24 January 2002

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

own language...she understood although she knew no word'.⁵² The existence of the barbarian language seems to never have occurred to the Magistrate, who could have better spent 'those long empty evenings (learning) her tongue',⁵³ rather than insisting that the barbarian girl communicate the truth through his own, inadequate means of expression. In both of these instances, the failure of the oppressor to acknowledge a system of communication beyond their own exposes the superficial nature of their authority; an authority that, in *The Conservationist*, belongs to the reader.

Each section of *The Conservationist* is prefaced with a quote from Zulu folklore, signalling to the reader its apparent significance and yet, without any knowledge of the reference point, limiting our understanding to the basic surface narrative that the quotes form. Posing a challenge to the coherence of the work, Coundouriotis has suggested that these quotes 'place an added burden on the reader to integrate disparate histories across different narrative traditions...that approximates cosmopolitan practice in the real world'⁵⁴ suggesting that the responsibility of forging these connections lies with the reader alone. While the inclusion of these references undoubtedly calls attention to the disparities between the sources, this is not necessarily an attempt of cultural fusion from Gordimer, but alignment. Indeed, I would argue that this disparity creates a divide wherein the reader is placed alongside the colonist, hinting at our own collusion with the inadequate system of understanding open to the oppressor.

Language fails in its most fundamental sense in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where the entire system of communication is exposed as subservient to the demands of the oppressor. A convenient tool for exclusion and differentiation, the term 'barbarian' ensures that the Empire is elevated above the apparently primitive, uncivilised, almost animalistic barbarian race. Moreover, for Colonel Joll, language is nothing more than a smokescreen, a concealment of a truth that can only systematic and unrelenting torture - 'first lies, then pressure, the more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth'⁵⁵ - can reveal. This system rejects the interpretation and subjectivity to which language is naturally bound; for Joll, the ridiculous notion of a 'tone of truth'⁵⁶ exists as a reality, another secret to be ousted by the brutality of the regime. It is this rigidity that the Magistrate exploits in his patronizing interpretation of the wooden slips: in an underhanded criticism of the oppressive regime, the symbol for war 'can stand for vengeance...it can be made to read justice',⁵⁷ a creativity and versatility that simply does not compute with Colonel Joll's utilitarian approach to language.

Where the Magistrate exploits the creative possibilities of language, Magda explores the 'many possible untapped variants'⁵⁸ that the adaptive nature of language allows, enabling both to assert their distance from the oppressor. However, where the Magistrate strives to mediate his personal perspective with 'the history that Empire imposes on its subjects',⁵⁹ Magda's motives are rather more self-serving. The memoir format of *In the Heart of the Country* encourages the reader to expect the confessional, and generally honest, expression typical of the genre. However, Magda's interest does not lie with authentic description, but with communicating that which is 'so bizarre as to be unimaginable'⁶⁰ and, as such, her story is subject to a process of constant revision and reimagining. The rape scene is communicated

⁵² Gordimer, *July's People*, p. 152

⁵³ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 78

⁵⁴ Eleni Coundouriotis, 'Rethinking Cosmopolitanism in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*', *College Literature*, 33.3 (Summer 2006): 3

⁵⁵ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 3

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 123

⁵⁸ Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, p. 5

⁵⁹ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 169

⁶⁰ Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, p. 139

in four different versions, each as plausible as the last, while the murder and burial of her father and his new bride is wholly fictitious, no more than ‘a theory...a version of myself as avenger’.⁶¹ Fantasy is not an attempt at liberation, for ‘of the many things (Magda) lacks, freedom is not one of them’,⁶² but perhaps an effort to articulate freedom in a more universal sense, free from the restrictions foisted onto language. When Magda’s language appears exhausted, Spanish voices are heard from the skies; a surreal episode in which the invasion of literal foreignness exacerbates the sense of alienation that Magda herself experiences. Here, just as the Magistrate recognises the universality of language through the wooden plates, Magda has no difficulties in understanding the voices in a ‘miraculous intervention...of translation’⁶³ of their ‘universal meanings’,⁶⁴ suggesting the existence of a level of interpretation to which the reader, and hence the oppressor, is fundamentally ignorant.

The most significant challenge to the reader’s understanding is in the novelist’s use of allegory, the symbolism of which creates the greatest restriction to our interpretative reading. Indeed, when this device is explicitly signalled within the text itself, the reader is arguably coerced into a reading that ultimately detracts from the surface image and emotional immediacy of the original sign. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the writer herself insists that ‘the life of the frogs themselves is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing’,⁶⁵ and yet in foregrounding such a contention, how are we to read the frogs as anything other than an allegory? The problem here seems to be that, by attaching allegory to an event, its meaning is immediately fictionalised, and thus distanced from the original sign. Yet ‘death is not an idea, suffering is not an idea’,⁶⁶ and so, to read the frog’s life allegorically is to commit the frog to the realm of ideas, rather than understanding its immediate significance. A similar issue arises in Coetzee’s *Foe*, where the novel’s blatant distance from South Africa supports a reading of it as an allegory of such, not least given the blanket media blackout that the country was experiencing at the time of the novel’s release. Likewise, Friday’s depiction of ‘row upon row of...walking eyes’⁶⁷ and the allegorical meaning we derive from the conclusion, ‘where bodies are their own signs...is the home of Friday’,⁶⁸ suggests that there is a power to his story that is fundamentally incompatible with writing and literary interpretation, and yet still we endeavour to impose any one of a number of political, colonial and racial allegories onto his character. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, the doctor professes K’s story to be ‘an allegory...of how...a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it’;⁶⁹ once again we are back the dichotomy of freedom and restriction, and the complicity that imposing literary and allegorical meaning, especially on a story as concerned with the superficial as K’s, encourages. What *Elizabeth Costello* seems to promote is a way of reading these experiences without attributing any allegorical or exterior meaning to the original sign, thus ensuring that the subject is treated ethically, rather than exploited by our methods of interpretation.

Restriction, it seems, is not merely a blanketed attempt at control, but the first step in a long march towards absolute control of the individual. Yet Gordimer and Coetzee’s preoccupation with such restraint does not only reflect upon the South African condition and on their own conflicted positions as novelists therein, but on the universal threat that restrictive expectations and prescriptive demands pose to the individual. This essay began with the dichotomy of restriction and freedom, yet this may now be more accurately

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 47

⁶² Ibid., p. 55

⁶³ Ibid., p. 137

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, p. 217

⁶⁶ James Wood, ‘A Frog’s Life’, *London Review of Books*, 23 October 2003

⁶⁷ Coetzee, *Foe*, p. 147

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 157

⁶⁹ Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 228

interpreted as the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, where the novelist's own position in the no man's land of this division begs the question of whether the depiction of otherness can ever be anything but a presumptive and belittling gesture on the oppressor's behalf.

As to whether they have discharged their novelistic responsibilities effectively, I find it impossible to remove my own view of the novelists' responsibilities from the equation, as the preconceptions with which I originally approached their identities - white, South African, native, privileged - only adds volume to the demands of the collective conscience. However, this is not to say that Gordimer and Coetzee themselves are not actively embroiled in the debate surrounding their own duties as novelists. Instead, by exploring the spectrum of subversive and exploitative guises that restriction assumes, both novelists not only embark on a journey of self-reflection, but present the universal threat that restriction, whether in the form of pressure exerted on the individual by outside demands, the physical control of space or the violent invasion of another's body, poses to the individual.

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