



J.M. Coetzee: Construction and Representation of Historical Reality (Effect)

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Abstract. South African novelist J.M. Coetzee has often been accused of refusing to engage with socio-political conflicts that mark his society. This paper will frame and analyse representation and conceptualization of history in Coetzee's post-apartheid novels—*Disgrace* (2000) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). The central argument will be that, far from ignoring historical struggles and developments, Coetzee's work engages with and encodes the same by using the grammar of novelistic discourse, which it positions as a rival to normative modern historical discourse.

Keywords: Modernity, Postcolonial, Novel, History, Sign System

Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. *Disgrace*. 3. *Elizabeth Costello*: Figurations of Modernity and Humanity. 4. The Effect(s) of Realism. 5. Living with Unknowability.

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1. Introduction

J.M. Coetzee, in his talk 'The Novel Today', delivered in 1987 at the Weekly Mail Book Week, declared,

In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry. (Quoted in Attwell 1990: 286)

He stressed that supplementarity would require the novel to provide the reader "with vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation" (Quoted in Attwell 1990: 286). Rivalry, on the other hand, which is the paradigm he associates with his own novelistic praxis,

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would lead to a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history ... for example, a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. (Quoted in Atwell 1990: 286)

This paper will argue that Coetzee's work is not impervious to—or deliberately non-cognizant of—historical experience. In fact, he posits novelistic discourse as an *alternative* form of discursive engagement with history, rivalling *modern* historical discourse. This paper will focus on two of Coetzee's post-apartheid novels, *Disgrace* (2000) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and will examine their representation and understanding of historical experience, as well as their methodologies for encoding the same in the form of novelistic discourse.

2. *Disgrace*

The plot of Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* unfolds in actual places in South Africa—Cape Town, Grahamstown, Salem and George; and depicts a clearly identifiable historical milieu—the post-apartheid period of the late nineties. The narrative is wholly focalized through the consciousness of the white, middle aged Professor of literature, David Lurie, who lives with a sense of being out-of-place “these days” (*Disgrace* 2000: 3), which have been marked by unprecedented social flux ever since the abolition of apartheid. A department secretary, who he takes out for lunch, notes,

I mean, whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation, at least you knew where you were...Now people just pick and choose which laws they want to obey. It's anarchy. (*Disgrace* 2000: 8)

And then again, soon after, there is a more direct reference as Lurie sits watching a play in which his “inamorata” (*Disgrace* 2000: 189), Melanie, is acting:

Sunset at the Globe Salon is the name of the play they are rehearsing: a comedy of the new South Africa set in a hairdressing salon in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. On stage a hairdresser, flamboyantly gay, attends to two clients, one black, one white...catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter. (*Disgrace* 2000: 23)

Lurie's ironic description betrays his view that the historically conditioned practices of social organization and of relating to others in society cannot be

wished away by mere policy change or wishful thinking. Indeed, this view is reinforced when Lurie is attacked and his daughter Lucy is raped, in the latter's country farm, by three black men who are not personally acquainted with them, in a case of, what appears to be, racial violence.

Lucy tells Lurie later that,

It was so personal...it was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was [...] expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them. (*Disgrace* 2000: 156)

Lurie responds, "It was history speaking through them...a history of wrong...It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (*Disgrace* 2000: 156). However, Lurie is not entirely correct. Those men were strangers, indeed, but their act *was* personal, as Lucy claimed. History *constitutes* the personal. Lurie's statement—"It was history speaking through them"—in reference to the three black men, is significant here. When it is read together along with his other remarks it appears to be an innocent figure of speech employed by a highly erudite man to convey his point. However, it is imperative to bear in mind the fact that the author, J. M. Coetzee, a linguist by training, often employs descriptions of acts of articulation in language as *metaphors* for the manner in which cultural sign systems mark and order individual and collective experience in a given socio-historical milieu. Lurie's figure of speech actually ironizes the rest of his statement, and it also provides a hint about Coetzee's conception of history. It is possible to explain the author's understanding of history by taking recourse to some of the concepts elaborated in linguist Ferdinand Saussure's *A Course in General Linguistics*.² Saussure asserts that sign systems do not just order, and reflect reality—they *construct* reality. He claims,

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass [...] without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. (Quoted in Kirby 1997: 17)

Sign systems *create* the reality (effect) they describe.³ It must be emphasized that reality (effect) is in no way inferior to prelinguistic reality. As Saussure points out,

² This paper does not propose that Coetzee composed his fictions with Saussure's theories in mind—however, the latter's work not only revolutionized the discipline of Linguistics, but also engendered Structuralism, which affected theorization in most disciplines, including history and literature. Subsequent scholarship has unearthed flaws in the theoretical paradigm which was thus inaugurated; however, it still relies on adapted, reworked and transmuted forms of the concepts which were developed then. Arguably, many of Saussure's thoughts (and their offspring) underlie Coetzee's formulations about the nature of reality, and the relationship between language and ideology.

³ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term effect has several meanings. Used as a verb, the term effect has one meaning: "Cause (something) to happen; bring about." In this essay the term reality is not used

To say that language is a product of social forces does not suffice to show clearly that it is unfree; remembering that it is always the heritage of the preceding period, we must add that these social forces are linked with time. Language is checked not only by the weight of the collectivity but also by time. These two are inseparable. (Quoted in Kirby 1997: 31)

Therefore, an individual's perception, thought, utterance or action is never free or "personal", but is generated *and* delimited by a frame-of-reference constructed by socio-historically constituted sign systems. So coming back to *Disgrace*, we may posit that history does "speak" through the black men, because the sign systems which generate and delimit the possibilities for their perceptions, thoughts and actions are historically conditioned. Centuries of social and political organization on the basis of colour has converted race into an important sign for marking individuality. The three rapists identify themselves as black men and, accordingly, identify Lucy as a white woman and judge her on the basis of a set of expectations that constitute the concept of whiteness. Before elaborating on this argument further, it would be fruitful to examine another exchange between Lurie and Lucy. When Lucy decides not to report to the police that she was raped, Lurie fails to understand her reason for doing so. She explains it as an attempt to "save my skin" (*Disgrace* 2000: 112). Lurie warns her that the rapists, wreaking vengeance, will not be deterred from attacking again by her decision not to lodge a complaint. But Lucy argues that that is not her reason for restraining herself. Lurie probes further, "Is it some sort of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope to expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" (*Disgrace* 2000: 112) Lucy replies, "No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions" (*Disgrace* 2000: 112). Lurie, just like the black men, attempts to "read" Lucy in terms of her racial identity. Even if he professedly condemns racial discrimination and violence, and feels that racial discrimination and discord must be countered and phased out, he treats race as an ontological marker of identity. The use of the term "misreading" is telling. Lucy, for Lurie and for the rapists, operates as a sign—she is conceptualized (signified) and described (signifier) as a white woman.⁴ They all read Lucy in terms of a sign system which exists prior to encounter. The problem is not that they read her as a sign—after all, we figure forth and describe ourselves, others, reality (effect) at large in terms of signs. The problem is that the rapists and Lurie conflate the sign—a constituent of reality (effect)—with the whole of reality.

as a standalone term, because the author of this paper believes that there is no essential, irreducible version of reality. The term reality (effect) is employed in the paper to describe reality as it is experienced by us because of the constant framing of our experiences of pre-linguistic reality by multiple sign systems. The label 'Prelinguistic reality' is employed to refer to material objects as they exist prior to experience.

⁴ According to Saussure, a Sign has two components: Signified (concept) and Signifier (which denotes the Signified). The Signified, it is necessary to remember, is *not* equivalent to pre-linguistic reality.

3. *Elizabeth Costello: Figurations of Modernity and Humanity*

While in *Disgrace* J.M. Coetzee invokes the experience of living in a post-Apartheid South African society where the historical legacy of racial oppression and discrimination is so deeply ingrained that racial signification remains a primary category of marking identities, in another novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, the author invokes human experience in a postcolonial⁵ world which is marked by an asymmetrical global order of political, economic, social and specie-al interrelationships on account of discourses which emerged with the unfolding of modernity. *Elizabeth Costello* is a compilation of six lectures delivered by Coetzee at different occasions, spanning from 1997 to 2003, under the description of ‘lessons’ to which are added two new ‘lessons’ and a fictional letter written by Lady Chandos to Francis Bacon. Costello, the protagonist, is an Australian novelist who is not embedded in the political, social, cultural matrix of any particular community, and who is constantly on the move, travelling around the world and delivering lectures. She identifies herself as “an ex-colonial”⁶—which highlights the fact that she has descended from white settlers in Australia. But more significantly, a perusal of her lectures, and an evaluation of the matrix of concerns they flag, would indicate that the given label is an identification of herself as an inhabitant of a postcolonial world.⁷

Costello, in Lessons Three and Four, delivers lectures entitled “The Lives of Animals” in Appleton University. A careful examination of the text of the lectures would reveal that they are not just about animals. Instead, they invoke a larger sign system, where the meaning of the sign, ‘Animal’, is not simply predicated on the union of a set of characteristics which formulate the concept indicated by the signifier ‘animal’. Let us take a brief theoretical detour to understand the ideological freight marking Costello’s idea of animals. The meaning of the sign, ‘Animal’, is based on its difference from the sign ‘Human’. Again, we must bear in mind that this sign system, which has emerged as the dominant conceptual framework over time, does not draw on irreducible ontological reality. It was engendered at a (contingent) historical moment when western culture encountered different cultures around the world, and in order to attain supremacy and impose its practices and discourses globally, it sought to efface difference by defining the ideal category of the ‘Human’. Individuals were identified and judged not on the basis of their belonging to cultural groups with different rationalities but on the basis of their proximity to or distance from the ideal human characteristics inscribed within the western cultural discourse. The differences were explained away by employing temporal classification—those who exhibited characteristics which modern western civilization posited as ideal human attributes, like rational thinking—were labelled ‘Modern’, while those who exhibited a predilection for alternate rationalities, practices and belief systems, were classed as ‘Backward’ or

⁵ Postcolonial here, and in the rest of the paper, denotes the period following the onset of colonization.

⁶ Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Vintage, 2003. Pg. 102.

⁷ Coetzee had once observed that we are postcolonial- postcolonizer(s) or postcolonized(s).

'Primitive'. All these labels, we may note, are relative categories, which have no meaning outside of the temporal-conceptual structure which colonial modernity is premised on.⁸ It was widely supposed that while the modern individual was contemporary to modern times, the primitive was (belatedly) evolving towards developing those modern, rational attributes and societal structures, which were the end goal of human evolution, and which, significantly, marked humans as distinct from all the other animals with whom they shared the attribute of embodiment. Costello states that it appears to her, that not only is Reason not the being of universe but is "the being of human thought" (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 69). Then, going a step further, she adds that it is "worse than that, the being of one tendency in human thought." She draws an analogy between intra-specie and inter-specie hierarchization, when she recounts that Kafka's ape Red Peter was considered to be a dumb, unthinking animal, until he was trained to speak a (Western) human language, German, and to employ reason. She argues that this homogenizing impulse may also be traced in the case of the Indian Mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, who was "captured and transported to Cambridge, England" (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 68), where what were dismissed as Ramanujan's "speculative" (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 68) mathematical thoughts, were studied and decoded by English academicians, adapting them to the methods of reason and, supposedly, *thereby* rendering them intelligible and intelligent. Costello hints at the connection between rationality and capitalistic imperialism when she states that we should view the worldwide emergence of rationalist codes of thinking and relating to the world not as

the flowering of a faculty that allows access to the secrets of the universe (but as) the specialism of a rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition whose forte is reasoning, in the same way that the forte as chess players is playing chess, which, for *its own motives* it tries to install at the centre of the world. (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 68. Emphasis mine)

The attempt to install goal-directed, inductive reason "at the centre of the world" is marked by the motive to align belief systems and practices, world over, with money rationality and capitalistic practices. Modern cultural groups argued that backward or primitive people were incapable of ruling themselves on account of not being modern—because of this they were not aware of the goals that a society should set for itself and of the orderly, efficient structures it should employ to order itself so as to keep developing. Only modern people, armed with reason and a historical imagination, could foresee which stage of historical development they were at and the ground they had to cover. Modern western powers justified their conquering of non-western societies by arguing that the latter *needed* their

⁸ Banerjee, Prathama. "Introduction." *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History- Writing in a Colonial Society*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2006. The idea of temporality in Western culture is couched in a way so as to subsume the entirety of the constellation of human cultures to its own logic. Therefore, Modernity is, to borrow Prathama Banerjee's term- "always already Colonial Modernity."

intervention in order to shape and regulate societal organization so as to bring about modernity. Eurocentric, normative modernity was established as the standard of measurement of a people's development, and was deployed to evaluate and judge actions, determine which did and did not accord with its principles (which were, of course, those that were commensurate with money rationality and capitalistic practices). So the pre-given category of western reason served as a framework to generate, organize and evaluate activities, and in this manner, alternative, different ideas and practices were labelled as irrational and non-modern, losing their ability to generate alternative, contesting forms of social organization, behaviour and identification. Costello, in her lectures, notes how modern pedagogical practices play a significant role in regulating future action and thinking in society, and in inoculating it against difference and contingency. The training which was provided to Red Peter so as to help him develop a reasoning faculty and skill, and the training which Ramanujan lacked, so that his speculations had to be suitably adapted by rational academicians in order to render them useful and reasonable—that training has assumed the form of the dominant pedagogical methodology in contemporary times which involves

the designated twelve years of schooling and six years of tertiary education...(to equip one for) making a contribution to the decoding of the great book of Nature via Physical and mathematical disciplines. (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 69)

Compare this to Lurie's ruminations in the first half of *Disgrace* about an aspect of South African Society of the nineties—"the Great Rationalization" (*Disgrace* 2000: 3) or the standardization of pedagogical and economic practices to align them with the global capitalist structures. At the outset of the novel, we learn that the University where he works has been restructured according to the new South African education policy which is in step with the global move to make educational more functional, and thereby align it with the capitalist outlook so that it could train people to contribute to capitalist activities. For instance, Lurie is described thus:

Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since classics and Modern languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications...He has never been much of a teacher; in this transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning he is more out of place than ever. But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days, burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age. (*Disgrace* 2000: 4)

4. The Effect(s) of Realism

Coetzee encodes his conception of historical reality in the Ur-Realist form of the given novels. Since historical reality, according to him, is a nebula—and it is accessible to us only partially in the form of premeditated sign systems which

generate and delimit the possibilities of thoughts, utterances and actions—no genre can reflect pre-linguistic historical reality. Therefore, while figuring forth his stories in the realist form, he underlines the limitations which mark the discursive boundaries of the form. Before illustrating this argument it is necessary to recapitulate the tenets of the realism which emerged as the dominant literary mode of novelistic practice in the twentieth century. Critics distinguish it from established literary traditions by drawing attention to its “formlessness” and use of non-embellished language (Watt 1957: 9). György Lukács, an influential theorist of the novel whose thoughts Coetzee often commented on, states that in a realist text the plot is driven by a dialectical interaction between the individual personality traits of the characters and their material socio-economic realities. It is also shaped by the interrelationships and interactions of characters which are reflective of social interrelationships which in turn depend upon the historic stage which the material, economic base structure of the society is at. The final social vision of the text manages to surpass authorial intention and foresight, because the author grounds the characters, ideas and phenomenon that he includes, in the “objective” material realities which he observes (Lukács 2006: 380-393). In *Doubling the point: Essays and Interviews*, J.M. Coetzee states,

I happen to think Lukács’ judgement wrong, conditioned by more than a little moralistic prejudice...the general position that Lukács takes *on what he calls realism*, as against modernist decadence carries a great deal of power, political and moral, in South Africa today: one’s first duty as a writer is to represent social and historical processes; drawing the procedures of representation into question is time wasting, and so forth. (Coetzee 1992: 202. Emphasis mine)

According to him texts *create* the historical reality (effect) that they represent. Coetzee’s novels, therefore, in a bid to be Realist to the core, *underline* the manner in which they create the reality (effect) which they reflect.

When Lukács claims that realism reflects material realities, he ignores the fact that the author is engendered by a specific historical and social context where the sign systems available to him mould the perception of the Reality (effect) that his works ‘reflect’. In *Disgrace*, as was argued earlier in the paper, it is on account of reading Lucy in terms of her material, social identity—a white woman—in a given historical period (postcolonial/apartheid) that the rapists and Lurie all perform a “misreading” of her. Moreover, the author never provides an insight into Lucy’s motives, since the narrative is entirely focalized through Lurie’s consciousness. By aligning the reader’s and the narrative’s consciousness with that of Lurie’s, the author hints that while he’s able to underline the discursive nature of historical reality (effect), he’s unable to step outside it in order to conceive of subject positions which are not generated and delimited by the reality (effect) he perceives and represents, because the subject positions available to him—as well as the sign systems available to him for perceiving and representing that reality (effect)—are conditioned by it.

Similarly, in *Elizabeth Costello*, while Costello recognizes the constructedness of the idea of man, and of the distinction between man and the animal, and she stresses that we—all the humans—share with animals the condition of being embodied, she is unable to *live* the embodied existence. Throughout the novel, irrespective of what she says in her lectures, she continues to be gripped by notions predicated on disembodied ideas of the human. For instance, in the first lecture, she discusses her wish to become immortal through her work. She recognizes the futility of her desire—acknowledging that everything dies out in the end—but is unable to let go of it. She doesn't, in her reflections on immortal fame, consider the fact that *this* wish is predicated on an unquestioning acceptance of the modern mind-body split wherein an individual is able to think of an identity outside of the body. Moreover, in her lecture, while indicating that we must think in embodied terms in order to be able to, through the act of sympathetic imagination, imagine the subject position of animals and thus understand the limits of our own subject position, she doesn't outline in concrete terms how one may go about doing such a thing. She gives only vague hints such as the injunction: "I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles [...] open your heart and listen to what your heart says." (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 82). In a debate about animal consciousness with a Professor of Philosophy, Costello advocates "kindness", which she defines "in its full sense, as an acceptance that we are all of one kind, one nature" (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 106). When O'Hearne argues against the possibility of the same, stating that animals' intelligence is deficient when compared to humans', she refuses to respond, stating that one "would first want to interrogate the whole question of rights and how we come to possess them" (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 107), indicating that the very definition of human intelligence and rationality is strategic in nature. She argues against the points he raises, but is unable to posit her own conception of human "kindness" with/for animals. The problem is that she is formulating her utterance in a format which requires assertive, rational statements imbued with logic. However, what she is trying to say is seemingly situated in a realm of thought which is not contiguous with the genre of the rational debate format, as it is not based on material evidence and isn't formulated through rational logic. She ends the debate with the statement—

If the last common ground that I have with him is reason, and if reason is what sets me apart from the veal calf, then thank you but no thank you, I'll talk to someone else. (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 112)

Ironically, this statement too is a typical if-then logic statement. Since she is herself a product of the culture whose seams she senses, she's unable to articulate her critique of the same except in terms of negation. It is necessary to remember that the lessons in the novel were originally lectures in the fictional mode, which were delivered by Coetzee on different occasions. Coetzee allows different—and often even divergent—positions and ideas to be voiced or bodied forth by different characters. Ultimately, however, it is possible to identify the irreducible base which enables/ limits all the characters' utterances. And that irreducible base is the

historical reality (effect). And since Coetzee focalizes his narratives entirely through one of his characters and doesn't offer any alternative and/or ironical viewpoint, he archly indicates that the given 'irreducible base' of the historical reality (effect) of his milieu determines his own thoughts, utterances and representations as well.

5. Living with Unknowability

The irreducible base of the postcolonial, modern cultural milieu appears to be the inability to remain uncertain, giving rise to the need to ground all observations and exchanges in pre-given codes and/ or in material, empirical evidence. This paper does not seek to suggest that non-modern cultures are capable of accessing reality prior to meditation. As suggested earlier in the paper, an(y) individual is able to perceive differentiated reality only through linguistic sign systems. However, what distinguishes modern culture from others is its need to contain difference and otherness. Johannes Fabian in his essay, 'The Other revisited' argues that 'the Other' is a vital epistemic category, the consciousness of which inspires the human need to communicate and express. He states that,

Recognizing an other = *alius* as other = *alter* is a condition of communication and interaction, hence of participating in social-cultural practices (or whatever sociological categories, from group to society, apply); or of sharing a *Lebenswelt*. Without alterity no culture, no *Lebenswelt* [...] this concept makes sense only if *Lebenswelt* exists in the plural. (Fabian 2006: 9)

Fabian outlines two kinds of 'Others' in the given essay. First, the Other *within*, whose alterity is *constitutive* of a given cultural universe. Second, the Other *without*—who is recognized as a member of a different cultural universe. As was noted earlier in the paper, on account of its need to establish and sustain cultural supremacy over people belonging to non-western cultural groups, the relation that the modern culture establishes with the non-modern is consistent with the first definition of Othering that Fabian proposes. It is on account of its need to erase the possibility of occurrence of practices which are contrary to its own rationality and regulations, that modern culture is wary of radical Otherness and contingency, and it seeks to contain the same by ordering experience in terms of pre-meditated systems of ideas or by explaining/grounding analysis of experience in terms of *what it identifies as* material, empirical evidence. Coetzee underlines this approach in his ruminations on realism in *Elizabeth Costello*.

Elizabeth Costello begins with a "lesson" entitled "Realism", with a direct address from the author J.M. Coetzee to the reader, thereby dispelling the realist illusion, in order to draw attention to the implicit assumptions about the realist narrative which are shared by the author and the readers, and whose acceptance *allows* the illusion to be sustained. This serves to draw attention to and subvert the assumptions that realism as a literary mode is best suited to represent reality on account of its "formlessness" (Hale 2006: 9) and the proximity of its language to

the language of daily reality. The first chapter is peppered by authorial interventions which indicate that scenes have been skipped or that “the scene has changed” (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 4) and so on. In one of his interventions, he states that,

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: *realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence...*when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations—walks in the countryside, conversations—in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world. (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003: 9)

The italicised statement deconstructs conventional realist practices’ apprehension and representation of reality. Realism is uncomfortable with free floating ideas, but its need to ground its ideas in a material basis is itself “premiered on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence.” This draws attention to a fact which has been reiterated again and again in this paper, that empirical experience and observation, which is privileged by science and literary realism like, is never unmediated. What is perceived as ‘material’ is actually a construction of reality (effect) by a historically sanctioned sign system. Coetzee’s views bear a family resemblance with those of Frederick Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* where, eloquently, the latter notes that realism constructs

the newly quantifiable space of extension and market equivalence, the new rhythms of measurable time, the new secular and “disenchanted” object world of the commodity system, with its post-traditional daily life and its bewilderingly empirical, “meaningless,” and contingent *Umwelt*—of which this new narrative discourse will then claim to be the “realistic” reflection. (Jameson 1981: 42)

The limits of the culture that generates realism and defines what constitutes the ‘material’ reality (effect), are evident in the idiom that Lurie and Costello both employ to articulate their apprehensions of experiences which it provides no conceptual terms to define. Lurie, after having lost and/or given up everything that defined him—his job, his responsibilities and rights as a father, his house, his faith in a world where individuals’, and later, creatures’ singularity/uniqueness was appreciated—realizes that all those defining, differentiating categories are immaterial. He comes to that realization when he sees dogs being euthanized in Bev’s clinic. Earlier, Lurie used to incinerate dogs’ corpses himself in the public crematorium when he saw that the workers used to beat the corpses with shovels to bend them in shape so they could enter the furnace. He reasoned to himself, then, that he did it “For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (*Disgrace* 2000: 146). He, at that point, held on to the notion of the integrity of the Self, of the singularity and definitiveness/difference of each creature. But by the end of the novel, he

begins to focus on helping the creatures *in death* rather than after it, easing their passage out of life. He recognizes that integrity of the self lies not in difference but in sameness—of the flesh, the embodied existence that all living creatures share. However, he is unable to articulate this sense in words free of the mind/soul and body duality which is at the heart of modern discourse. Using quasi theological language, he reflects that, “here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and contorting; then it is sucked away and is gone...one leaks out of existence” (*Disgrace* 2000: 219). His use of theological discourse is significant. Religious experience and parlance, in the modern world, does not constitute ‘materiality’ as it is not empirically verifiable. Thus he bodies forth his apprehension of the limits of historical reality (effect) by employing idiom that has been banished from its ambit, but which still bears traces of thought structures, such as the body-mind duality, which characterize it. Most significantly, it underlines the fact that the very moment of an *ongoing act* of experiencing, constitutes an act of ‘faith’, because our immediate reception of information from the senses is populated by phenomena which are differentiated by the sign systems we have inherited/inherited and created/create through consensus.

J.M Coetzee’s novels represent historical experience by focalizing it through the consciousnesses of different characters and by grounding the different and often diverging utterances in the seemingly irreducible perceptions/assumptions about historical, social reality that they seem to share. Moreover, they underline the limits of the boundaries of those ‘seemingly irreducible perceptions/assumptions about historical, social reality’ and, thus, denaturalize them—not by negating them and erecting alternative definitions of the irreducible, but—by highlighting the fact that every representation of historical reality (effect) also *constructs* it, and that, therefore, ontological (pre-linguistic) historical reality always already exceeds historical discourse.

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