THE TROPE OF BORDER-CROSSING JOURNEYS: ETHICS OF HYBRID ENCOUNTERS IN J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS* AND *AGE OF IRON*

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Abstract. The present paper examines the spatial and metaphorical representation of border-crossing experience and its ethical significance in (re)shaping the hybrid subjectivity in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron*. Along with their encounters with the racially and culturally different Other(s), many Coetzeean protagonists undergo an identity crisis that leads them "to be rid of old self" (Coetzee 2002, 111). These characters respectively undertake perilous journeys to the other's territories for the sake of not simply escaping what they deem as dysfunctional and autochthonous forms of identity but above all-embracing a hybrid identity capable of offering an enabling space of belonging. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate encounters a captive barbarian girl, and probably out of human compassion, he takes it upon himself to return her to her tribe across the border. After the trip, he faces disgrace and imprisonment as he openly expresses his disavowal of the colonial discourse of the Empire which denigrates and dehumanizes the so-called barbarians. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren endures a series of violent incidents that compels her to leave the safe white suburbs and venture into Guguletu, a squatter camp for blacks, in Cape Town. Witnessing the violent and almost inhuman conditions in which the majority of black people are doomed to live, she renounces the dominant discourse of apartheid propagated by the state-monitored mass media.

Keywords: border, self/other, (post)colonial identity, hybridity, ethical transformation, intersubjectivity

INTRODUCTION

Encountering the Other in J. M. Coetzee's fiction is not so much an act of hospitality and accommodation as it is a convulsive and

dislocating event that forces the Self to undertake a critical and decisive journey across identities. Border-crossing experience, in this regard, could be viewed as a determinant factor in not only propelling a hybridizing process but also triggering an ethical awakening that urges some characters to question their own identities as well as the barriers erected between Self and Other.

Following the Levinasian model of Self/Other intersubjectivity that tends to surmount the logic of discrepancy and binarism characterizing Self/Other relationship, Coetzee invests some of his protagonists, such as Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* and the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, with the capacity for self-analysis, change, and self-reformation that allows them to challenge dominant discourses informing their identities. Due to the fact that these characters are most of the time alienated and marginalized individuals even in their own communities, they reveal an ability to reconsider their concepts of humanity and justice.

Such characters reveal a readiness to go through a process of moral transformation that allows them not merely to sympathize but above all to empathize[1] with the figures of otherness they come across. Following the "cruciform logic" (Coetzee 1990, 125), these characters go through a metaphorical process of death and rebirth, during which they make a journey across the boundaries between identities, and they return changed in their attitudes towards themselves, the Other, and, above all, their affiliation and sometimes filiation to their national identities.[2] Coetzee illustrates his proposed Self/Other inter-relationship in the pattern of a mythological journey taken by the Self under the guidance of the Other to alien territories from which it returns not so much a newly born Self as it is a reformed one.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the hybridization process characterizing this *Self/Other* encounter from a postcolonial as well as Levinasian perspectives. Hybridity in the aforementioned novels correlates with an ethical development that leads the main protagonists to abnegate their belonging to an autochthonous and

monadic form of identity and instead articulate their subjectivities in a post-binary space of belonging.

I. Problematic Belonging: Dwelling on the Margin

Even though the Magistrate is part of the Self, as he represents the imperial authority at a remote outpost, he feels he is marginalized and alienated from Colonel Joll, the Third Bureau's agent of interrogation, who comes afresh from the capital. When the Magistrate sees the sunglasses for the first time, he expresses his bewilderment: "I have never seen something like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire […]. He told me they are a new invention" (Coetzee 1980, 1). Both the fashionable way Colonel Joll dresses up and the newly invented sunglasses he puts on reveal the cultural distance between the capital of Empire, the centre of change, innovation, and the beacon of civilization, and the frontier settlement, the Empire's periphery; a small and isolated oasis in the heart of the desert whose three thousand dwellers live according to the natural rhythm of seasons away from the metropolitan life. Even the news and social gossip reaching out from the capital concerning the ascendancy of the Third Bureau in the political circle of influence of the Empire, as they become "guardians of the state" (Coetzee 1980, 9), are outdated: "The Third Bureau is the most important division of the Civil Guard nowadays. That is what we hear, anyhow, in gossip that reaches us long out of date from the capital" (Coetzee 1980, 2). When the Magistrate asks Joll about the itinerary of his second military expedition inside the barbarian lands, he ironically reverses the Centre/Margin dichotomy: "'if you get lost it becomes our task to find you and bring you back to civilization'. We pause, savouring from our different positions the ironies of the word" (Coetzee 1980, 13). The outpost, which is regarded in the first place as a marginal settlement distanced from the capital, the metropolis of civilization,

becomes literally the centre of events in the story. On the other hand, the centre of civilization is metaphorically dislocated from the capital towards the periphery where the Empire has to prove itself by imposing and expanding its dominion.

The Magistrate seems to be aware of the ontological chasm between him and Joll. When the Magistrate tries to explain to a newly arrived officer that the image that people in the capital have about barbarians is much exaggerated, the officer, astonished, "looks at [him] oddly […]. [The Magistrate] feels a barrier descend, the barrier between the military and the civilian" (Coetzee 1980, 54). With the arrival of the representatives of the Third Bureau, the Magistrate starts to realize that he has no room in the Empire's military campaign against the barbarians, since he represents the soft version of the Self that serves Empire at times of peace: "I was not, as I like to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, the truth the Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less" (Coetzee 1980, 148). According to the Magistrate, Colonel Joll personifies the Empire at its most brutal state. The question that he poses when he sees Joll wearing sunglasses at the opening scene, "Is he blind?" (Coetzee 1980, 1), implies that the Empire is myopic in its way of perceiving the Other.

Like the Magistrate who is depicted occupying a marginal position vis a vis the central authority of the Empire, Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron*, is presented as a detached, isolated, and dying figure. The unexpected presence of the homeless Vercueil on the threshold of her house disrupts her feelings of loneliness and seclusion after the departure of her daughter, her only family, to the United States. The house of Mrs Curren, which is metonymic of her subjectivity, is depicted as an "empty house, from which every echo has faded" (Coetzee 1990, 5). Feeling empty and abandoned while suffering from deteriorating physical condition due to recurrent pain attacks caused by cancer, Mrs Curren comes into view as a spectral figure just like the derelict Vercueil. They are both lonely and outcast and

therefore victims of their personal circumstances. While Vercueil is rejected by society, Mrs Curren is deserted by her own daughter, who decides to never come back to South Africa. This makes them share the same space of marginality and detachment. The unpredicted encounter is thus between two isolated and alienated individuals whose fates, despite the racial, cultural, and social barriers separating them, seem to become closely intertwined.

After witnessing a violent incident in front of her house, in which two black boys are deliberately hit by a police car, Mrs Curren decides to venture outside the white suburbs in Cape Town to see for herself the ugly reality of apartheid. While wandering around the black ghetto streets, Mrs Curren has some childhood reminiscences revealing her socio-cultural backdrop:

> When I think back to my own childhood, I remember only long sun-struck afternoons, the smell of dust under avenues of eucalyptus, the quiet rustle of water in roadside furrows, the lulling of doves. A childhood of sleep, prelude, to what was meant to be a life without trouble and a smooth passage to Nirvana. (Coetzee 1990, 85)

Mrs Curren falls into a reverie of a golden age of peace and tranquillity as an attempt to escape the infernal reality she finds herself stuck in. Nevertheless, jolted out of her idyllic memories, Mrs Curren opens her eyes on a gothic, cold, and violent scenery so much unknown, ignored, or forgotten by people like her. "Around us was a wilderness of grey dune-sand and Port Jackson willow, and a stench of garbage and ash. Shreds of plastic, old iron, glass, animal bones littered both sides of the path" (Coetzee 1990, 86). Mrs Curren understands that she has been the victim of the propaganda fostered by the state-condoned mass media that try to fabricate a bright image of South Africa that reflects political stability, economic prosperity, and above all social peace and harmony between ethnicities and races.

II. Journey across Identities: The Ordeal

The ethical framework that characterizes the Self/Other relationship in Coetzee's two narratives corresponds with the Levinasian conceptualization of the ethical and the ontological, which offers the possibility of conceiving the Other beyond the imposing constraints of the dominant discourse. In order to surmount the ontological structures constructed by processes of knowledge, Levinas proposes an intersubjective paradigm operating a priori "to the present and to representation" (Levinas 1998, 15). The sense of moral obligation that the Self bears towards the Other unfolds into an ontological mutual indebtedness that transcends the historical and cultural modes of existence. Nonetheless, this moral obligation cannot occur without producing a sense of "exposure to the assignation by the other […] into [one] by burglary" (Levinas 1998, 145). Defining what he designates as an act of assignation of the Self by the Other, Levinas maintains: "The subject in responsibility is alienated in the depths of its identity with an alienation that does not empty the same of its identity, but constrains it to it, with an unimpeachable assignation" (Levinas 1998, 141). The correlation between the *assignation* of the Self by the Other and the act of *constraint* intimates that the presence of the Other detaches the Self from its self-awareness of unity and sameness**.** The unexpected arrival of the visitant Other creates a sense of "responsibility and substitution" (Levinas 1998, 151) that subverts the processes of assimilation and modulation attempted by the Self to contain the Other within its power hierarchization.

To establish the possibility of moral transformation, Coetzee entrusts his alienated characters with the ability of self-analysis and self-reflection, and therefore with the capacity for challenging and questioning their own identities. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren is much concerned about both discovering and uncovering the dark side of apartheid regime with which she was once complicit. Although she feels "[t]ired beyond cause, tired as an armour against the times,

yearning to close [her] eyes, to sleep" (Coetzee 1990, 117), Mrs Curren frequently struggles to keep her eyes open as an indication that she is willing to repudiate the version of truth maintained by official mass media. Instead, she adopts an unmediated and thus relatively truthful picture of reality. Referring to the majority of her white compatriots, she describes them as being blind to the truth about apartheid: "scales thickening on [their eyes], as the land-explorers, the colonists, prepare to return to the deep" (Coetzee 1990, 116). As a way of initiating the process of moral change, Coetzee introduces the notion of otherness, that is, people of a different gender, class, race, and culture from outside their familiar circle of life, into his characters' existence. Through their involuntary encounters with figures of otherness, those characters start becoming actively involved in the reality that they have feared to face and tried in vain to avoid it.

The violence that Mrs Curren witnesses during her physical, as well as the metaphorical trip to Guguletu, triggers her sympathy for the blacks. "Full of misgivings" (Coetzee 1990, 83), she drives beyond the tranquil and secure boundaries of the white suburbs, which she describes as a "closed universe, curved like an egg, enclosing us" (Coetzee 1990, 20). Accompanied by Vercueil, she ventures into a wholly alien and dreary world, in which "swirls of mist floated towards us, embraced the car, floated away" (Coetzee 1990, 83), writes Mrs Curren to her daughter. However, it is her encounter with Vercueil, the epitome of the Other in the story, which disrupts her present withering life and makes her show some signs of spiritual self-awakening and empathy for the Other.

Now standing as a witness to the ugly reality of black ghettoes, she refers to the streets as "a landscape of scorched earth, blackened trees […] a wilderness of grey dune-sand […] and a stench of garbage and ash. Shreds of plastic, old iron, glass, animal bones littered both sides of the path." (Coetzee 1990, 86). The more she infiltrates into the ghetto, the more she witnesses an underworld of agony and anger. Driving from one street to another, Mrs Curren

feels appalled by the high rate of brutality and misery to which most blacks are cast: "Men passed us, dark, bearded, stern, armed with sticks, walking swiftly in single file […], a scene of devastation: shanties burnt" (Coetzee 1990, 87). The black inhabitants are forced to live in crowded spaces with the absence of basic state services, facilities, and even a police force to secure the area against crime and violence. This unveils the colonial heritage of apartheid, the result of which those native people are displaced from their lands and placed into closed and marginalized cantons that lack the lowest degree of human dignity, probably to provide cheap labour as a substitute to slavery for the capitalist industrial and agricultural growing enterprises.

Like Mrs Curren, who ventures outside the white suburbs, depicted by mass media as the "land of smiling neighbours" (Coetzee 1990, 49), to seek the truth about the apartheid crimes committed against blacks, the Magistrate decides to cross the border to the barbarian lands to return the barbarian girl to her clan. The journey beyond the Empire's territories casts him into an alien and unchartered space in which he realizes the limits of his knowledge of the Other. The deeper he goes into the barbarian land, the more he gets disentangled from the Empire's physical as well as moral grasp. Therefore, being situated away from the centre, the Magistrate finally becomes able to observe for the first time some of the girl's undiscovered human qualities he earlier failed to notice when he was submerged by the imperial representation of the barbarians. It is only now that he can see the girl as "a witty, attractive young woman […], at no loss for words." He realizes that instead of "giving her a good time [he] oppressed her with gloom" (Coetzee 1980, 68) by the inconsiderate imposition of his selfish desire to decipher her by turning her into an inhuman object of study. The girl's body was fetishized and turned into a space of representation:

> I realize that if I took a pencil to sketch her face I would not know where to start. Is she truly so featureless? With an effort I concentrate my mind on her.

> I see a figure in a cap and heavy shapeless coat standing unsteadily, bent forward, straddle-legged, supporting itself on sticks. How ugly, I say to myself. My mouth forms the ugly word. I am surprised by it but I do not resist: she is ugly, ugly. (Coetzee 1980, 50-51)

Before the journey, the girl seems to be indecipherable when she is regarded as a mere object of scrutiny that bears witness, through the marks of torture on her body, to the atrocity of the colonial history of the Empire. The Magistrate has obliterated her human features, her personality, and her alterity. What he sees is only the ugliness of Empire transmuted into the marks of torture and scars upon the girl's body.

Having physically and metaphorically crossed the border, the Magistrate is released and somewhat liberated from the heavy spell of the Empire's colonial ideology. He gets disillusioned with the high value that he has so far ascribed to civilization. He starts sensing the impotence of the Empire to authentically and sincerely communicate human feelings for the Other. It is only during the journey that he becomes able to view the barbarian girl as a whole being, a "whole woman" (Coetzee 1980, 70) he needs to love and cherish. Before that, he used to see her as a fragmented entity, impersonal discrete parts of a stereotypically deformed body.

The encounter with the so-called "mountain barbarians" as well as the discovery of the girl's true character remind him of the Empire's hegemonic political and economic expansionist policy which has led to the displacement of the native population, who have been "pushed off the plains into the mountains by the spread of Empire" (Coetzee 1980, 78). He expresses both his regret and shame for never having tried to really understand them as a race of humans but just as a *barbarian* race—the term 'barbarian' is deployed as the disfavoured part of the civilized/barbarian binary opposition. The Magistrate admits:

> I have never before met northerners on their own ground on equal terms: the barbarians I am familiar with are those who visit the oasis to barter, and the

> few who make their camp along the river, and Joll's miserable captives. What an occasion and what a shame too to be here today. (Coetzee 1980, 78)

The Magistrate eventually realizes that it is the civilization that corrupts the natives' lives and souls by turning them into "lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid" (Coetzee 1980, 41) people. He also has a guilty conscience that he has never made an effort to know the natives deeply enough to respect them as a race endowed with ethos, culture and language equal to the people of the Empire. He even expresses his deep regret for not having learnt the barbarian language: "What a waste […], she could have spent those long empty evenings teaching me her tongue! Too late now" (Coetzee 1980, 78). The realization that he is no different from his colleagues in sharing the same stereotypical images that dehumanize the natives leads to his recognition of the dubious role he is playing on the trip as well as in his official position. He confesses: "I am patching up relations between the men of the future and the men of the past, returning, with apologies, a body we have sucked dry – a go-between, a jackal of Empire in sheep's clothing" (Coetzee 1980, 79). His use of "we" allies him with the "torturers," whom he used to claim that "there is nothing to link [him] with" and whom he "must assert [his] distance from" (Coetzee 1980, 48). The use of "we" also implies his involvement in the crime of cultural imposition and economic exploitation committed by Empire. Significantly, it indicates his acknowledgement and acceptance of the shared responsibility and guilt that he has so far feared to face.

III. Identity Loss or Gain? or Something In-Between?

The irruption of the Other, as put forward by Derek Attridge, has an ethical as well as an ontological effect on the construction of the Self: "The same," he explains, "is no longer the same after the irruption of the other." The encounter between Self and Other

invokes an ethical responsibility that leads to "converting alterity into familiarity" (Attridge 2004, 138). The process of including the Other in the space of the same does not solely affect the Other by rendering its alterity familiar, but it also "refashions" and "reshapes" (Attridge 2004, 128; 136) the Self by having it jeopardize its own homogeneity and instead venture into a heterogeneous space, or what Homi Bhabha calls "Third Space" (Bhabha 1994, 7), in which the Self loses its sense of originality and becomes hybrid.

The Magistrate's liminal position reverberates Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which he defines as a "dwell[ing] in 'the beyond,' in a sense a space of intervention in the here and now" (Bhabha 1994, 7). The need to circumvent the normative structures of identity suggests existing "in a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity" (Bhabha 1994, 1). Bhabha emphasizes that the fact of being in transit entails living in "innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" (Bhabha 1994, 1), which challenges any claim of stability and fixity of identity itself. Through subverting the rigid and traditional demarcations of cultural identity by "introduc[ing] other, incommensurable cultural temporalities" (Bhabha 1994, 2), he proposes a fluid and flexible paradigm of identity that tends to surmount the fixed and established cultural boundaries.

Therefore, it is the Magistrate, as the central protagonist in the novel, who seems to be located in the "interstitial space" (Bhabha 1994, 2) between the two cultures. More equally, being the narrator of the story, it is also he who has to carry out the burden of (re)writing and thus revisioning the history of the outpost and probably that of the Empire. Eventually, being the only character in the novel that undergoes the process of transformation, it becomes the fate of the Magistrate to inhabit the in-between space and to negotiate the possibility of a hybrid encounter between the Self and the Other.

The act of crossing the border, the interval space that bridges the gap between the Self and the Other, could be interpreted as an

interruption in the teleological and the homogeneous course of history that the Empire tries to impose on its subjects. Living in the here and now suggests articulating heterogeneous versions of history that can encompass different histories and dissimilar cultural identities. Moreover, being situated on the fringe, away from the centre of the Empire's nationhood, the border becomes a space of encounter and negotiation that is capable of articulating new signs of a hybrid identity that signals, reversely, from the margin towards the centre. Nonetheless, the Magistrate can neither completely lose his attachment to the identity of the Self he belongs to, nor thoroughly appropriate the Other's identity; hence, he is vacillating between either assenting to the Empire as a symbol of national identity or dissenting from colonial discourse held by the Empire, which he describes as the "empire of pain" (Coetzee 1980, 24).

After returning to the outpost, the Magistrate is accused of having been "treacherously consorting with the enemy" (85). However, undergoing imprisonment and torture in the granary enables him not only to experience the suffering and pain the native captives have endured, but it also arouses his sympathy for and identification with the Other which leads him to take his fateful decision to end his "alliance with the guardians of the Empire" to "set [him]self in opposition" (Coetzee 1980, 85) to its authority.

The solitude of confinement makes the Magistrate experience self-effacement; it even forces him to turn to "the evocation of the ghosts" (Coetzee 1980, 87-88) of the former prisoners as a desperate attempt to spiritually communicate with them and sense what it was like when they were tortured and murdered by Colonel Joll and his men. Dressed in "a woman's calico smock," he realizes that Joll is "deal[ing] with [his] soul" through the same kind of dehumanizing treatment that he has applied to the other prisoners (Coetzee 1980, 128-29). This experience symbolically stands for a radical metamorphosis in his identity which is suggested by the gender reversal. That is, the Magistrate is probably on the verge of disavowing the Empire's identity, as it is indicated by his having "a

crust like a fat caterpillar" (Coetzee 1980, 125) on his wounded cheek similar to the girl's as well as by his roaring and shouting in the "barbarian language" that he uses for "calling his barbarian friends" (Coetzee 1980, 133). Furthermore, the fact of being hung upside down from a tree suggests that his original stance on the barbarians and the Empire has been subverted, reinforcing the idea that his old Self is lost, that he has "already died one death on that tree" (Coetzee 1980, 138). This mock hanging can probably be compared to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which suggests, in addition to the possibility of resurrection and renewal, the ideas of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. In the same vein, the Magistrate's dissent from the racist and oppressive rule of the Empire could be seen as an act of self-sacrifice as he ends up in prison after having been tortured and humiliated the same way the barbarian prisoners have been through.

Nevertheless, the Magistrate's experience of metaphysical death and reincarnation leads him to give up his idea of being a self-pitying "martyr," of wanting to "go down in history" and "make a name for [him]self as the One Just Man, the man who is prepared to sacrifice his freedom to his principles" (Coetzee 1980, 124). Instead, he recognizes an egotistical motivation in confronting the Empire, "easier to be beaten and made a martyr […] than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians" (Coetzee 1980, 118). Rather than feeling pity for himself, he is now determined to speak out from his heart instead of his mind: "'Let everything be said!' I told myself when I first faced up to my tormentors […]. 'Declare your terror, scream when the pain comes! […] Open your heart!'" (Coetzee 1980, 141). After his homecoming, the Magistrate seems to have gained not only a cleansed and humbled Self but also a better understanding of himself, the Empire and the Other. Above all, he has become able to challenge the Empire through denouncing and condemning publicly the atrocities committed by the Third bureau officers:

'Look!' I shout. I point to the four prisoners who lie docilely on the earth,

> their lips to the pole, their hands clasped to their faces like monkeys' paws […]. 'We are the great miracle of creation! […] How!' Words fail me. 'Look at these men!' I recommence. 'Men!' (Coetzee 1980, 117)

The Magistrate seems to be liberated from the racist modes of representations that have dominated the colonial discourse. Before that, especially when the first prisoners are brought into the settlement, he adopts the same prejudices propagated by the imperial discourse that tend to dehumanize the barbarians by representing them as savage and uncivilized creatures unworthy of being treated as equal human beings. Now that he has become a man of conscience who rejects the injustice even if it is inflicted on the Other, he refers to the barbarians as "Men" and "miracle of creation;" they are human again. This is a reversal of the Empire's standards and ideologies that demonize the barbarians and construct them as the "enemy" (Coetzee 1980, 115).

While the Magistrate needs only to undergo the same acts of torture and humiliation meted upon the barbarian captives to recognize the humanity and difference of the Other, Mrs Curren has to go through a painful process of moral transformation that leads her not only to denounce the apartheid discourse propagated by mass media but above all to love the "unlovable" (125) and to "embrace" (Coetzee 1990, 181) the once alien Other.

After the journey to Guguletu, where she undergoes a moral development that leads her to a kind of loss of her "doll" identity, Mrs Curren is submerged by the feelings of emptiness and sorrow: "Grief past weeping. I am hollow, I am a shell. To each of us, fate sends the right disease. Mine a disease that eats me out from inside" (103). What remains of her old Self is apartheid, metaphorically represented by her growing cancer and likened to "a crab sitting inside licking its lips" (Coetzee 1990, 103). Engulfed within a state of limbo, Mrs Curren expresses her relentless desire not to succumb to death. She is willing to refashion her old Self into a reformed one: "To do with a life that isn't worth, much anymore. I am trying to work out what I can get for it" (Coetzee 1990, 104). In order to fill

her emptiness, Mrs Curren takes refuge into the ritual of writing to exorcize the demons of apartheid from what remains of her life before the claws of death close upon her: "Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death. Therefore, writing, holding death at arm's length, let me tell you that I meant to go through with it" (Coetzee 1990, 106). After seeing the truth in the black ghetto, she wants to write or rewrite the story of the changing, transiting South Africa from apartheid to post-apartheid as she herself is transiting from life to death:

> Why should it be left to me, old and sick and full of pain, to lift myself unaided out of this pit of disgrace? I want to rage against the men who have created these times. I want to accuse them of spoiling my life […]. I want to sell myself, redeem myself. (Coetzee 1990, 107)

The public and the personal stories are both fused into a single narrative that recounts the traumatic experience of the dying Mrs Curren who tries to seek redemption for the crimes of apartheid. When she starts writing after her journey, she seems less confident as she loses control over her voice: "I wrote. I write. I follow the pen, going where it takes me. What else have I now?" (Coetzee 1990, 99). Mrs Curren concedes her subject position as an agent, enunciator of the narrative, and occupies what Bill Ashcroft designates as "interstitial space in which there is a constant slippage between abjection and subjectivity" (Ashcroft 2001, 44-45). Through occupying this space of marginality and abjection, Mrs Curren as a transformed/reformed Self enters a space of difference and alterity, in which she becomes able to reconstruct a different story or history that could probably challenge the authority of the official record of the apartheid history.

Mrs Curren is regretful now of having returned home leaving the horrible events in Guguletu behind her. After her border-crossing to the Other's space, she returns not only changed but above all more capable of self-criticism:

> 'I want to go home!' So I had whinged, to my shame […]. Home to my safe house, to my bed of childhood slumber […]. From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed, and reared, and that doll is what I call I. A doll? *A doll's life? Is that what I have lived?* (emphasis added, Coetzee 1990, 100-101)

Mrs Curren refers to her old Self as a 'doll' controlled by a hierarchical discursive system that starts from the family and then moves to educational institutions and finally circulates to the other structures of knowledge to constitute a whole ideological system that shapes such an identity. Seeing the whole picture, Mrs Curren becomes disillusioned with her old self and all the system that has so far spawned it. She starts revisioning and interrogating the so-thought fixed traits in her old identity. She becomes disillusioned with her upbringing as a white Afrikaner insofar that she begins referring to her generation as 'ugly:' "How ugly we are growing, from being unable to think well of ourselves! Even the beauty queens look irritable. Ugliness: what is it but the soul showing through the flesh?" (Coetzee 1990, 121). She regards her background as a predetermined mode of life according to which individuals are contained by an iron system of 'discipline' and 'surveillance' that leaves no room for dissenters like her to forge their own identities[3].

The second journey undertaken by Mrs Curren's, in which she deserts her house (her old identity) and spends a night in the open air under a flyover like a homeless, marks a turning point in her moral transformation. Mrs Curren's shift from sympathy to empathy with the Other leads her to cede the privileged position of the Self - a white widow living in the 'cocoon'-like white suburbia - and reversely occupy the marginalized space of otherness, in which she is othered herself by the Gestapo-like police when she is accused of cooperating with black insurgents. Mrs Curren is depicted wedged into a liminal space between identities, from which she could hardly disentangle herself except through recognizing her moral obligation towards the Other. This reversal in positions urges

Mrs Curren to reject her belonging to the Afrikaner nationalist identity as well as her filial bonds towards her daughter and her grandchildren. Instead of surrendering to the doom of being eaten out by cancer (apartheid), Mrs Curren returns to the Other not only to be redeemed but above all to avoid the fate of dying in shame.

After witnessing the atrocities of the apartheid regime during her trip to Other's territories, Mrs Curren begins to put into question an important trait that constitutes her old Self as an Afrikaner: the zealous love for the land and the lifestyle related to it. Evoking her childhood in the farm, Mrs Curren looks sceptical of her pastoral background: "Now that desire, which one may as well call love, is gone from me I do not love this land any more […]. I am like a man who has been castrated […]. Instead, he would feel a tug, light but continual, toward stupor, detachment" (Coetzee 1990, 111). This rupture with the old self is not smooth and without consequences for Mrs Curren. The loss of the old identity jettisons her into an uncomfortable state of torpor and alienation that will develop later into a crisis of belonging. This in-between and transient position is described by Bill Ashcroft as "ambivalence of white resistance in South Africa [which] allegorizes the dilemma of any dissenter in an oppressive regime" (Ashcroft 2001, 145). Although Mrs Curren exposes her inner feelings, worries, and ambivalence to Vercueil, her sole interlocutor in the narrative, her confession is countered by another kind of detachment so much different from hers. Vercueil's detachment and indifference are far from being provoked by an existential crisis of identity, but it is rather a strategy of evasion from and resistance to any prescriptive discourse.

Mrs Curren's process of revisioning her old identity renders her more capable of seeing the dark image of the apartheid so far dissimulated by propaganda. She eventually recognizes the crimes of apartheid, which she earlier failed to denounce when urged by Mr Thabane: "The age of iron waiting to return […]. Now, in South Africa. I see eyes clouding over again […] as the land-explorers, the colonists, prepare to return to the deep" (Coetzee 1990, 116). Mrs

Curren acknowledges the justness and legitimacy of the young blacks' struggle against such an oppressive and criminal authority. Like iron, they are rigid, unbreakable, and probably unstoppable. For Mrs Curren, they belong to the 'age of iron' that shall rise again from death and overthrow the racist regime of apartheid. Such a decaying regime is depicted drowning deep into a sea of troubles during the mid-eighties of the last century: "what honour is there in slipping off in these times when the worm-riddled ship is so clearly sinking […]. The Afrikaners of Paraguay joining the Afrikaners of Patagonia in their sullen diaspora: […] bullies, thugs, torturers, killers - what company!" (Coetzee 1990, 117). Now that she is illuminated by the truth about apartheid, Mrs Curren not only dissociates herself from the political affiliation but also from her racial filiation and its colonial history. She portends the downfall of the white regime and the diasporic dispersal of its leaders who would run away for their lives by deserting the sinking ship.

In order to seek redemption and rebirth as a new or reformed Self, Mrs Curren associates her moral awakening with the reconciliation with the Other. This is achieved through reciprocity with and recognition of the unwanted Other. After having thought of death, Mrs Curren has two dreams in which she expresses her longing for human togetherness and communion: "I embrace the longing, embrace the regret, embrace the king, the swimming girls, embrace whatever will occupy me" (emphasis added, Coetzee 1990, 24). The more her painful cancer grows and her body becomes weaker, the more her longing for human communion becomes intense. Her moral responsibility for the Other allows her to wish to embrace not only her far away daughter - her own flesh and blood - but also any other being including her black housekeeper, Florence: "I want to be held to someone's bosom, to Florence's, to yours, to anyone's, and told that it will be all right" (Coetzee 1990, 37). Mrs Curren realizes that her moral salvation would never be accomplished without the guidance of the Other. She feels so empty and lonely that she grows eager for being absorbed by and filled with

other entities even if it means embracing a filthy and smelly derelict like Vercueil by the end of the story.

Conclusion

In the two texts, the flight from a pre-determined and an a priori form of subjecthood may impart the idea that there is no definite and ultimate framing paradigm for identity. Rather, identity in Coetzee's texts is presented as complex and multifaceted. It can be a matter of political affiliation and allegiance as well as one of race, ethnicity, history, and nationality. There are individual characters, such as the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, whose ethical awakening enables them to abnegate their belonging to an autochthonous and monadic form of identity and instead articulate their post-binary form of subjectivity in a hybrid constructive space of becoming, on the threshold of new modes of existence.

Notes

1. In his book *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, Zygmunt Bauman relates the idea of empathy to the notion of reciprocity between Self and Other. Defining empathy, he supposes that "if we put ourselves in another person's place, we will see and feel exactly 'the same' as he or she sees and feels in his or her present position - and that this feat of empathy may be reciprocated" (Bauman 1997, 9).
2. According to R. Radhakrishnan, the concept of 'national identity' is "a normative measure that totalizes heterogeneous 'selves' and 'subjectivities', […] and secures the regime of a full and undivided Identity. And in our times […] the dominant paradigm of identity has been 'the imagined community' of nationalism" (Radhakrishnan 1993, 752).
3. According to Michel Foucault, the state-condoned mechanisms of discipline and surveillance hardly permit any space of individual freedom or even the possibility of resistance outside the constraints of the prevalent discourse. Resistance, as determined by Foucault, is an element of power itself. He argues: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather

consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978, 95).

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