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Narrative Entrapments in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee: a Postmodern Feminist reading of his Three Female Narrating Personas

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Introduction

J.M Coetzee has released three novels in which he uses women narrators. The novels *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe* and *Age of Iron* all address the problem of narrative and discourse, and reading through the novels I was drawn to the observation that they shared a basic theme, namely the three women's failure to communicate their own stories. The three narrators all present themselves as authors of their own stories; Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* asserts that she has "uttered my life in my own voice throughout" (*HC*, p. 139), Susan in *Foe* declares that "I still endeavour to be the father of my story (*Foe*, p. 123), while Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* refers to her story as "my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place" (*AI*, p. 130) Nevertheless, I could not escape the question that they all engage in a struggle to control their narratives and to define their own truths, and that despite their assertions of narrative authority the three women narrators are all cautiously aware of the limitations of their narratives.

My further exploring of the novels, then, centred around the following theme: Do the female narrators have problems finding a space from which to speak, and of producing representations of the self which are not immediately subsumed by the system in which they emerge? Do the female narrators experience some sort of "narrative entrapment"? Is Coetzee through these novels actually targeting a general problem for women narrators, that women's access to representation, to writing, to truth and to power is marginalised in society, in culture and in literature? Has society historically fostered narratives that are blocking women's true representation?

These questions are, naturally, theoretically informed, as the novels have been subject to much debate and scrutiny by critics advocating rather different interpretations based on a variety of theoretical frameworks. I will, however, argue that despite the proliferation of

approaches, the idea of 'metanarratives' has been increasingly addressed, substantiated and targeted in much of the criticism. The term metanarrative is most commonly thought of in connection with postmodernism, and Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism simply as "incredulity towards metanarratives".[1] By this he means that the postmodern condition is characterised by an increasingly widespread scepticism towards metanarratives. In critical theory and in postmodernism in particular metanarratives are identified as "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience".[2] Metanarratives are, in other words, stories fostered in order to legitimise various versions of truth. Postmodernism's scepticism towards metanarratives represents a specific repudiation of the entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with liberal humanism, such as truth, objectivity, reason, certainty, closure, progress and personal identity. Metanarratives of transcendent and universal truths, then, are no longer tenable, and instead we are left with a series of mininarratives which are provisional, contingent and temporary.

Postmodernism and its incredulity towards metanarratives is clearly also interesting from a feminist point of view, especially if we believe that these metanarratives smother difference and plurality by invariably privileging what is valued by patriarchy. In fact, Fiona Probyn argues that feminism enables the critique of the metanarratives of liberal humanism because women have always had an uneasy relationship to these metanarratives, and are therefore in a privileged position to undermine them.[3] What is being targeted is the potentially manipulative power of these narratives that have attained the status of knowledge; be it historical, political, medical, psychoanalytical or linguistic. I have decided to refer to them as 'narrative entrapments', hence the title of the paper. The concept 'narrative entrapment' is constructed based on a constant dialogue between specific textual analyses of the three novels and the wider framework briefly outlined above. This allows me to be both specific (concentrating on the novels) while also relating the problems raised in the novels to wider societal gender issues. Hence, I suggest that entrapments in the novels indicate that certain metanarratives have become a controlling

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[1] Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. Manchester University Press. Manchester. 2002. p.86

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_narrative

[3] Probyn, Fiona. J.M Coetzee: *Writing with/out authority*. Internet: http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/probyn.htm p. 14

factor not only of the three women's narrativisation, but also of the way their narratives are being interpreted.

In order to capture and underpin the relevance of the concept of 'narrative entrapments' I will, thus, apply two theoretical outlooks; feminism and postmodernism or, rather, *postmodern feminism*. Feminism as a critical approach has, generally, been an eclectic theory in that it draws upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism. Contemporary feminist literature is, however, divided in regard to what extent postmodernist perspectives should be incorporated into feminism. I have, nevertheless, chosen these two theoretical applications, or a merging of the two, not because they will arrive at an inevitable interpretation of the text, but rather because the bringing together of Coetzee's texts with these, sometimes conflicting, theories will allow the posing of certain questions which should be asked of authority, representation, writing and truth.

The Thesis – its Structure and Approach

The structure

The thesis will proceed as follows: The next section briefly introduces the three novels and their female narrators. Subsequently the methodological approach is outlined, in which I will justify the starting point from which I explore the proposed concept of 'narrative entrapments'. Based again on textual analyses of the three novels, combined with an understanding of how these analyses are informed by a wider theoretical framework, I will explore the following key dimensions: How women's lack of narrative power is embedded in historical discourse, in the status of the female body, in the status of the female language, in the connection between language and identity, in the primacy of psychoanalysis as an interpretative framework, and in the problem of 'confessions', i.e. the fact that women's narratives in general seem to have an apparent confessional aspect. These should to some extent be seen as already well proven elements in feminist criticism. The dimensions are, accordingly, discussed in their own sections in the order of appearance outlined above. In the final part, then, the findings are brought together in an effort to bring a solid fundament for future applications of the concept of narrative entrapments, be it in Coetzee's texts or in a more general sense.

The Novels

The protagonists in the novels I have chosen all experience some kind of isolation. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* lives on an isolated farm with only the servants to keep her company. Susan Barton in *Foe* is a castaway on the island of Cruso, whereas Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* feels at least psychologically isolated in her illness. It is in such states of isolation, be it physical or psychological, that the three women are trying to tell their stories.

In the Heart of the Country presents itself as a journal, or first-person monologue. Magda's account is presented in two hundred and sixty-six numbered sections, in which contradictory accounts of events are frequently given. Magda gives, for example, two different versions of the killing her father. In one scenario she describes killing her father with an axe when he arrives home with his new wife. In another account she describes fatally shooting her father when he is in bed with his new mistress Klein-Anna. After the

demise of the father, a recurrent thread in Magda's journal concerns her attempts to establish rapport with her servant Hendrik and his wife Klein-Anna. Her attempts are futile though, and she is instead humiliated and raped by Hendrik, whereupon he and Klein-Anna eventually desert Magda, leaving her alone on the farm.

Foe comprises four parts. The novel begins with Susan Barton's memoir "The female Castaway" which tells the story of how, returning from Bahia where she has been searching for her lost daughter, she is put off the ship after a crew mutiny. She swims ashore and finds herself on an island with Cruso and Friday. Cruso tells Susan that Friday is incapable of speech because he has no tongue. The cause of his mutilation is, however, never revealed. After their rescue by a passing merchantman, Cruso dies aboard the ship, whereupon Susan and Friday are left to make their way in England. Once back in England Susan seeks out the author Foe to have her story told. The novel thus continues in a series of letters addressed to Foe, most of which do not reach him because he is evading his creditors, it proceeds in an account of Susan's relationship with Foe, before ending with a sequence spoken by an unnamed narrator.

To read *Age of Iron* is to read a letter written by a dying woman, addressed to her daughter who has exiled herself to America, vowing not to return to South Africa until the political climate has changed. Mrs Curren, a retired lecturer of the classics, begins writing on the day she is diagnosed as suffering from terminal bone cancer. A derelict who calls himself Vercueil enters the old woman's world of isolation and solitude and becomes her only companion during her last years.

Approach

How to read Coetzee's female narrators is perhaps one of the most interesting and challenging aspects of his work. Critics such as Sue Kossew have pointed out that feminist readings of Coetzee have been slow to develop, perhaps because Coetzee at first glance seems to be a powerful ally of feminism. Indeed, one of the comments Coetzee has given on *Foe* states that his interest "clearly lies with Foe's foe, the *un*successful author, worse author*ess* Susan Barton".[4] A striking feature of much of the criticism on Coetzee's women

[4] *Writing with/out authority* p. 3

narrators, however, is the inherent patriarchal nature of their readings. In his analysis of *Foe*, for instance, David Attwell argues:

> To these arguments one must add that the feminism Coetzee constructs through Susan carries additional allegorical burdens that have little to do with gender. In the allegory of white South African authorship, Susan's womanhood suggests the relative cultural power of the province as opposed to the metropolis and of unauthorized as opposed to authorized speech; gender therefore serves as the sign of the position of semi marginality that I have called colonial postcolonialism[5]

Similarly, in "Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in Coetzee's *Foe*" Colleran and Macaskill argue that Coetzee's text should not be 'swallowed up' by feminism: "Coetzee's text can ill afford to have itself swallowed up by deconstructionist, or feminist, or any other form of theorizing that might desire to expose every kind of secret other than those of its own".[6]

The overall argument in these male-written works of criticism seems to be an idea that the subjugation of women is not important or noteworthy when considered alone. Probyn points out, accordingly, that the stories of Mrs Curren, Susan and Magda are interpreted as being about issues 'broader' than women's issues, thus leaving the question of the women narrators relatively unexplored.[7] Josephine Dodd also attends to this issue in her discussion of critics' misreadings of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. Dodd argues that "by naturalizing Magda's narrative as 'really' being about her father or South Africa or politics and so on, the (male) critic disallows Magda's difference, renders her other and confirms his sense of Self. Criticism of this nature must be seen for what it is: an imperialist activity".[8]

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[5] Attwell, David. J.M Coetzee: *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1993. p. 111-112

[6] Macaskill, Brian and Jeanne Colleran. "Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J.M Coetzee's *Foe*." *Contemporary Literature* 33.3 (1992): 432-57.p.442

[7] *Writing with/out authority*.p.9

[8] Dodd, Josephine. "The Textual Production of Women." Printed in Kossew, Sue, *Critical Essays*. 157-166. p. 161

I have decided to devote this thesis exclusively to the three women narrators. In the first place, I argue that their stories reflect an attempt by Coetzee to shed some new light on how history, literature and culture tends to subordinate women's narratives – if their narratives are at all possible to convey in a true sense under male defined metanarratives. I also allude to the view that compared to for instance issues of race, the subjugation of women by patriarchal culture has been more systematic than any other form of oppression. Sheila Roberts has, accordingly, pointed out that "women have no memory traces of any utopian existence of living in equality side by side with men"; they have "no memory of a mode of existence independent of the patriarchal one".[9] It is in this relatively powerless mode of existence that the three women narrators are seeking to define themselves.

Before embarking on a closer analysis of the three novels I will in the next chapter explore some of the tensions in the debate on the relationship between historicity and textuality. In order for me to be able to talk convincingly about the texts as representations of women's lives, not only as characters inside a book, but also as characters reflecting the lives of people living outside a book, I cannot, in a postmodern age, escape the questions put forward by this debate. A significant part of the criticism on Coetzee's work does indeed deal with elements of this theoretical conflict. In view of that, I believe that my further analysis of the novels preconditions at least a rudimentary treatment of this debate.

[9] Roberts, Sheila. "Cinderella's Mothers: J.M Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*". *English in Africa* 19.1 (1992): 24-33. p. 22-23

In the Nexus of History and Text

David Attwell, who is particularly strong on the theoretical background of Coetzee's authorship, argues that Coetzee's work constitute a form of "situational metafiction," which he characterises as a "mode of fiction that draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and, finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation".[10] The term situational metafiction is coined in an effort to bridge the gap in the polarized debate on the relationship between historicity and textuality. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the problem in all its dimensions, although I will address some of its main concerns.

The idea of historicity is usually believed to manifest itself through the realist genre. The underlying assumption following realism as literary form is that the text always figures forth the real world; that it reflects and records history. The textual turn in postmodern literary culture constitutes the other side of the theoretical divide. To fully embrace the notion of postmodernism would, on the contrary, imply a rejection of literary realism. The postmodern outlook would instead favour the fragmented, allusive text where the novel alludes to and interacts with other novels, but does not figure forth the real world. Favouring this view we can, moreover, hardly accept the novelistic characters as people but see them as merely 'tissues of textualities'.

A major theorist of postmodernism is the contemporary French writer Jean Baudrillard.[11] He is associated with what is usually known as 'the loss of the real' – meaning a loss of distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth.[12] In *Simulacra and Simulations* Baudrillard asks the question that was initiated by the deconstructionists: what if a sign is not a manifestation of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs? Coetzee is frequently labelled a postmodern writer, and the incessant blurring between real and imagined in *In the Heart of the Country* seems thus entirely

[10] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* p. 20

[11] *Beginning Theory* p.87

[12] *Beginning Theory* p.87

fitting for a work situated in the postmodern era. For instance, Magda describes the murder of her father only to unsay it a few pages later, leaving the reader doubting what actually happened. Being a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, *Foe* equally values the postmodern outlook in which the novel alludes to other novels without necessarily figuring forth an external world. With reference to *Foe* Attwell (reading Ina Grabe), accordingly argues that "in paying more attention to the telling of the story than the story itself, the novel clearly participates in the post-modernism's favouring of the signifier over the signified".[13] An interesting parallel can be drawn to *Age of Iron* and Mrs.Curren's letter to her daughter. Although she identifies her text as a "message" and Vercueil as a "messenger" (*AI*, p.32) its meanings and implications – what is actually signified within the letter – are by no means clear.

Apart from the postmodernism that manifests itself in his works, Coetzee has through various statements asseverated the autonomous character of his work; its independence from outside influences and constraints:

> I am not a herald of community or anything else, as you correctly recognize. I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light[14]

His emphasis on the fictional character of his work together with his taste for the allegorical style has, by some critics, been considered evidence of a kind of political and ethical evasion. The writer and critic Stephen Watson has objected that Coetzee's reluctance to write 'realist' fiction reduces his work to "little more than an artfully constructed void".[15] *Waiting for the Barbarians* is perhaps his paradigmatic case of allegory, as it is located neither in time nor space. By contrast, the later novels I have chosen are all set in specific times and places: Cape Town in the mid-1980's for *Age of Iron*, early eighteenth-century London for *Foe* and the South African countryside for *In the Heart of the Country*. The latter novel is, however, characterised by historical ambiguities: what may seem like a

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[13] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.104

[14] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Intro

[15] Lowry, Elizabeth. *Like a Dog*. Internet: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n20/lowr01_.html p. 4

nineteenth-century setting at the start is later contradicted by airplanes towards the end, which clearly brings us into the late twentieth century.

In considering Coetzee's writing, however, the oversimplified polarisation between textuality and historicity seems obsolete, Attwell argues, as it neglects the way in which Coetzee's work is located in the "nexus of history and text; that is, they explore the tension between these polarities".[16] Attwell nevertheless poses the question of whether the concern with textuality in Coetzee's writing will lead to a "turning away from history"[17] suggesting that it is, principally, a question of 'reference'. In historical discourse, the existence of the referent is, naturally, not questioned. In fiction, however, the question of reference is more problematic. In his discussion of reference Attwell draws attention to a number of theorists of metafiction, among them Patricia Waugh and Jan Mukarovsky.[18] In her conclusion to *Metafiction*, for instance, Waugh argues that "metafiction cannot escape historicization in the moment of its interpretation, even when its author might prefer otherwise"[19] whereas Mukarovsky suggests that, because the signs in poetic language are directed at nothing "distinctly determinable", the literary work refers to "the total context of so-called social phenomena". It is precisely because of this 'global' quality of literature's reference to reality that it "provides valuable images of the texture of historical epochs"[20] Thus we can justifiably speak of a situational metafiction. Linda Hutcheon alerts us, accordingly, to the "paradoxically worldly"[21] condition of certain forms of postmodern writings. Some novels are "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages"[22], she says.

Adhering to these critics' statements my conclusion is that Coetzee's postmodernism does not prevent him from convincingly dramatising the historically disadvantaged position of

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[16] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.2

[17] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.17

[18] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.2

[19] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.18

[20] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.19

[21] Hutcheon, Linda. *The politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge. New York. 1989. p.2

[22] Hutcheon, Linda. *A poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge. New York. 1988. p.5

women, in my case represented through the characters of Magda, Mrs.Curren and Susan Barton. As much as Coetzee can be labelled a postmodern writer he cannot be said to embrace the 'spirit of abandonment' that is often characteristic of postmodern works. Rather than completely undercutting concepts of history, reality and truth, Coetzee's work seems instead directed at understanding the relationship between the activity of truth-telling and that of power.

Coetzee is frequently contrasted with his fellow citizen Nadime Gordimer regarding their different approaches to fiction and its relationship to history. Gordimer's preference for realism as narrative form is, according to Elizabeth Lowry, a corollary of her belief that the writer should, through her work, always demonstrate a 'conscionable awareness' of history. Coetzee's preference is, contrarily, for a novel that "operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions".[23] The difficulty, Coetzee argues, is that fiction necessarily deals with stories, and stories, as he once explained in an interview, are defined by their 'irresponsibility' and freedom. They are, in the judgment of Swift's Houynhnhms, "that which is not".[24] The core of the argument is a question of to what extent the writer is responsible for providing us with a conclusion that is empirically checkable – in other words for the writer to truthfully record and reflect history. Coetzee – inveighed against the tendency to subsume fiction under history – has responded with this dictum:

> I reiterate the elementary and rather obvious point I am making: that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degree of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story people agree to tell each other – that as Don Quixote argued so persuasively but in the end so vainly, the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it demands. I see

[23] *Like a Dog*. p.3

[24] *Like a Dog* p.4

> absolutely no reason why, even in the South-Africa of the 1980's, we should agree to agree that things are otherwise[25]

What makes Coetzee's statement especially interesting for my purpose is his blatant rejection of history as a 'master-discourse'. The statement seems to align his view with postmodernism and its incredulity towards metanarratives. No narrative, not even history, can lay claim to be a natural metanarrative. The authority of history lies, Coetzee argues, simply in the consensus it demands. History does not necessarily give its readers a privileged access to the real or the truth, but is a discourse that is influenced by power relations.[26] It thus becomes natural to ask the question of who has the power to determine this historical discourse. Dale Spender argues that men have, historically, had monopoly on the making of history, and it has therefore not been difficult to sustain the belief that there is but one reality. Mirroring Magda's words in *In the Heart of the Country* that she is "lost to history" (*HC*, p.3) Spender alerts us to how women have been silenced under patriarchy, while the narratives of men have proliferated:

> Women have made just as much history as men, but it has not been codified and transmitted; women have probably done just as much writing as men, but it has not been preserved; and women, no doubt, have generated as many meanings as men, but these have not survived. Where the meanings of women have been discontinuous with the male version of reality they have not been retained.[27]

However, Spender further argues that "the very existence of feminist meanings – few and fragile they may be – undermine the existence of monodimensional reality".[28] Instead of there being one reality or one truth, then, one should acknowledge the possibility that different realities and truths may operate simultaneously, and that there is not necessarily a

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[25] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.17

[26] There is something 'fictional' here, stemming from the, at first sight, overtly simplified use of concepts such as 'history', 'master-discourse', 'agreement' and 'consensus'. It could be said that few texts have the ability to arouse debates, tensions, conflicts and biased political and ideological uses as historical works do. The struggle over the historical representation of Holocost is but one telling example. It may also seem somewhat inconsistent to emphasise consensus over history, while at the same time stressing that there is no 'grand' story, only partial narratives. On the other hand it is never entirely coincidental what 'story' that appears to be trustworthy and accepted as such and thus the concept 'history' can be maintained precisely as a "discourse that is influenced by power relations".

[27] Spender, Dale. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1980. p.53

[28] *Man Made Language*.p.62

correspondence between history, reality and truth, but more so between historical discourse and different fields of power.

Michel Foucault's studies of power and its shifting patterns constitute, in this respect, one of the foundations of postmodernism. Foucault does not recognize any component of truth separate from power and uses the term power/knowledge to demonstrate how these two concepts are inextricably linked; "power and knowledge directly imply one another…there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations".[29] Truth, Foucault argues, is always part of a régime; "each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, *the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true*" (my italics).[30] Foucault insisted, moreover, that power does not all emanate from one specific location, but that it is diffused throughout social institutions. Raymond Williams argues, accordingly, that not even works of art are separated from the power struggles constituting social reality. Williams argues against traditional views that assume the autonomy of literature in his claim that society, culture and art are interconnected and that "literature serves the dominant order".[31] Foucault's power/knowledge configuration is, in other words, necessarily the a priori of all literature. The ideas of Foucault and Williams will form the basis of my further analysis, when I now return to the three novels.

[29] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Penguin Books Ltd. London. 1975. P. 27.

[30] Foucault, Michel. *Truth and Power*. Printed in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001.p. 1668

[31] Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Printed in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2001

The Castaways of History

Annamaria Carusi refers to *Foe* as a "case history of the failed narrative".[32] She defines the limits of this failure to the "failure to transform a story into *literature*".[33] She consequently questions on what terms, then, a story does indeed become literature. What institution may be said to control the disposal of stories and to guarantee their acceptance?

After being rescued form the island in *Foe* Susan seeks out the author, Foe, to have her story told. The single justification of a narrative for Susan Barton is its ability to communicate the truth. The possibility that Foe subjects her to wide-ranging authorial manipulations is, however, raised overtly throughout the text. Susan protects her account of the island, but her continuous struggle to retain control of her story is foreshadowed by the merchant who rescues them from the island. He urges Susan to have her story told because, to his knowledge, there has "never before been a female castaway of our nation" (*Foe*, p.40). However, when Susan insists that her story of the island where she was stranded be told truthfully, he informs her that the bookseller's "trade is in books, not in truth" (*Foe*, p.40). Accordingly, Foe later tells her:

> The island is not a story in itself. By itself it is no better than a waterlogged boat drifting day after day in an empty ocean till one day, humbly and without commotion, it sinks. The island lacks light and shade. It is too much the same throughout. It is like a loaf of bread. It will keep us alive, certainly, if we are starved of reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had? (*Foe*, p.117)

Instead Foe suggests that they make up a story with a proper beginning, middle and end:

> We therefore have five parts in all: the loss of the daughter, the quest for the daughter in Brazil; abandonment of the quest, the adventure of the island; assumption of the quest by the daughter; and the reunion with the daughter with her mother. It is thus we make up a book; loss, then quest, then recovery: beginning, then middle, then end. (*Foe*, p.137)

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[32] Carusi, Annamaria. "*Foe*: The Narrative and Power." *Journal of Literary Studies* 5.2 (1989): 134-44.p.134

[33] "*Foe*: The Narrative and Power".p.134

While Susan wants the novel to correspond to her memories of past events, Foe wants her memories to correspond with a more interesting novel or narrative design. His insistence on a story with a beginning, middle and end reflects thus a metanarrative on narrative design.

Josephine Dodd shows, similarly, how critics of *In the Heart of the Country* have argued that Magda's narrative is discontinuous and marked by "little plot, less purpose and much confusion".[34] These critics, Dodd argues, are governed by a set of textual assumptions which claim that a narrative should be "continuous, should indicate the hierarchization of levels, should distinguish between the merely imaginary and the absolutely factual".[35] The main idea is that these women are not allowed to tell their stories in the way they want, as it does not satisfy the prevailing standards of what constitute an appropriate narrative design. Magda's narrative, with its numbered paragraphs, could be seen as a revolt against this tyranny of plot, akin to Susan Barton's reluctance to accept Foe's demand for a story with a proper beginning, middle and end.

Because Susan did not succeed in her quest for the lost daughter, Foe, in order to achieve a proper ending, introduces a girl who claims to be Susan's daughter. Susan's desire to control her story is, however, sustained in her repudiation of the daughter as Foe's creation:

> Who is she and why do you send her to me…She is not my daughter. Do you think women drop children and forget them as snakes lay eggs? Only a man could entertain such a fancy…She is more your daughter than she ever was mine. (*Foe*, p.75)

Susan moreover responds to Foe's imposition by explaining to the "daughter" that she actually has no mother, but that she is "father-born" (*Foe*, p.110). Thus a struggle for control over the narrative is staged between Foe and Susan in which Susan is fighting hard not to succumb.

A parallel to Susan Barton in *Foe,* who becomes dependent on Foe to authorize her story, can be drawn to Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, and on how she becomes dependent on Vercueil

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[34] Dodd, Josephine. "Naming and Framing: Naturalisation and Colonization in J.M Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*." *World Literature Written in English* 27.2 (1987): 153-61. p.157

[35] "Naming and Framing".p.155

to deliver her letter. As the story progresses Mrs Curren grows more and more intimate with Vercueil, trusting him to send the letter to her daughter after her death:

> There is something I would like you to do for me if I die. There are some papers I want to send to my daughter. But after the event. That is the important part. That is why I cannot send them myself. I will do everything else. I will make them up into a parcel with the right stamps on it. All you will have to do will be to hand the parcel over the counter at the post office. Will you do that for me?" (*AI*, p.31)

The irony is that, in order to ensure the letter's arrival, Mrs Curren could have sent the letter before she dies, but she chooses instead to entrust it to Vercueil. Thus Mrs Curren's truth, like Susan's, lies, finally, in the hands of a man: "If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never know they existed. A certain body of truth will never take on flesh" (*AI*, p.130). It should be obvious that handing the letter over to a woman would not have given Mrs Curren the same guarantee or assurance as in trusting it to a man, as there in that case would be no obvious connection between narratives and power.

The three novels are all concerned with the difficulty of getting one's story told. *Foe* examines Susan's difficulty in doing so not only thematically, but also formally. The irony in *Foe* is that the reader has to read almost to the end of the novel to realise that Susan's story is never given a chance to become literature. Her story is never published. Despite Susan's efforts her voice disappears entirely in the fourth section of the novel where an unnamed narrator finds both Foe and Susan dead. Josephine Dodd thus argues that *Foe* is "bound to be seen as addressing questions of how women are vampirised as thematic content, how their stories get rewritten or remain unpublished, how women are silenced".[36] Failing to have her story formed into literature, Susan does indeed end up a "castaway". A castaway not only on a deserted island but, joining Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, they become the "castaways of Gods" as they are "the castaways of history" (*HC*, p.135).

In some respects, then, it would seem natural for postmodernism and feminism to become allies, and the grounds for such an alliance would be a claim that the "*certification of*

[36] "The Textual Production of Women." p.157

knowledge is as much a political as an epistemological process" (my italics).[37] Karen Vintges argues, however, that "much as I sympathize with postmodernism as a philosophical point of view, I cannot but conclude that the postmodern perspective has been devastating for the theory and practice of contemporary feminism".[38] What polarises feminist views on whether postmodernism is an enemy or an ally of feminism is, above all, the issue of selfhood. Historically, feminism has always been a struggle for the proper representation of women. Postmodernism, however, questions this agenda by problematising the very idea of womanhood – or selfhood – itself. In view of this question Nancy Hartsock asks why it is that "just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic".[39]

Theresa Lee argues that while some feminists maintain that the political viability of feminism lies in "scrutinizing the very notion of womanhood as hegemonic construct", others argue that without "women", feminism will simply lose its "raison d'être" and thus become "unsustainable as political movement".[40] In *Gender Trouble*, for instance, Judith Butler conforms to the former group in arguing that we must replace the 'essential subject' of human liberalist discourse with 'inessential women'. The idea is that universal similarities between women can no longer be taken for granted because it eradicates irreducible differences among individuals. Luce Irigaray's argues, however, that there are good reasons for holding on to woman as a category: "whatever inequalities may exist among women, they all undergo, even without clearly realizing it, the same oppression, the same exploitation of their bodies, the same denial of their desire", she says.[41] Irigaray's emphasis on the exploitation of the female body will mark the transition to my next chapter, which will examine the way in which narrative entrapments are also connected to the relation between women's bodies and women's narratives.

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[37] Lee, Theresa Man Ling. *Feminism, postmodernism and the politics of representation*. Women and politics Vol.22, no 3, 2001, pp.35-37. Photocopy from University of York Library. p.39

[38] Taylor Dianna. Vintges Karen. *Feminism and the final Foucault*. Board of Trustees. University of Illinois. United States of America. 2004. p.275

[39] *Feminism, postmodernism and the politics of representation*.p.41

[40] *Feminism, postmodernism and the politics of representation*.p.37

[41] Irigaray, Luce. *The Sex which is not One*. Cornell University Press. New York. 1985.p.164

Body and Narrative

Numerous intellectuals have tried to understand how exactly power acts upon a body. One of them is Michel Foucault, whose question of bodies and power is perhaps best known in his analysis of the body of the prisoner in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault writes that the "systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain 'political economy' of the body". When Foucault attempts to determine the way in which the body is "directly involved in a political field" he describes the process in this way: "Power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs".[42] The body interrogated in torture, Foucault further argues, constitutes the "locus of the extortion of the truth".[43] In *The History of Sexuality* he further explores the way in which power operates not only physically but also discursively on bodies. Through language bodies are assigned to various categories that are in conformity with existing norms and values. Although Foucault does not consider gender in his analysis it seem especially pertinent to women who have had meanings and assumptions forced on the feminine body by a variety of discourses for centuries. Dorothy Driver emphasises, for instance, the way in which women's bodies are being used as signs by political or cultural movements that at the same time refuse to hear what women have to say.[44]

Although highly attentive to postmodernism's problematisation of all kinds of authority, 'the body' in Coetzee's writing comes to represent something paradoxically tangible. Coetzee's writing clearly demonstrates an interest in the evocation of the body, of which *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe* and *Age of Iron* are no exceptions. Indeed, Fiona Probyn argues that Coetzee sees his fiction as significantly empowered by 'the body', which the following answer to Attwell's question about the body of Friday in *Foe* illustrates:

> If I look back over my fiction I see a simple (simple-mined?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not "that which is not", and the proof that it is the pain that it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can

[42] *Discipline and Punish*.p.25

[43] *Discipline and Punish*.p.42

[44] Driver, Dorothy. Afterword printed in Wicomb Zoe's *David's Story*. The Feminist Press at The City University of New York. 2000.p.239

> get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure)…Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore the body…..And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words, its power is undeniable.[45]

The suffering body is very much present in Coetzee's novels. In *In the Heart of the Country* there is the rape of Magda and also the slow, painful death of her father. In *Foe* Friday's tongue has been barbarously removed, while in *Age of Iron* the body of Mrs. Curren is infested with cancer. Probyn explains accordingly that Coetzee "does not stand outside liberal humanism in its attachment to the figure of the suffering body" in that the reference to the immediate authority of the suffering body provides an "ethical groundedness"[46] that contradicts the elusive nature of the postmodern outlook. The body becomes, in other words, an anomaly that threatens to expose the insufficiency of postmodern theory alone to account for Coetzee's fiction.

One way around this anomaly is to fuse the postmodern with a feminist aesthetic. Historically, feminist theory has always emphasised the body not as a site that escapes representation but quite the opposite; the body is continually and inevitably caught up in representation. In her analysis of *In the Heart of the Country* Caroline Rody argues that Coetzee uses feminism and its concern with the body precisely to "challenge the limits of the post-modern".[47] Magda is, at least ostensibly, a perfect example of the decentred subject of postmodern texts:

> Am I, I wonder, a thing among things, a body propelled along a track by sinews and bony levers, or am I a monologue moving through time, approximately five feet above the ground, if the ground does not turn out to be just another word, in which case I am indeed lost. (*HC*, p.62)

She is in some sense trapped in textuality; "a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse but of my stony monologue" (*HC*, p.12) who suspects that in between the numbered entries of her

[45] Attwell, David. *Doubling the Point*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge. 1992. p.248

[46] *Writing with/out authority*.p13

[47] Rody, Caroline. "The Mad Colonial Daughter's Revolt: J.M Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*". South Atlantic Quarterly 93.1 (1994): 157-80. p.165

diary she may not exist: "A day must have intervened here. Where there is a blank there must have been a day" (*HC*, p.79). She does, however, not want to be merely a postmodern tissue of textualities but expresses a deep desire to be a real person who interacts with others in a world outside of the text: "For the day will come when I must have another human being, must hear another voice, even if it speaks only abuse. This monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead" (*HC*, p.16).

In an effort to escape her postmodern characterisation Magda insists on the validity of her own physicality, her own body: "I am sure that I am real. This is my hand, bone and flesh. I touch this skin and it is warm, I pinch this flesh and it hurts. What more proof could I want?" (*HC*, p.54). Moreover, lamenting her own physical shortcomings she presents several exaggerated solutions of how to transform herself into a desirable woman: "If the cause be physical", she says, "then the cure must be physical; if not, what is there left to believe in?" (*HC*, p.22). Chiara Briganti has thus noticed:

> Magda's oscillation between emphasizing the linguistic status of the subject, her fall into textuality, as it were, and her insistence on the body, on her own physicality, on even exhibitionist self-display, exemplifies the issues that confront contemporary feminism: in one respect, the acceptance of the post-modern view of the decentred self, and, in another, the necessity to recuperate the value of experience by pointing to a specifically, albeit fragmentary and unstable, feminine identity, thus problematizing the relationship between post-modern and female subjectivity.[48]

The notion of the unrepresentable, a fashionable concept in the postmodern debate, is thus deconstructed in Coetzee's text. Magda rejects the philosophical abstractions of postmodernism and makes a direct appeal to the real, a concept that is usually discredited in postmodernism. In *Age of Iron* the body is similarly given a historical context and a political force through Mrs Curren's belief that she has cancer from the "accumulation of shame I have endured in my life" (*AI*, p.145). Mrs Curren sees her crisis with cancer not only as a personal indictment but as a smaller version of the degeneration of society as a

[48] Briganti, Chiara "A Bored Spinster with a Locked Diary": The Politics of Hysteria in *In the Heart of the Country*". Printed in Sue, Kossew, *Critical Essays*. 84-100. p.88

whole. Mrs Curren seems, moreover, to suggest that her story cannot possibly be told without reference to her body.

In *Body Work* Peter Brooks argues that the body becomes "the prime determinant of life's meaning and of the construction of the narrative of that life".[49] Moreover, Brooks suggests that "modern narratives appear to produce a semioticization of the body which is matched by a somatization of the story: a claim that the body must be a source and locus of meaning, and that stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative signification".[50] With reference to *Odyssey* he demonstrates how identity is related to the body; when Odysseus returns in disguise to his palace in Ithaka, he is first recognized by the old nurse Eurykleia. It is not an intellectual recognition, but she identifies him because of a scar which Odysseus received during a boar hunt decades earlier. Brooks concludes:

> It is as if identity, and its recognition, depended on the body having being marked with a special sign, which looks suspiciously like a linguistic signifier. The signing of the body is an allegory of the body become a subject for literary narrative – a body entered into writing.[51]

Thus he emphasises the body as a narrative body, where the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story.

In her reading of Coetzee's breakthrough novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* Rosemary Jolly argues that the Magistrate treats the tortured barbarian girl's body precisely as a text which, if he pays it enough attention, if he 'reads' it 'properly', will alert him to the truth behind the scene of torture".[52] The Magistrate attempts to make the body into a sign that he hopes will develop into the figure of truth; "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on the girls' body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (*WB*, p.31). Thus a chain of association seems to be created between notions of truth, story,

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[49] Brooks, Peter. *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. Harvard University Press. London. 1993.p. 55

[50] *Objects of Desire*.p.7

[51] *Objects of Desire*.p.3

[52] Attridge, Derek and Jolly, Rosemary. *Writing South Africa, Literature, apartheid, and democracy, 1970-1995*. Cambridge University Press. 1998.p.127

and the body in which power is primarily seen as the possibility of affecting another singularity, and where power and control become dependent on knowledge and possession of the body. Susan Barton in *Foe* tries, similarly, to read Friday's body as a text. Before she has uncovered the mystery of the loss of Friday's tongue, before she has 'read' his body, she cannot finish her story. Bearing in mind the idea that the body holds the key to knowledge, one can begin to understand the significance of the body of Friday. At the end of the novel an unnamed narrator dives into a wreck where he finds the "home of Friday…a place where bodies are their own signs" (*Foe*, p.157). In "*Foe*: The narrative and power" Annamaria Carusi argues that it is through the statement precisely, of the body being 'its own sign', that the power of Friday is revealed: "Where the body is its own sign, there is an impossibility of transforming it from its self-enclosed existence into anything else". Carusi further argues: "without the possibility of exerting power over bodies in terms of a knowledge or a truth…it would be impossible to extract a story from it, or to impose one on it".[53] Returning to Foucault's analysis on how power affects the body by forcing it to "emit signs", it would seem like the body of Friday evade this exertion of power. His body is not available for translation into a narrative scheme and thus his story is never revealed.

Having once established the body as a site that does not escape representation, it seems pertinent to investigate more closely the significance of the body in Coetzee's writing. Feminist theory has always emphasised the body as a restless captive of culture. Fiona Probyn identifies the body as "*the* significant site on which politics are played out and made manifest"[54] whereas Mary Douglas argues similarly that "what is being carved in human flesh is an image of society".[55] These statements reflect mainly on the female body and on how it has become a field upon which the tensions of a whole society is played out. Douglas moreover argues that ideas about sexual dangers can be represented as "symbols between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social systems".[56] The rape of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* supports this

[53] "*Foe*: The Narrative and Power."p.142

[54] *Writing with/out authority*.p.13

[55] Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1966.p.143

[56] *Purity and* Danger.p.4

idea of 'body politic', what Magda herself refers to as a "woman's fate" (*HC*, p.106), as the rape happens as a direct result of Magda not being able to meet Hendrik's demand for payment:

> I turn to go. He springs at me and grabs my arm. "Let go!" I shout. He grips me tightly and pulls me back into the kitchen. "No, wait a bit!" he hisses in my ear.....His pelvis grinds hard into me. "No!" I say. "Yes!" he grunts an inch from my ear....I do not see how to get out of it, something is going limp inside me, something is dying. He bends and fumbles for the bottom of my dress. I scuffle, but he finds it and his fingers come up between my legs. I grip as tightly as I can to keep them still. "No, please not, please not that, only not that, I beg you, Hendrik...He begins to pant. He shudders lengthily and lies still on me. Then he draws himself away. Now I know for sure he was inside me, now that he is out and all the ache and clamminess sets in. I sob and sob in despair. (*HC*, p.104-106)

It is at this moment, when Magda's economic disempowerment is revealed, that Hendrik asserts his position as the new patriarch after the demise of Magda's father.

Through the character of Mrs Curren, *Age of Iron* similarly deals with the motif of bodily invasion. The same day Mrs Curren learns about her illness her house, like her body, is being intruded upon by an unwanted visitor; the derelict Vercueil:

> We got home. Uninvited, he followed me in. "I have to sleep, I am exhausted," I said; and then, when he made no move to leave: "Do you want something to eat?" I put food in front of him, took my pills, waited. Holding the loaf of bread with his bad hand, he cut a slice, buttered it thickly, cut cheese. His fingernails filthy. Who knows what else he had been touching. And this is the one to whom I speak my heart, whom I trust with the last things. Why this crooked path to you? My mind like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs. Without that finger, stillness, stagnation. A way of indirection. By indirection I find direction out. A crab's walk. His dirty fingernail entering me. (*AI*, p. 81-82)

Moreover, what Magda previously identified as a woman's fate is the same lot that Mrs Curren envisages for herself. "To each of us fate sends the right disease", she says. "Mine is a disease that eats me out from inside....Gnawing at my bones now that there is no flesh left. Gnawing the socket of my hip, gnawing my backbone, beginning to gnaw at my knees (*AI*, p. 112). The motif of bodily invasion seems, thus, to operate both literally and metaphorically.

A similar image to the one presented of the rape occurs in Magda's powerful description of the invasion of her body by patriarchal law:

> The law has gripped my throat, I say and do not say, it invades my larynx, its one hand on my tongue, its other hand on my lips. How can I say, I say, that these are not the eyes of the law that stare from behind my eyes, or that the mind of the law does not occupy my skull, leaving me only enough intellection to utter these doubting words, if it is I uttering them, and see their fallaciousness? How can I say that the law does not stand fullgrown inside my shell, its feet in my feet, its hands in my hands, its sex dropping through my hole; or that when I have had my chance to make this utterance, the lips and teeth of the law will not begin to gnaw their way out of this shell, there it stands before you, the law grinning and triumphant again, its soft skin hardening in the air, while I lie sloughed, crumbled, abandoned on the floor? (*HC*, p.84)

Being invaded by patriarchal law Magda identifies her words as being "doubting" and "fallacious" (*HC*, p.84), questioning whether it is actually she that utters them at all. Thus the devouring described by both Magda and Mrs Curren comes to represent a silencing of the female voice. This connection between the word and the body is emphasised in the passage where Mrs Curren describes the stealing of her letters, what she herself metaphorically refers to as rape:

> They have left their mark on everything, I thought: thorough workers. Then I remembered the file on my desk, the letter, all the pages thus far. That too! I thought: they will have been through that too! Soiled fingers turning the pages, eyes without love going over the naked words. "Help me upstairs," I said to Vercueil. The file, left open when I last wrote, was closed. The lock of the filing cabinet was broken. There were gaps in the bookshelves. The two unused rooms had their locks forced. They had been through the cupboard, the chest of drawers. Noting left untouched. Like the last visit the burglars paid. The search a mere pretext. The true purpose the touching, the fingering. The spirit malevolent. Like rape: a way of filthying a woman. (*AI*, p.169)

"Eyes without love going over the naked words", Mrs Curren says, the word 'naked' used metaphorically to not only refer to the vulnerability of the female body, but also to the precarious position of women's writing.

This link between the body and the word is persistently maintained not only in the three novels I have chosen but in most of Coetzee's writing. Benita Parry argues, accordingly,

that "shared by all Coetzee's protagonists of silence is an absence or economy of speech which is, in all cases, associated with sexual passivity or impotence".[57] In Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* one of the main characters, Lucy, is brutally raped by three men. Lucy becomes isolated in her shame, unable or unwilling to press charges against the men who sexually abused her; "She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. Like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs; they are its owners" (*Disgrace, p.115*). Lucy is said no longer to own her own story, as if the rape not only decreases her sexual power but also entails a corresponding lack of narrative power; a diminishing of her ability to relate the truth about what really happened to her that day. The motif of bodily invasion, both literal and metaphorical, becomes, thus, a way of insisting on the lack of narrative authority.

With reference to *In the Heart of the Country* David Attwell argues that as the novel progresses there are significant changes in narrative construction. Following the second death of her father and the rape by Hendrik he argues that Magda is becoming more and more disorientated and that she is losing her grasp on time. Attwell infers thus that "Magda's loss of control and the self-affirming actions of Hendrik are, of course, thematically related".[58] However, his conclusion differs from mine in that he dismisses the rape as a colonial fantasy, claiming that Magda invents it as a result of her increasing disorientation, rather than acknowledging that it may be the rape that actually causes this lack of narrative control.

It seems fair, then, to ascertain a connection between body, word and narrative. If women's narratives cannot free themselves from bodily aspects, this assertion begs the question of whether women's narratives will always be unfree. In *Foe* there is, in this respect, an interesting attempt at a reversal of gender roles, when Foe imagines himself as Susan's whore:

> So I sat down beside Foe. In the cruel light of day I could not but mark the grubby sheets on which he lay, his long dirty fingernails, the heavy bags under his eyes. 'An old whore', said Foe, as if

[57] Parry, Benita. "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M Coetzee. In Attridge and Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa*, 166-79. Cambridge University Press.1998.p.153

[58] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.66

> reading my thoughts. – 'An old whore who should ply her trade only in the dark.' (*Foe*, p. 151)

Susan answers by referring to Foe as her mistress and wife:

> 'Am I to damn you as a whore for welcoming me and embracing me and receiving my story? You gave me a home when I had none. I think of you as a mistress, or even, if I dear speak the word, as a wife'. (*Foe*, p. 152)

Moreover, when Susan and Foe couple she mounts him as the Muse, both 'goddess' and 'begetter' (*Foe*, p. 126) of her story:

> I calmed Foe. 'Permit me', I whispered – 'there is a privilege that comes with the first night, that I claim as mine'. So I coaxed him till he lay beneath me. Then I drew off my shift and straddled him (which he did not seem easy with, in a woman). 'This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets,' I whispered, and felt some of the listlessness go out of my limbs. 'A bracing ride,' said Foe afterwards – 'My very bones are jolted, I must catch my breath before we resume'. 'It is always a hard ride when the Muse pays her visits,' I replied – 'She must do whatever lies in her power to father her offspring.' (*Foe*, p. 139-140)

The above passage's sexual metaphors clearly establish some kind of link between sexual and narrative power. When the Muse have visited her poets their 'pens (penis), that have been dry, flow" (*Foe*, p.126). If the pen is a metaphor for the penis, however, the question arises of from what organ females can generate texts. As Josephine Dodd succinctly puts it: "How does one write as a woman? How does one ride the muse without a penis/pen?"[59]
From the above, one should be able to sustain the view that women's narratives are, if not entrapped, then at least trapped in the female body and in gender and gender roles. Hence the question comes up to what extent women's mastering of language, or rather revolt against language, can loosen the grip of suppressed body and gender on their narratives.

[59] "The Textual Production of Women." p.157

Women's Language

Fiona Probyn argues that the three women narrators are "particularly self-conscious of the effects of writing and write self-reflexively, placing under question or suspicion the act of writing itself".[60] An important aspect of this self-reflexive writing is they way the female narrators make continuous degrading assessments of the value of their own discourse. Mrs.Curren in *Age of Iron* refers to her words as "devious discourse" (*AI*, p.82), Susan in *Foe* observes that "some people are born storytellers; I, it would seem, am not" (*Foe*, p.81), whereas Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, commenting on her failure to provide an interesting story, concedes that "women are not philosophers, and I am a woman. A woman cannot make something out of nothing" (*HC*, p.119). Furthermore, Magda continually undercuts the authority and gravity of her language, describing her speech as "cackling" and "gibbering" (*HC*, p.45) "prattle" (*HC*, p.49) and "babble" (*HC*, p.113). This chapter is devoted to the question of how one writes as a woman.

The language question can legitimately be defined as one of the most contentious areas of feminist criticism. It is predominantly the French feminists who have developed theories about language, and their concern with this issue is founded on a belief that language use is gendered, so that when a woman is trying to write she discovers that there is "no common sentence ready for her use".[61] Instead of language being a neutral medium it is seen as an instrument fashioned for male purposes and, consequently, language will invariably serve and reflect patriarchal interests and values. Women are believed to be caught up in a world structured by male-centred concepts, and women's social inferiority is thus reinforced by the fact that they do not have access to language except through recourse to masculine systems of representation. This substantiates the desire for an écriture feminine – a unique woman's voice – opposed to phallocentric language.

The most influential French feminists with regard to the language question are undoubtedly Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. They all have masculinist thinking and language as their shared opponent but are, nevertheless, divided with regard to how they envision resisting and moving beyond it. These women agree that resistance takes place in

[60] *Writing with/out authority*.p.2

[61] *Beginning Theory*.p.126

the form of *jouissance* – explained by Rosalind Jones as "the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father".[62] A common feature of their theories is, thus, the emphasis they place on the connection between body and language. The claim seems to be that the recognition of the specificity of women's bodies – of women's sexuality – necessarily implies recognition of the specificity of women's relation to language.

The link between body and language is especially strong in the writings of Hélène Cixous; "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time", she says. In *The Laugh of the Medusa* she further emphasises the way in which women must write through their bodies:

> Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence", the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word "impossible" and writes it as "the end". [63]

The female narrators of *Age of Iron*, *Foe* and *In the Heart of the Country* do, similarly, all stress the importance of the body by explicitly representing it as the progenitor of their language. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* says of finding answers within her body:

> What have I been doing on this barbarous frontier? I have no doubt, since these are not idle questions, that somewhere there is a whole literature waiting to answer them for me. Unfortunately I am not acquainted with it; and besides, I have always felt it easier spinning my answers out of my bowels. (*HC*, p. 138)

While Mrs.Curren in *Age of Iron* declares in the letter to her daughter:

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[62] Jones, Rosalind. *Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of "L'Ecriture Feminine"* Printed in Showalter, Elaine. *Feminist Criticism. Essays on women, literature and theory*. Virago Press. London. 1986.p. 362

[63] Cixous, Hélène. "Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula S. Cohen. *Signs: A Journal of Women and Culture* 1.4 (1976): 875-86. p. 880,886

> I must reach to you in words. So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page. These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, by way of living on. (*AI*, p.9, 131)

In a different register, Susan Barton in *Foe* declares:

> The Muse is a woman, a goddess, who visits poets in the night and begets stories upon them. In the accounts they give afterwards, the poets say that she comes in the hour of their deepest despair and touches them with sacred fire, after which their pens, that have been dry, flow. (*Foe*, p. 126)

In Cixous's writing, thus, the realm of the body is seen as immune (impregnable) to outside influences and able to issue forth a pure essence of the feminine. While Cixous and Irigaray have uttered the need to find an authentic woman's voice entirely outside phallocentric discourse, Kristeva maintains that rather than formulating a new discourse, women should persist in challenging the one that rules. Kristeva uses instead the terms the 'symbolic' and the 'semiotic' to designate two different aspects of the same language. The symbolic, she argues, is associated with "authority, order, fathers, repression and control".[64] The symbolic facet of language furthermore maintains a belief in a unified, fixed, autonomous self. The semiotic aspect of language is linked conceptually with the feminine and is characterized not by logic and order, but by "displacement, slippage, and condensation".[65] The idea is that for language to survive these to realms must always coexist and interact, something which would allow for an increased orientation towards to female.

In the discussion on the opposition between the writings of these French critics I would like to draw attention to Fiona Probyn's discussion on how Coetzee's imagery in *Foe* and *In the Heart of the Country* is informed precisely by the writings of these feminists. Susan Barton's question at the end of *Foe*, "who must dive into the wreck?" (*Foe*, p.142) is

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[64] *Beginning Theory* p.128

[65] *Beginning Theory* p.128

frequently read as an allusion to Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck". The poem, Probyn argues, can be read as an "allegory of the retrieval of women's histories or women's voices submerged beneath a dominant patriarchal discourse".[66] Rich's poem suggests that it is in the body and in fluidity that a non-phallic language might be found. The unnamed narrator in the last part of *Foe* is also moving through an underwater wreck, where he finds Friday lying "half buried in sand, his knees drawn up, his hands between his thighs" (*Foe*, p.157). In asking Friday "what is this ship" the unnamed narrator realises that that this home of Friday is "not a place of words" as "each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused" (*Foe*, p.157). In Friday's case, Probyn argues, the water imagery serves to "represent his history, words, voice, as unattainable, silent, absent and yet 'present' at the margin".

Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* equally represents her discourse as submerged: "When I wake on the ocean floor it will be the same old voice that drones out of me, drones of bubbles or whatever it is that words do in water" (*HC,* p.54). Like the unnamed narrator in *Foe* Magda imagines herself diving into the wreck, in what Probyn describes as "a kind of mock suicide that parodies both the traditional representation of women's affinity with water as well as the presumed presence of a woman's language beneath phallic discourse":

> Far down in the earth flow the underground rivers, through dark caverns dripping with crystalline water….I wade out in to the tepid dam looking for the sinkhole which in our dreams beckons from the deep and leads to the underground kingdom. My skirt billows and floats around my waist like a black flower…Of all adventures suicide is the most literary, more so even than murder. With the story coming to an end, all one's last bad poetry finds release. I cast a long calm look of farewell at the sky and the stars, which probably cast a long vacant look back, exhale the last beloved breath (goodbye spirit), and dive for the abyss. (*HC*, p.13)

The above statement is satirizing not only Magda's "nihilistic pretensions to literariness but also the feminist preoccupation with submergence as an allegory for women's plight" Probyn further argues. Magda falls short in her effort to dive into the abyss and, surfacing, she ridicules the feminist quest for a language below the surface structure of phallic

[66] *Writing with/out authority*. p. 11,12

discourse: "My underwear balloons with water. I strike the bottom all too soon, as far from the mythic vortex as ever. The first willed draught of water through my nostrils sets off a cough and the blind panic of and organism that wants to live" (*HC*, p.13). Magda is unable to satisfy the feminist quest for a language beneath the surface of phallic discourse; she cannot survive under water but suffers "the blind panic of an organism that wants to live" (*HC*, p.13). Magda's helplessness in this 'underwater kingdom' mirrors the way in which women's language cannot survive outside of phallic discourse. Thus Coetzee here seems to be aligned with the Kristevan view on language and of there being no underneath or outside of phallocentric language. Instead it has to be challenged, resisted and deconstructed from within.

Regardless of which critical outlook one adopts there is in *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe* and *Age of Iron* an inevitable focus on the problematic nature of language. If language is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world then the question of who masters language becomes paramount. A claim predominant within postmodern theory is that there is no way for human beings to communicate in a language completely devoid of cultural bias or political content. To women language becomes, in other words, a metanarrative, because it is never free of the ideological underpinnings of its own representation. Having learnt the language of patriarchal society women have also learnt to classify and manage the world in accordance with the existing order. The claim from the French feminists is that women have been deprived of their own language and instead been forced to use a language not of their own making, a language that is in many ways insufficient to account for women's experiences. "Deprivation inflicts silence"[67] says Benita Parry, whereas Luce Irigaray claims that "conventional narrative techniques, as well as grammar and syntax, imply that unified viewpoint and mastery of outer reality that men have claimed for themselves".[68] Magda, Susan and Mrs. Curren are consciously trying to defeat this entrapment so that to overcome the imposed rules of language.

In "Charting J.M. Coetzee's Middle Voice: *In the Heart of the Country*" Brian Macaskill argues that Coetzee is especially fascinated by the "determinism of linguistic structure and

[67] "Speech and Silence". p.154

[68] *The Sex which is not One*.p.373

by the efforts to escape such determinism".[69] In Macaskill's opinion self-reflexive writing is an example of Coetzee's strategy of "writing in the middle voice", which Coetzee himself has described in these terms: "To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do writing) with reference to the self".[70] Mirroring Magda's desire to be "the medium, the median" (*HC*, p.133) Macaskill's "Charting the Middle Voice" focuses on the 'speculative linguistic phenomena' of 'writing in the middle voice' which can be described as an "act of agency that seeks to speak between incommensurable imperatives".[71] Teresa Dovey's ""J.M. Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice" argues equally that Coetzee's novels are all "making reference to the self of writing" and that they "exploit the notion of the divided subject of Lacan, the split between text and narration, or utterance and enunciation, in order to gesture towards the possibility of escaping complicity with the dominant discourse".[72] Although Dovey and Macaskill do not consider the issue of gender in their discussion of the middle voice, it would appear that their ideas are highly applicable to the voices of the three women narrators.

It is perhaps in *In the Heart of the Country* that the rebellion against language is most forcefully expressed. Following the second patricide in *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda states; "Until this bloody afterbirth is gone there can be no life for me" (*HC*, p.136). However, as much as Magda's killing of the father can be ascribed to an attempt to subvert the power of the father as representative of patriarchy, his demise actually reinforces Magda's powerlessness. Being born into what Magda aptly designates a "language of hierarchy…my father-tongue" (*HC*, p.97) the insufficiency of this language becomes even clearer when Magda's father is gone. "I cannot carry on with these idiot dialogues. The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered" (*HC*, p.97) Magda declares after her failed attempt to communicate with the servants, to break out of her monologue and into meaningful interchange. To

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[69] Macaskill, Brian. "Charting J.M. Coetzee's Middle Voice: *In the Heart of the Country*". Printed in Kossew, Sue, *Critical Essays*. 66-84. p. 69

[70] *Doubling the Point*. p. 94

[71] "Charting J.M. Coetzee's Middle Voice".p. 73

[72] Dovey, Teresa. "J.M Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice". Printed in Kossew, Sue, *Critical Essays*. 18-29. p. 19

communicate in a language other than the one she was thought by her father seems impossible.

Having unsuccessfully attempted to communicate with her servants Magda tries instead to converse with the sky-gods in a "Spanish of true meanings such as might be dreamed of by the philosophers" (*HC*, p.126), what Attwell refers to as "a substitute for human communication" and an attempt to "find a language not mediated by social division".[73] Magda fails, however, and she explains how the voices coming from the flying machines overhead accuse her of turning her life into fiction, not in rebellion against true oppression but "in reaction against the tedium of serving my father" (*HC*, p.128) thus not only ridiculing her need for an unbiased language but also undermining the validity of her whole story.

The insufficiency of patriarchal language is moreover illustrated through Magda's difficulties in accounting for the rape. Drawing attention to the repetition of the rape scene, critics have frequently interpreted the rape as a delusion – a sign of Magda's increasing insanity – or as a colonial fantasy in which the white woman dreams about being raped by a black man. David Attwell argues for instance that Coetzee is "careful to repeat the rape sequence several times, thus denying it the status of an "event" and establishing it as a colonial fantasy on Magda's part".[74] While this is, of course, a plausible and valid interpretation, none of the critics have actually considered the possibility that Magda repeats her account of the rape scene in frustration because she lacks language to accurately describe the ordeal. Magda never uses the word 'rape' to depict Hendrik's actions, something that could suggest that the word does not satisfactorily explain what happened. Dale Spender (reading Muriel Schulz), comments that the word rape is in fact a remarkably innocuous term: "Despite the violent nature of the act, there is an absence of force in the name rape, which is evidence by its usage in polite conversation and by the fact that it can also be used metaphorically without distaste".[75] Thus it can be argued that Magda's sexual disempowerment is actually embedded in language. Spender further argues: "Because there is no name which represents the trauma of being taken by force, the

[73] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.p.67

[74] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. p.67

[75] *Man Made Language*.p.178

horror for the rape victim can be compounded. When the act cannot be accurately named it cannot be readily verified, to oneself, or to others".[76] Because phallocentric language is inadequate to express women's experiences, Magda is instead forced to repeat the rape scene in an attempt to communicate the brutality of the situation, a brutality that patriarchal language cannot capture.

In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren continually laments the insufficiency of patriarchal language to truthfully describe what she sees. Witnessing the fighting and killing of a street riot she exclaims; "these are terrible sights (…) they are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth" (*AI*, p.99). Recounting this incident to Vercueil she later states; "I had hoped the words I needed would just come, but they did not. I held out my hands, palms upward. I am bereft, my hands said, bereft of speech" (*AI*, p.105). The inadequacy of patriarchal language is similarly illustrated in one of Mrs Curren's reflections on her intent to commit suicide; "I meant to go through with it. Is that the truth? Yes. No. There is such a word, but it has never been allowed into the dictionaries. Yes-No: every woman knows what it means as it defeats every man" (*AI*, p.116). Furthermore, referring to the words that come from her 'heart' and her 'womb' she states; "They are not Yes, they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting it, in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled" (*AI*, p.145). What Mrs Curren seems to be suggesting is that for language to adequately describe her experience she needs something in between 'yes' and 'no', a middle voice that escapes the patriarchal pattern. She is thus mirroring Magda's desire to be "the medium, the median" (*HC*, p.133), neither the one nor the other, but a bridge between, so that the contraries will be reconciled.

Dale Spender argues that because women's language is allegedly lacking in forcefulness and persuasiveness then women, in order to convincingly tell a story, have to express themselves in male terms, thus "affirming their own dependence upon the words of the powerful".[77] The arguments I have conducted so far show that the three women narrators all express a strong desire to overcome this dependence. This proves to be a difficult task, however, and they experience repeated failures in trying to communicate their own

[76] *Man Made Language*.p.180

[77] *Man Made Language*. p.12

experiences in a truthful way. In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren comments; "when one speaks under duress one rarely speaks the truth" (*AI*, p.98) and one could argue that this is true for all the women narrators. In the absence of a language that will serve their needs, their representations face an inevitable patriarchal influence. It is not, however, only the representation of outward experiences that is under duress. The representations these female narrators make of themselves, meaning their selfhood and identity, is inextricably linked to language and the problems it represents.

Language and Identity

In *Reading for the Plot* Peter Brooks comments on the relationship between desire and narratives, stating that "narratives both tell of desire – typically present some story of desire – and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification".[78] From *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to more modern fiction he trace the history of desire in narrative as a development from 'scheming to stay alive' to desire taking a more elaborated and socially defined form in desire as 'ambition'. This is, in essence, a definition of the male plot. Brooks further states, however, that "the female plot is not unrelated, but it takes a more complex stance towards ambition, the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood".[79] The issue of selfhood – here understood as identity – constitutes a central element of Coetzee's fiction, and the female narrators' revolt against language coincides with their repudiation of the fixed identity that language tries to impose upon them.

Male language is, in many regards, inappropriate for the formation of a female identity. As a result the female narrators all inhabit roles that deny individuality and identity. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* says that what keeps her going is her determination to get beyond the "names, names, names" (*HC*, p.17) that separate her from the world. Her struggle to achieve individuality is illustrated in the episode where she tries to get the servant Anna to call her by her right name:

> "Tell me, Anna, what do you call me? What is my real name?" I breathe as softly as I can. "What do you call me in your thoughts?"
> "Miss?"
> "Yes: but to you am I only the miss? Have I no name of my own?".....
> "Can you say Magda? Come, say Magda for me."
> "No, miss, I can't." (*HC*, p.102)

The problem of identity is also illustrated by the episode in which Magda, after her father's death, insists that Henry makes a two-day journey to the post office with a note requesting the withdrawal of cash. He returns with no money as the withdrawal slip lacks a signature.

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[78] Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Harvard University Press. London. 1984.p.37

[79] *Reading for the Plot*.p.39

The lack of signature – or patriarchal inscription – symbolises Magda's difficulty in achieving an identity independent of the father-daughter relationship.

In *Foe* Susan Barton is surrounded by male figures with whom she is expected to have a relationship. The impossibility of her existing independent of her relation to a male is highlighted in the captain's demand that she be referred to as Cruso's wife: "I should tell you that Captain Smith had proposed that I call Cruso my husband and declare that we had been shipwrecked together, to make by path easier on board and when we should come ashore in England" (*Foe*, p.42). Dale Spender argues: "It is I think a mark of identity options open to women in a patriarchal order that so many women voluntarily and even enthusiastically seek to be labelled as the property of male".[80] Susan sees no other option than accepting to be referred to as Cruso's wife whereas Magda, after failing to get Anna to call her by her right name, turns her thoughts to marriage, conceding that "if only I had a good man to sleep with at my side and give me babies, all would be well" (*HC*, p.22). Women are thus compelled to support a hierarchical system not of their own devising, to which their own identity must invariably be subordinate.

Theresa Dovey suggests moreover that even the structure of *In the Heart of the Country* reinforces Magda's failure to achieve an identity: "Written in numbered segments, her speech does not contain the continuity of narrative at all: the segments function as separate, successive units, and the metaphoric signifying function is made to intrude in the domain of the metonymic function, which would allow for continuity".[81]

In *Age of Iron*, Mrs.Curren's first name is never actually revealed (although a number of critics have insisted upon calling her Elizabeth), something which would also imply some kind of lack of individuality and identity. Mrs.Curren also seems to suggest that her identity "what I call I" is somehow determined by forces that she does not command:

> I have intimations…that once upon a time I was alive. Was alive and then was stolen from life. 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. (*AI*, p.100)

[80] *Man Made Language*.p.28

[81] "J.M Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice".p.20

She sees her identity as akin to that of a doll, manipulated and constrained by outside forces, without life and without agency.

Teresa Dovey argues that "the notion of saving the self works metaphorically to imply the achievement of identity"[82] Although Dovey refers exclusively to *In the Heart of the Country*, this desire to be saved is a prominent feature in all three texts. "How shall I be saved?" asks Magda (*HC*, p.16) as does Mrs Curren: "I want to be saved. How shall I be saved?" (*AI*, p.136). Susan Barton similarly declares; "I have a desire to be saved which I must call immoderate....It burns in me night and day, I can think of nothing else" (*Foe*, p. 36). Peter Brooks argues for the necessity of narrative as "the only way to portray an incoherent self"[83]. The three women, I believe, are trying to save themselves precisely by rewriting the identity imposed upon them. They are, in other words, trying to construct an identity for themselves in writing[84] by becoming the authors of their own lives.

Several critics have argued that Coetzee follows Jacques Lacan fundamentally in his belief that identity is achieved through language and through the confrontation of the subject with the other. Among them is Teresa Dovey. Her pioneering full-length study *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* stresses relentlessly the influence of Lacanian theory. She argues accordingly Coetzee's novels "exploit the Lacanian definition of the function of language as being 'not to inform but to invoke', with the subject seeking, via speech, 'the response of the other, an 'I' which requires the response of a 'You' in order to achieve identity".[85] She further uses the Lacanian concepts of the Imaginary and the Symbolic to argue that Magda's speech remains "trapped in the realm of the Imaginary, unable to project a response which would release it into the Symbolic, unable to achieve a place in the family constellation which would grant a name, a signifier of self and subjectivity to the speaker".[86] David Atwell similarly argues that "without the stable mechanisms

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[82] "J.M Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice". p24

[83] *Reading for the Plot*.p.54

[84] "J.M Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice". p25

[85] Dovey, Teresa. *The Novels of J.M Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*. Craighall: Ad.Donker. 1988.p.19

[86] "J.M Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice". p.21

whereby a stable identity can be formed through the reflections of self thrown back by others, Magda speaks an obsessive interior monologue that rarely resembles a language of social intercourse".[87] The argument in both cases seems to be that identity is achieved partly in relation to others; its achievement becomes, in other words, dependent on reciprocity. "It is not speech that makes man man, says Magda accordingly, "but the speech of others" (*HC*, p.126).

Coetzee's female narrators all struggle to obtain responses from the male characters in the novels. Magda's murder of her father seems to be a most desperate appeal for response: "Speak to me! Do I have to call on you in words of blood to make you speak?" (*HC*, p.71). There are several instances in the text where Magda desperately desires reciprocity:

> For the day will come when I must have another human being, must hear another voice, even if it speaks only abuse. This monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I will not find a way until someone gives me a lead.....I need people to talk to, brothers and sisters or fathers and mothers.... (*HC*, p.16, 120)

In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren struggles equally to get a response from Vercueil, who refuses to unveil his secrets and never discloses the circumstances that led to his homelessness:

> It was time for him to say something now, about hills or cars or bicycles or about himself or his childhood. But he was stubbornly silent. (*AI*, p.17)

Mrs Curren moreover explains why Vercueil is so important to her narrative; suggesting that her story cannot be told without taking his story into account:

> Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. Otherwise what would this writing be but a kind of moaning, now high, now low? When I write about him I write about myself. When I write about this dog I write about myself; when I write about this house I write about myself. (*AI*, p.9)

Similarly Susan Barton comments on the silence of Friday and Cruso:

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[87] *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. p.58

> 'In the letters you did not read,' I said, 'I told you of my conviction that, if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue. (*Foe*, p.117)

> Crusoe had no stories to tell of the life he had lived as a trader and planter before the shipwreck. He did not care how I came to be in Bahia or what I did there. When I spoke of England and of all the things I intended to see and do when I was rescued, he seemed not to hear me. (*Foe*, p.34)

A common feature of the three novels, then, is the female narrators' continual struggle to uncloak some of the 'darkness' surrounding the male characters.

In *Man Made Language* Dale Spender argues that the decision to withhold one's story is often a sign of power: "Power often lies with those who do not disclose their vulnerabilities" and that "strategies such as denying the validity of a topic, refusing to talk on someone else's topic, abstaining from self-revelation and withholding personal information, all contribute to the maintenance of power".[88] It can be argued that this statement is highly relevant for the three novels. Until the male characters' secrets are at least partly revealed the female narrators cannot narrate themselves out of their powerless position. The power of patriarchy remains thus intact. Failing to achieve this desired reciprocity, the female narrators all raise ontological doubts by representing themselves as lacking in substance. This self-conscious ontological uncertainty of the character is, of course, familiar to postmodern writings. Susan in *Foe* engages in an endless quest for having her substantiality confirmed in narrative discourse:

> When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without a substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso….But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me….Nothing is left to be but doubt. I am doubt itself…Return me to the substance I have lost, Mr. Foe, that is my entreaty. (*Foe*, p.51, 133)

Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* also raises ontological queries. She imagines herself as existing entirely outside human society, in what she refers to as her former state of "unthinking animal integrity" (*HC*, p.40). She thinks of herself as a snake "licking the

[88] *Man Made Language*.p.47

eggslime of herself before taking her bearings and crawling off to this farmhouse to take up residence behind the wainscot" (*HC*, p.38), or as "a thin black beetle with dummy wings who lays no eggs and blinks in the sun" (*HC*, p.18). Moreover, like Susan, Magda also represent herself as being insubstantial:

> I move through the world as a knifeblade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole, a hole with a body draped around it, the two spindly legs hanging loose at the bottom and the two bony arms flapping at the sides and the big head lolling on top. I am a hole crying to be whole. (*HC*, p.41)

As does Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*:

> I am hollow. I am a shell. Were I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the food of light. (*AI*, p.112)

The ability to express a sense of identity is essential to the female narrators. The feeling of "hollowness" that they all share seems, consequently, to be a result of the failure of establishing an identity independent of patriarchal structures.

"Am I now a woman? Has this made me into a woman (*HC*, p.107)?" Magda asks after having been raped by Hendrik. Magda's statement seems to be an admission that when Hendrik rapes her he does not only exert physical power but he simultaneously exerts power in terms of defining her sexual identity. Sexuality is, naturally, a fundamental constituent of identity. The discourses on sexuality do, however, not always reflect social reality. Accordingly Dale Spender (reading Dorothy Hage) points out that "there is no term for sexual power in women".[89] Men, Spender further argues, have named themselves as 'virile' and 'potent' but they have provided no comparable names for women. Without a name it is difficult to present oneself as a sexual being, and women's sexual disempowerment becomes thus embedded in language. Psychoanalytic discourse in particular has inscribed women as lack, as fault or flaw, and as being without sexual identity. This paragraph marks, thus, the transition to my next chapter in which I will further explore the influence of psychoanalytic discourse on women's narratives.

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[89] *Man made language*.p.175

Psychoanalysis

In *Foe* Susan Barton announces that "I am not a story, Mr. Foe", rejecting the inventions Foe imposes upon her story to make it conform to what he believes will be acceptable by male standards. Within the realm of psychoanalysis the case study known as 'Dora' (officially entitled 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria') is usually considered the prime example of how stories are being imposed upon women in terms of assumptions about their sexuality and desires. Dora was admitted to Freud's clinic for treatment in the autumn year 1900. She was subjected to extensive psychoanalytic treatment, in which the gist of Freud's conclusion was that Dora's reluctance to yield to the sexual advances from a much older man, known as Mr K, was caused by a residual trace of Oedipal love for her father. Chiara Briganti (reading Marcus and Auerbach) points out, however, that Dora "refused to be a character in the story that Freud was composing for her" and that she met his "interpretative assaults as she did Herr K's: with a recurrent 'no'".[90] Although Dora refuses Freud's impositions, I will still argue that psychoanalysis qualifies as a metanarrative; one that threatens to impose a law of truth on how we think of women and their sexual identity.

The first to present a massive, in-depth critique of Freudian theory was Luce Irigaray. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* and the succeeding book *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she criticises psychoanalysis not only as it was expressed by Freud, but also as it was developed and reformulated by Lacan. The main target of Irigaray's critique is what constitutes the very basis of Freudian and Lacanian theory, namely the belief in the primacy of the phallus. Especially contentious, thus, is Freud's view on female sexuality. A considerable part of Freud's theory concerns aspects of sexuality. In *This Sex Which is Not One* Irigaray explains that in Freud's sexual imaginary women's sexuality is based upon feelings of narcissism, masochism, and passivity. Moreover, according to Freudian theory women lack an adequate sexual organ, and are therefore believed to suffer from an intrinsic form of inferiority complex popularly known as 'penis envy'. Only the male attributes are defined as sexually valid and the penis thus becomes the only sexual organ of recognized value. Consequently sexual desire – or libido – is believed always to be masculine, whether it is manifested in males or females.

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[90] "A Bored Spinster with a Locked Diary". p. 90

Another controversial notion in Freudian theory is the 'castration complex'. Irigaray explains that women's castration complex is believed to begin when the sight of the penis shows the girl to what extent her sex organ is deficient and unworthy in comparison to the boy's sex organ. The girl however, still hopes that she can one day find herself endowed with a true penis, and while waiting for such hopes to be fulfilled she turns her desire towards the father in an attempt to obtain from him what she lacks.

Lacan, Irigaray further argues, has extended castration into a total metaphor for female literary and linguistic disadvantage. Lacan's writing distinguishes two realms, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The symbolic realm is a world of patriarchal order and logic whereas the realm of the Imaginary is a world in which language gestures beyond logic and grammar.[91] Lacan theorizes that the acquisition of language and the entry into the Symbolic depends on an acceptance and recognition of the phallus as a privileged signifier. Cora Kaplan explains: "The phallus as a signifier has a central, crucial position in language, for if language embodies the patriarchal law of the culture, its basic meanings refer to the recurring process by which sexual difference and subjectivity are acquired".[92] The elevation of the phallus to the status of transcendental signifier has thus enabled Lacan to theorise the exclusion of women from the Symbolic; from the Law of the father and from language.

Irigaray fiercely argues that all women suffer under these Freudian and Lacanian laws of sexuality; laws that see women's entire sexual development governed by her lack of, longing for, jealousy of, and demand for the male organ. Psychoanalytic discourse has ensured that "the feminine is in fact defined….as nothing other than the complement, the other side, or the negative side of the masculine; thus the female sex is defined as a lack, a *hole*", she says.[93] Psychoanalytical discourse on female sexuality thus lay claim to be a discourse of truth: "a discourse that tell the truth about the logic of truth: namely, that the feminine occurs only within the models and laws devised by male subjects".[94] This is a

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[91] *Beginning Theory*.p.114.

[92] Showalter, Elaine. *Feminist Criticism. Essays on women, literature and theory*. Virago Press. London. 1986. p.256.

[93] *The Sex which is not One*. p.172

[94] *The Sex which is not One*. p.86

discourse of truth to which women have not been allowed to contribute, and returning to the novels I will attempt to show how psychoanalytical discourse heavily influences the way the characters think about themselves and their lives.

The female narrator who seems to be most consciously aware of the seemingly inescapable authority of psychoanalytic theory is Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. The perceptions of oneself are, naturally, culturally controlled, and Magda's efforts to produce representations of herself are continually influenced by what she refers to as "forces within me belonging to the psychology I abhor will take possession of me" (*HC*, p.70). When considering narrative authority it is fair to say that Magda's worry is that psychoanalytic theory becomes too much a controlling factor of her narrative. But it is not only Magda's perceptions of herself that is controlled by psychoanalytic discourse; the way critics think about Magda seems also to be influenced profoundly by the psychoanalytic dictum.

In "Naming and Framing: Naturalization and Colonization in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*" Josephine Dodd looks at different reviews of *In the Heart of the Country*, claiming that they are informed by a set of ideological assumptions that have led to a total re-interpretation of "Magda's story, Magda's life, Magda's psychology, Magda's text (…..) for the sake of consumption".[95] Psychoanalysis is undoubtedly a powerful tool for literary criticism, and the psychoanalytic lesson seems to weigh heavily on these critics' approach. Indeed, it is the psychoanalytic dictum that causes these reviewers to dismiss the novel as the ramblings of a hysterical spinster who "is after revenge because her father has already found sexual satisfaction in the arms of the foreman's black bride". The predominant claim in these reviews is that Magda is mad, and she is mad simply because she is a spinster. The fact that Magda has already anticipated these interpretations seems to have conveniently eluded most critics' attention: "In the cloister of my room, I am the mad hag I am destined to be" (*HC*, p.8). The problem, Dodd argues, is that Magda's perceptions of herself are shaped by having "absorbed the lessons of literature".[96] She is, in other words, "scripted by her dominant literary discourse to go mad", in the same way that these critics are "scripted

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[95] "Naming and Framing".p.156

[96] "Naming and Framing".p.158

by our dominant psychoanalytic discourse to identify her as wanting to be seduced by her father".[97]

Interestingly, the text seems to subvert psychoanalysis at the same time as it encourages it. Magda does makes repeated allusions to herself as the seduced daughter: "Wooed when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life. The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in that fancy" (*HC*, p.3). She also describes herself as "the grim widow daughter of the father" (*HC*, p.3) and tell us that "there is incest in the line" (*HC*, p.23). Furthermore she admits that her father enters her dreams, and that these dreams are "not my creatures nor are they his: they are ours together" (*HC*, p.34). Nonetheless, highly self-conscious, Magda later on adds that "there is a scheme of interpretation…..But who is to say what a dream about my father is?" (*HC*, p.73). Magda seems, moreover, to be supporting Freud and psychoanalysis in its belief in "marriage as a standard for mental health"[98]: "if only I had a good man to sleep at my side, and give me babies, all would be well" (*HC*, p.41). In the same sentence, however, she wonders at how, after "meditations that would do credit to a thinker" (*HC*, p.41), she could find herself worked into the "trap" of coming with such an admission. The marriage Magda visualizes for herself seems, furthermore, a parody rather than an ideal: She imagines herself giving birth without a midwife while her husband lies drunk in the next room, so that she is forced to "gnaw through the umbilical cord". Then, after a decade of "closeted breeding" she is finally "emerging into the light of day at the head of a litter of ratlike, runty girls, all the spit image of myself, scowling into the sun" (*HC*, p.42). The questions that presents itself is why Magda provides what are so obviously Freudian explanations for her predicaments, if only to reject them in the next sentence.

In her article Dodd suggests that a possible reading is that Magda is "framed by, circumscribed by, a literary and psychoanalytic discourse which is ill-suited to her specific spatio-temporal experience".[99] Instead Dodd proposes a re-reading where she shows that the psychoanalytic lesson is at fault, or at least inadequate to account for Magda's experience. To explain this Dodd refers to the second parricide where Magda shoots her

[97] "Naming and Framing".p.159

[98] "A Bored Spinster with a Locked Diary".p.86

[99] "Naming and Framing".p.158

father in bed with his young mistress. Magda does not supply a clear motive for going to his room or for killing him. Dodd explains that according to psychoanalytic theory, Magda is supposed to desire her father as "custodian of reason and language". It is, however, "*only male children* who are supposed to fantasize about the killing of the father" because "only male children can hope to accede to that position of power".[100] Thus rather than interpreting the killing of the father as a result of Magda's dark desires, Dodd suggests that Magda's actions can be read as an attempt to overthrow the rule of the patriarch.

The dilemma Magda encounters, I believe, is an acknowledgement that despite the hypocrisy latent in psychoanalytical discourse and in patriarchal norms generally, these very norms provide a framework of security and defined expectations within which an individual can exist. Briganti argues accordingly that Magda's desire to be "inexplicable", but not "not-existent' (*HC*, p.5) exemplifies how Magda, on the one hand, "is aware of the arbitrariness of all interpretive constructs", while, on the other hand, she is also "conscious that her repeated attempts to defy interpretation might ultimately cancel her".[101] In order not to be "not-existent" there seems, for Magda, to be no other choice but to, at least partly, recognize the psychoanalytical law of truth. It is probably this awareness that accounts for much of the ambiguity in Magda's narrative and her vacillation between stating that "my story is my story, even if it is a dull black blind stupid miserable story" (*HC*, p.5), while at other times wishing for "a life story that will wash over me tranquilly as it does for other women" (*HC*, p.8). Submission to the psychoanalytical law of truth becomes, thus, a part of a process by which recognizability is achieved.

Several interpretations of *Foe* also rely heavily on the psychoanalytical dictum, but also in this case the insufficiency of psychoanalytical theory is revealed. Susan Barton is, like Magda, trying to retain control of her story, and Annamaria Carusi suggests that Susan's refusal to give up the subjective link with the story of the island may be interpreted as "a refusal of castration – or in other words, a refusal to subject herself to Law".[102] Carusi further argues that the silence of Friday can equally be read as "a figure of the lack of

[100] "Naming and Framing".p.159

[101] "A Bored Spinster with a Locked Diary".p.86

[102] "*Foe*: The Narrative and Power."p.139

castration, his mutilation being its very embodiment".[103] In telling her story Susan is, however, never able to account for the circumstances under which Friday lost his tongue, and of whether, in his mutilation, he was also castrated. What Susan sees when Friday whirls around in Foe's scarlet robe she can not readily explain:

> 'In the dance nothing was still and yet everything was still. The whirling robe was a scarlet bell settled upon Friday's shoulders and enclosing him; Friday was the dark pillar at its centre. What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them. I saw and believed I had seen, though afterwards I remembered Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he had put his hand in the wound.' (*Foe*, p.120)

In this she seems to make a statement only to, in the next breath, throw doubt on her assertion, leaving the truth about Friday's castration unanswered. "There is a play on presence and absence, between saying and taking away, that can only cause us the utmost uncertainty concerning Friday's castration", Carusi argues.[104] In the novel Cruso contemplates two possible reasons for Friday's mutilation. One of his suggestions is that slavers cut out his tongue to prevent him from ever telling his story. The other possibility put forward is that Friday was punished for cannibalism.[105] The first possibility, Carusi argues, would signify general "repression and slavery", the other would "reinforce the fact of castration and would signify punishment and retribution".[106] The impossibility of answering either one of these questions unequivocally suggests that a psychoanalytical reading in itself is not sufficient, Carusi argues. She subsequently proposes a shift to another paradigm of explanation; that of power.

In the *History of Sexuality* Foucault argues that the articulation of psychoanalytic theory in general was made possible by the sexualisation of the family in the late eighteenth century. Thus rather than being a universal a priori, the discourses on sexuality constitute a set of exemplifications of the 'regimes of truth' in which subjects are constituted and controlled.

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[103] "*Foe*: The Narrative and Power."p.140

[104]"*Foe*: The Narrative and Power."p.140

[105] "*Foe*: The Narrative and Power."p.140

[106] "*Foe*: The Narrative and Power."p.140

In the novels I have referred to in this chapter this regime of truth becomes an entrapment. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* is continually lured into the trap of making psychoanalytical interpretations of herself even though she is aware of their deceptiveness. In accounting for Friday's mutilation Susan Barton is incapable of seeing beyond the obvious Freudian explanations. As I have argued these explanations are in many ways insufficient, and Susan's questions remain thus unanswered.

Freud has been defended by critics who argue that he does not present female sexuality as a natural given. Sexuality isn't innate but is formed and adjusted by early experiences. Peter Barry argues accordingly that "the notion of penis envy need not be taken as simply concerning the male physical organ itself (whatever might have been Freud's intentions), but as concerning that organ as an emblem of social power and the advantages which go with it".[107] Lacan's writing similarly emphasises the phallus not as a physical biological object but as a symbol of fullness and power. The legacy of Freud and Lacan; penis envy, the castration complex and the oedipal phase have, nevertheless, become indelible coordinates defining women's sexuality.

[107] *Beginning Theory*.p.131

A Private Confession

In *Poetics* Aristotle argues that "the end is everywhere the chief thing",[108] a line of thought advanced by Walter Benjamin centuries later in his claim that "only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality".[109] By valuing the end as the most important part of a story it is implied that the narrative line should have an intention and design that "hold the promise of progress towards meaning".[110] The key word seems to be that of 'closure', of being able to say terminus at a final stage where meaning has been acquired. From this can be drawn the inference that the ability to determine the end is somehow connected to narrative authority and control. In his discussion of plot Aristotle moreover argues that for a story to be complete it requires a beginning, a middle and an end. Magda's desire to have a story with a "beginning, middle and end, not just the yawning middle without end" (*HC*, p.42) indicates, thus, a lack of authority and completeness. Lack of authority demonstrated in this way, I will argue, is also prevalent in the stories of Susan Barton and Mrs Curren.

To further explore these women's predicament I will introduce the concept of 'confession', which allows for a more direct scrutiny of the problem of narrative authority. In his non-fictional work "Confession and Double Thought: Rousseau, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky" Coetzee argues that "by our time, confessional fictions have come to constitute a subgenre of the novel in which the problems of truth-telling and self-recognition, deception and self-deception, come to the forefront".[111] The incentive to write a confession, Coetzee further argues, is invariably brought about as the result of a crisis, such as a confrontation with one's own death or some kind of illumination in the life of the central character that makes it impossible to continue in the same mode of existence. This is certainly true for the three female narrators; Mrs Curren is told she suffers from terminal cancer, Susan Barton is cast adrift on an island, whereas Magda's position, as mistress of the household, is threatened when her father brings home a new wife.

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[108] Aristotle. *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (2nd ed.; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. 1973.p.678

[109] *Reading for the Plo*.p.22

[110] *Reading for the Plot*.p.11

[111] *Doubling the Point*.p.252

In his essay Coetzee argues that, whether sacramental or secular, the goal of confession is always absolution: "Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of memory".[112] The question thus arises of whether, in the absence of a confessor empowered to absolve, secular confession can ever lead to that 'closing of the chapter'. In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren highlights the difficulty of secular confession, of achieving an end to her letter when there is no God with the power to absolve:

> I am written out, bled dry, and still I go on. This letter has become a maze, and I a dog in the maze, scurrying up and down the branches and tunnels, scratching and whining at the same old places, tiring, tired. Why do I not call for help, call to God? Because God cannot help me. God is looking for me but he cannot reach me. God is another dog in another maze. I smell God and God smells me. I am the bitch in her time, God the male. God smells me, he can think of nothing else but finding me and taking me. Up and down the branches he bounds, scratching at the mesh. But he is lost as I am lost. (*AI*, p.126)

The problem repeatedly thrown up by secular confession in particular is therefore the problem of closure, and the lack of authority in the three women's narratives seems related to the fact that their stories are all partly confessional. In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren is, for instance, contemplating the circumstances of her own impending death: "This is my first word, my first confession. I do not want to die in that state that I am in, in a state of ugliness" (*AI*, p.136), or Magda's confessions in what she refers to as her diary: "I live, I suffer. I am here. With cunning and treachery if necessary…I am a spinster with a locked diary" (*HC*, p.3). Moreover there is Susan's 'evaluation' of her relationship with Cruso: "Yet I will confess, had I been convinced I was to spend the rest of my days on this island, I would have offered myself to him again" (*Foe*, p.36). The problem of confession and closure is highlighted in *Foe* when Foe relates the story of a woman in Newgate prison who kept confessing and throwing doubt on her confession until the chaplain finally

[112] *Doubling the Point*.p.251

pronounces her shriven and leaves her, despite her many objections. Foe concludes that the moral of the story is that "there comes a time when we must give reckoning of ourselves to the world and then forever after be content to hold our peace" (*Foe*, p.24). Susan's understanding of the story, however, seems to be closer to the mark, declaring that "to me the moral is that he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force" (*Foe*, p.124). This is a force over which Susan does not dispose.

In his essay Coetzee puts particular emphasis on the connection between confession and truth. He declares that "the concern with truth overrides all other concerns". Moreover, he proposes the following distinction: "We can demarcate a mode of autobiographical writing that we can call the confession, as distinct from memoir and apology, on the basis of an underlying motive to tell the truth about the self".[113] Coetzee argues, however, that where the achievement of truth relies solely on the confessant's own self-scrutiny, it will always be tainted by self-deception. The self-directed scepticism of confession will invariably produce a questioning of the confessant's own motives, which ultimately renders the confessions powerless to tell the truth and come to an end.

In order to effectively illustrate the 'double thought' of confession I would like to draw attention to Rousseau's *Confessions*, more exactly "The Story of the Stolen Ribbon", which is also one of the texts Coetzee investigates in his critical essay. Rousseau feels underemployed working for Mme Versillis, who later dies without having acknowledged his unfair status. After her demise he steals a ribbon, which is subsequently found in his room. When he is confronted with the evidence Rousseau claims that the ribbon was given to him by Marion, another employee of the household. Mme Versillis' heir cannot determine the truth, so he dismisses them both. This recurrently causes Rousseau to envisage what will become of Marion without money and references as a result of his lie. In *Confessions* Rousseau then claims that he did not intend to harm Marion, but included her in his lies because he was thinking of her at the time he was confronted, because he actually intended to give the ribbon to her. Rousseau also confesses that he did not own up to the crime because he was afraid of his internal dispositions becoming known and the ensuing judgement of his character.

[113] *Doubling the Point*.p.252

In *Reading for the Plot* Brooks argues that it becomes impossible to order the elements in *Confessions* and "The Story of the Stolen Ribbon" into a logical discourse, as "the very point of the discrepancy between the narrative of actions and the narrative of internal dispositions is their fundamental lack of congruence, the inability of either ever to fully coincide with or explain the other".[114] There is no end to narratives told on the confessional model because there is "no solution to the crime".[115] This problem of self-deception is addressed in *Age of Iron* when Mrs Curren decides to redeem herself by setting herself on fire outside the Houses of Parliament. Later she says: "The truth is, there was always something false about the impulse, deeply false, no matter to what rage or despair it answered (*AI*, p.141). By thus continually questioning her motives she is generating even more narrative, interrupting simple movement forward.

Another interesting aspect of Coetzee's critical essay is his comment on the distinction between sincerity and authenticity. Again with reference to Rousseau's *Confessions* and "The Story of the Stolen Ribbon", Coetzee, reading Paul de Man, argues that one can identify two different strains in the story: "an element of *confession* whose purpose is to reveal a verifiable truth, and an element of *excuse* whose purpose it is to convince the reader that things are and were as Rousseau sees them".[116] The idea is that although the act of theft was bad, the intention behind it was potentially good, and the crime therefore of a less blameworthy character. In order to get to the truth behind the story, Coetzee's essay suggests, one should move beyond the balancing of the claims of motifs, and instead instigate a scrutiny of the language of confession: "The immediacy of the language Rousseau projects is intended as a guarantee of the truth of the past it recounts. It is no longer a language that dominates its subject as the language of the historian does. Instead, it is a naive language that reveals the confessant in the moment of confession in the same instant that it reveals the past he confesses".[117] Thus we are moving from the domain of truthfulness, in which the confession is necessarily historically verifiable, to the domain of authenticity, which is independent of an external reality but where language is permitted to establish its own truth. In order to judge between truth and falsity in Rousseau's account

[114] *Reading for the Plot*.p.32

[115] *Reading for the Plot*.p.33

[116] *Doubling the Point*.p.266

[117] *Doubling the Point*.p.291

one would thus have to "detect inauthentic moments in Rousseau via inauthentic moments in his language" an analysis that premises itself on being able to detect features of the language that does not belong to Rousseau, when "Rousseau is not speaking for himself but someone else is speaking through him".[118] The discussion on sincerity and authenticity seems relevant also when considering *Age of Iron*, *Foe* and *In the Heart of the Country*. On a historical level it becomes impossible for them to tell a 'sincere' story because their truth is always overshadowed by the truth of men. But also on a textual level it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to tell a true story because someone else will always be speaking for them. If the female characters are all destined to speak a language not of their own making it will always be inauthentic and therefore inadequate to establish their truth.

Coetzee conclude his essay by saying that "the end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself".[119] Derek Attridge, however, points out that a true confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self. One does not have to read Wittgenstein to understand that "the attempt to write only for oneself is doomed to failure: articulated language is always premised on the existence of an interlocutor or potential interlocutor".[120] Magda states, accordingly, that "there is no private language" (*HC*, p.35). Derek Attridge argues furthermore that "the confession is premised upon telling the truth to another or the other, a making public what has hitherto remained secret".[121] This certainly seems to be the basis of Rousseau's *Confessions*. It is even possible to argue that what Rousseau really wanted was neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the pleasure of being heard, recognized and listened to, which is arguably what he finally achieves through telling his story.

The desire to hear others speak and to be listened to is, similarly, what most of all drives Coetzee's women narrators; "To have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one is, it seems to me, nothing", Mrs. Curren laments. "Opinions must be heard by others, heard and weighed" (*AI*, p.163). The most important confessional scene in *Age of Iron* involves

[118] *Doubling the Point*.p.269

[119] *Doubling the Point*.p.268

[120] Attridge, Derek. *J.M Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. The University of Chicago Press. London. 2004.p.146

[121] *J.M Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*.p.145

Mrs Curren talking aloud in the presence of Vercueil. Vercueil, however, makes no response and shows no sign of having heard. Mrs.Curren, recounting the episode in the letter to her daughter, thus asks: "Is a true confession still true if it is not heard? Do you hear me, or have I put you to sleep too"? Peter Brooks identifies the desire to be heard, recognized, and listened to as the "sole meaning of the act of narration".[122] The desire to be listened to, he says, "continues to generate the desire to tell, the effort to enunciate a significant version of the life story in order to captivate a possible listener".[123] This certainly seems to be the case for the female narrators. As argued previously Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* is desperate to break out of her monologue and into meaningful interchange, Susan Barton in *Foe* wants to have her story published so that people can learn the truth of how she came to be stranded on an island with Cruso and Friday, whereas Mr Curren in *Age of Iron* hopes that her story will live on through the letter written to her daughter.

In Lacanian theory the concept of desire comes into being as a "perpetual want for (of) a satisfaction that cannot be offered in reality".[124] Desire will, in other words, always be unfulfilled. Magda is the most explicit Lacanian narrator, and delivers several monologues where she comments on the concept of desire:

> I am not one of the heroes of desire, what I want is not infinite or unattainable, all I ask myself, faintly, dubiously, querulously, is whether there is not something to do with desire other than striving to possess the desired in a project which must be vain, since its end can only be the annihilation of the desired (….) It is the first condition of life forever to desire, otherwise life would cease. It is a principle of life forever to be unfulfilled (*HC*, p.114)

Desire is inherently unsatisfied, Magda says. The paradox being that although unfulfilled, desire is still there to prevent life from ceasing. In *Foe* Susan Barton asks, accordingly, how "without desire" is it "possible to make a story" (*Foe*, p.88)? The desire to be heard,

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[122] *Reading for the Plot*.p.53

[123] *Reading for the Plot*.p.54

[124] *Reading for the Plot*.p.55

recognized and listened to is what most drives Coetzee's white narrators, but that seems to be exactly the desire that their writings cannot fulfil.

Narrative entrapments – Conclusions and Outlooks

The thesis' point of departure was, firstly, a hypothesis that *In the Heart of the Country*, *Foe* and *Age of Iron* all share a basic theme, namely the three women narrators' failure to communicate their own stories. Although the female narrators position themselves as authors of their own stories they seem, nevertheless, to be entrapped in wider metanarratives that relentlessy affect the women's ability to truthfully represent their stories. The concept 'narrative entrapment' was, subsequently, launched as an analytical and conceptual tool that I anticipated would be of particular relevance to my understanding of the three texts. As stated in the introduction, the entrapments in the novel is meant to indicate they way in which certain metanarratives function as a contolling factor not only of the three women's narrativisation but also of the way their narratives are being understood and interpreted.

The concept 'narrative entrapment' could, however, not have been constructed in a theoretical vacuum. It was informed by various theories; the emphasis being on postmodernism and feminism. There were, however, considerable challenges in using these two theories. Feminism has, generally, always been a struggle for the proper representation of women. Postmodernism, on the other hand, questions this agenda by problematising the very idea of selfhood or womanhood. What made a combination of these two theories especially relevant to my purpose was, however, their mutual scepticism towards totalising grand narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism precisely by its disbelief in metanarratives. Feminism similarly questions the validity of metanarratives on the basis that they do not acknowledge the plurality inherent in knowledge and experience. I argued therefore that theoretical elements from these theories can be combined in order to substantiate the concept of narrative entrapment.

The critics I have cited in my thesis all emphasise Coetzee as a writer working in a postmodern era. Postmodernism as a critical approach did thus present itself as an appropriate tool when exploring Coetzee's novels. This, however, presented some challenges when determining the scope of my thesis. To fully embrace the notion of postmodernism would imply a repudiation of the belief that literary texts reflect and record history. The postmodern outlook values instead the fragmented, allusive text that does not

necessarily figure forth an external world. In considering the novels also from a feminist perspective it seemed, however, unproductive not to be able to ascertain some kind of link between the issues raised in the novels and issues confronting social reality. The underlying question was, in other words, whether the three novels can at all avoid being read as texts situated in history, culture and society and thus carrying a wider critique of women's narratives' subordination under patriarchal metanarratives. My anwer to this question was that, although works of fiction, Coetzee's novels still convincingly dramatise the historically disadvantaged position of women. I therefore used Attwell's understanding of Coetzee's texts as being situated in the "nexus of history and text" as a basis for my futher exploration of the novels. The concept of narrative entrapment did, consequently, constitute a useful framework for the interpretation of the texts not only as works of fiction but also as works addressing wider societal problems of how certain metanarratives block the true representation of women's stories.

The second main building block of the thesis was to explore the concept of narrative entrapment by consulting a number of essential dimensions that have been addressed in various discussions on women and narratives. Based on a textual analyses of the three novels, combined with an understanding of how these analyses are informed by a wider theoretical framework, I chose to explore the following key dimensions: How women's lack of narrative power is embedded in historical discourse, in the status of the female body, in the status of the female language, in the connection between language and identity, in the primacy of psychoanalysis as an interpretative framework, and in the problem of 'confessions', i.e the fact that women's narratives in general seem to have an apparent confessional aspect. I did not 'randomly' choose these dimensions, of course, as they to some extent was already present as elements in various works of feminist criticism. This approach was nevertheless not blatantly obvious from the outset. The overall argument in the majority of the male-written works of criticism seems to be an idea that the subjugation of women is not important in itself. In this respect, I referred to Fiona Probyn who points out that the stories of Magda, Susan and Mrs Curren are invariably being interpretred as secondary to broader issues of colonialism and postcolonialism. The exploration of the above dimensions allowed me, however, to devote my thesis exclusively to the three women narrators. These dimensions provided me, moreover, with an adequate basis for my exploration of narrative entrapments.

The first key dimension to be explored in my theis was the way in which women's lack of narrative power is embedded in historical discourse. The title of this chapter; 'The Castaways of History' seemed, in that respect, an appropriate title. Out of the six proposed dimensions this was, arguably, the most difficult and comprehensive. The discussion in this chapter is inextricably linked to the last sections of the previous chapter 'In the Nexus of History and Text', and is predicated on a belief that literature is not separated from the power struggles constituting social reality. I am aware of the rather simplified connection I establish between history and literature. As mentioned previously, however, the underlying idea behind this thesis is that Cotetzee's texts do, to a certain degree, record and reflect history. It seems fair to argue, then, that history and literature is closely interwined. The problem is that women have, traditionally, not had the same access to writing and publishing as men, and therefore they have not been included in the process of writing history. History becomes, in other words, a metanarrative on reality to which women have not been allowed to contribute. I believe my discussion on how Foe manipulates Susan's story highlights the way in which how women are being silenced under the influence of patriarchy. It seems to me, then, that when Susan is trying to write her story she has two main barriers to overcome. First of all she stuggles to retain control of the content of her story, as Foe is continually inventing episodes to make her story fit an accepted narrative design. Secondly she faces the challenge of having her story published. Thus she needs Foe to provide access to the tradition of publishing. As it turns out her narrative is never published, something which would confirm the idea of Susan as being a castaway of history.

In the chapter 'Body and Narrative' I drew attention to how the status of the female body reflects existing social hierarchies. The rape of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* supports thus an idea of 'body politics', in which the physical power exerted on the female body also reflects women's social inferiority. I found that the invasion of the body is a recurrent theme in the novels. I argued moreover that the invasion of the female narrators' bodies, be it literal or metaphorical, came to represent a silencing of the female voice and is thus a way of insisting on the lack of narrative authority. Furthermore I argued that this link between body, word and narrative is persistently maintained through practically all of Coetzee's novels. This connection seemed to beg the question, however, of whether women's narratives are trapped in the female body.

The chapters on 'Women's Language' and 'Language and Identity' are closely interrelated. These chapters are also a logic continuation of the previous chapter on 'Body and Narrative' as they to some extent further emphasise the belief in a connection between body and word. The theories of the so called 'French feminists' form the theoretical background of these two chapters and serves moreover as an introduction to my exploring of the problematic nature of language. The main idea presented is that language is inherently phallocentric and therefore inadequate to represent female experience. I illustrate this inadequacy with various references to the novels, where the female narrators express their incapability of accounting for their experiences when forced to use a language not of their own making. I argue, moreover, that male language is insufficient for the formation of a female identity. As a result of this insufficiency the female narrators all inhabit roles that deny individuality and identity. I support this view with continual references to the texts showing how the women narrators struggle to establish identities independent of patriarchal structures.

In the chapter titled 'Psychoanalysis' I argue that psychoanalytical discourse functions as one of the metanarratives that block women's true representation. I present Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* as the narrator who is most consciously aware of the seemingly inescapable influence of psychoanalytical theory. I argue that Magda's text is especially interesting precisely because Magda is so aware of the fact that she is being 'scripted' by a psychoanalytic discourse that is at best inaccurate. I pointed out how Magda presents several Freudian explanations for her predicaments only to reject them later, arguing that this ambiguity in her narrative illustrates the seemingly impossibility of existing outside patriarchal norms.

In 'A Private Confession' I argued that the confessional mode constitutes an entrapment in that it does not follow the conventional format of beginning, middle and end. The problem repeatedly thrown up by the confession is the problem of closure. Because the ending is, traditionally, considered the most important part of a story I argued that the women narrators' lack of narrative authority was related to that fact that their stories are all partly confessional.

J.M Coetzee has released three novels in which he uses women narrators. This thesis has argued that the three women narrators fail to communicate their own stories because they are entrapped in wider metanarratives that limit their ability to truthfully represent their stories. Their stories have, to some extent, nevertheless challenged these metanarratives by exposing their inadequacies. However, in the end it would seem that some truths are always more powerful and persuasive than others.

Afterword

In the letter she is writing to her daughter Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* contemplates her own intention of immolating herself outside Houses of Parliament stating:

> For as long as the trail of word continues you will know with certainty that I have not gone through with it; a rule, another rule. 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, did not go through with it. (*AI*, p.115-116)

Thus she seems to be implying that the ability to write, to narrate, is what keeps death at bay. Moreover, in the very last paragraph of her letter she describes Vercueil embracing her, squeezing her life's breath out of her, as if death has finally ended her letter. The female narrators of *Foe* and *In the Heart of the Country* similarly die at the end of the novels. An unnamed narrator finds Susan Barton dead in Foe's house whereas Magda writes her own obituary stating that she has "chosen at every moment my own destiny, which is to die here in the petrified garden" (*HC*, p.139). Has death become a symbol of the women narrators' inability to convey their true story?

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