

THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION

**COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS IN J. M. COETZEE'S EARLY FICTION:
TWO TROPES OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY**

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a. Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

My dissertation is an examination of stories of colonial intersubjectivity in Coetzee's early novels (*Dusklands*, *Foe*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K*). Drawing upon Hegelian and Levinasian ideas of intersubjectivity, it joins the ethical strand of the critical reception, represented by the likes of Derek Attridge and Mike Marais. Attridge's ethical approach (highlighted in his landmark study on Coetzee, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*[2004]) draws upon Levinasian and Derridian perspectives, and it was in the wake of his study that the concepts of the other and otherness—his “figures of otherness/alterity” (Attridge 12)—became prominent in Coetzee criticism (López 25). The premise of my investigation is provided by Attridge's starting points: Coetzee's fiction, which is particularly relevant in its engagement with the theme of otherness and that in it one encounters the “singular demands of the other” (xii), has the capacity to “stage,” “distance,” and “embrace” otherness, or, to put it differently, his novels pose the question of our responsibility toward the other (Attridge 30, xii, Marais xiv).

In 1987, eleven years after the publication of his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee started his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech with a question: how come that “in an unfree country like mine, in a society of masters and slaves, someone is honored with a prize for freedom?” (*Doubling* 96). Claiming that “at the heart of the unfreedom of the masters of South Africa lies a failure of love,” Coetzee adds that the deformed and stunted relations created under colonialism and apartheid find their psychic representations in a “literature of bondage, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power,” a literature of “pathological attachments, of anger and violence” (*Doubling* 98).

My chief concern throughout this dissertation is to explore how this “failure of love” manifests itself in Coetzee’s novels. I am interested in the scenarios of intersubjectivity, particularly in the encounter between colonizer and colonized, staged in his early novels. The theoretical assumption behind the argument of my dissertation is that the colonial encounter (the encounter of or between the colonizer and the colonized) demonstrates in a radical way that the basis of all subjectivity is the traumatic logic of intersubjectivity. In other words, subjectivity always exists and occurs as intersubjectivity because the subject can only recognize itself in and through the other and it can come into existence only as a response given to the other (Bényei 13-14, 21). The above understanding of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity gains a particularly complex and acute manifestation in the way Coetzee’s novels combine the insights of Western philosophy and theory with the colonial context. The theoretical background behind these assumptions is provided partly by the Hegelian dynamic of intersubjectivity as dramatized in the master-slave encounter in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807; English trans. A. V. Miller, 1977) and partly by the varied and various interpretations and reworkings of the Hegelian dialectic: Kojève’s broadly anthropological reading of the encounter, Fanon’s and Bhabha’s postcolonial revisions of the Hegelian dynamics, Levinas’s and Blanchot’s ethical-phenomenological considerations, and Sartre’s existentialist reading of Hegelian intersubjectivity. The novels I read inquire into the ethics of the shocking and painful encounter with the other. Though it traces an asymmetrical relation, a sense of reciprocity and a latent wish for communion with the other seems to be hidden in Levinas’s idea of encounter with the other: “the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation” (*Totality* 198). Primarily, the term “encounter” in Levinas refers to the relationship with the always unattainable, infinitely other human being, but Levinas’s thought also hides a yearning (even if never accomplished) for a response from the other human being. In my understanding, what makes Coetzee’s rendition of colonial intersubjectivity unique is that

besides the ambiguous evocation of Hegel, Coetzee's novels also evoke Levinasian ethics, which plays a contrapuntal or supplementary role, as if the Hegelian scenario inevitably entailed Levinasian ethics. I argue that in his novels the colonial encounter is always enacted between the Hegelian and Levinasian scenarios.

One objective of my dissertation is to attend to and trace the meaning of the encounter between colonizer and colonized as it appears in Coetzee's early fiction. I locate and read those places in Coetzee's early fiction where the Hegelian scenario is exposed as inadequate. Such places already occur in *Dusklands*, where, despite Jacobus's exertions to establish and fix himself as master in relation to the Hottentots, the presence of the fragments of the Sinbad and Herakles myths suggests a more complex and ambiguous relationship and power set-up in the encounter between colonizer master and colonized servant.

b. An outline of the employed methods

My hypothesis is that the exploration of this aspect of Coetzee's fiction is possible only through a close reading of the rhetorical structures of the novels, concentrating on the rhetorics of the texts, their web of motifs, their intra- and intertextuality, including their web of mythological references. In my exploration of how Coetzee's novels stage the colonial encounter, I attend to the presence and significance of two metaphors in Coetzee's early fiction: the trope of carrying another on one's back—which is present through repeated references to the story of Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea in Coetzee's oeuvre—and its inversion or “inside-out,” the trope of embracing, two motifs that are multivalent in their implications. The act of carrying another on one's back is partly the visual representation of the master-slave relationship, also evoking the iconic colonial scene of the “white man's burden,” but, at the same time, it is also an inverted, inside-out embrace or a “backward embrace,” like the embrace

between Susan and Friday in *Foe*, or the one between Magda and Hendrik in *In the Heart of the Country*. The “content” and motivation of both acts is a striving towards the other, while their stake in the novels is no less than the responsibility toward the other human being.

In my readings of the individual novels, I start out from small textual details, repeated patterns and motifs of intersubjective encounters (primarily, versions of the embrace, of carrying another on one’s back and of the gaze), showing how these recurrent instances function like core fantasies of Coetzee’s narratives. I also demonstrate that these basic scenarios of intersubjectivity permeate the fictional world of the individual novels partly through evoking certain mythological stories in a manner that seems typical of Coetzee.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework outlined above, the chapters of the dissertation trace the variations of colonial intersubjectivity in Coetzee’s early fiction through the two recurrent tropes mentioned above. I read these tropes of intersubjectivity by unravelling some threads of the largely hidden mythological web of references in the novels: the tropes are situated in a never conspicuous or fully coherent but ubiquitous network of references to certain mythical narratives. The chapters on *Dusklands* and *Foe* focus on the myth of Herakles and the legend of Sinbad. In *Barbarians*, the tropes are read in the context provided by seeing the novel as a colonial version of the Oedipus myth, while the comparative analysis of *Michael K* and Beckett’s *Molloy* follows the relevant traces of the Sisyphus myth and the legend of St. Roch. Whenever they are relevant to my argument, I also refer to the more sporadic traces of other legends and myths (St. Christopher, Achilles, Philoctetes, Theseus and Ariadne, Penelope, and Eros and Psyche). My investigation of these novels has persuaded me that the novels’ treatment of myth is relevant to their workings, even though my interest in Coetzee’s treatment of myth is necessarily limited to the role these fragments of myths play in his scenarios of intersubjectivity, the ways they can be understood and read as “parables” of the colonial scenario or “illustrations” of the colonizer-colonized relationship.

In comparison to the mythologizing practice of modernism, Coetzee's mythologizing seems much more fragmentary and erratic. Myths seem to be present in his novels more as instantaneous flashes, fragmented or sudden associations. The fragments of myths might be seen as carrying a self-reflexive function, the novels trying to—through a self-reading, self-understanding gesture—bring meaning, embed and “tame” the painful narratives into known stories through the archaic and universal nature of myth. However, the novels elude the rendering of such a universal meaning, Coetzee's mythopoetics evoking Eric Gould's poststructuralist, anti-realist understanding of myth, offering no fixed interpretations to the invoked myths. The closing chapter of my dissertation addresses this mythopoetic dimension of Coetzee's early fiction.

c. The results of the dissertation

Due to the seemingly fragmented and desultory presence of myths in Coetzee's fiction, the mythopoetic dimension of his fiction is still an under-researched area in Coetzee criticism. In the various chapters I examine how Coetzee's novels unravel various aspects of colonial intersubjectivity precisely by relating the act of carrying and embracing to various mythical narratives. In *Dusklands*, the allegory of intersubjectivity is rendered through the motif of carrying another on one's back. The most emphatic appearance of this motif in the novel is provided by recurrent references to the story of Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea from *A Thousand and One Nights*, a story that relates the sailor's encounter with the monstrous Old Man who fastens on his back and refuses to dismount. The persistent, though sporadic presence of the story of Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea in Coetzee's fiction can be traced from *Dusklands*, through *Foe* and *Michael K* to later novels like *Slow Man*. I read the motif of carrying another on one's back as a symbolic act of colonization and as a metaphor of the

relationship between colonizer and colonized. The allegory of intersubjectivity provided by the Sinbad tale appears in conjunction with an apparently similar mythical narrative predicated on the motif of carrying another on one's back: the story of the events that lead to the death of Herakles (the shirt of Nessus). This chapter discusses the implications of the act of carrying another on one's back in the Sinbad tale, also examining how the Herakles-Nessus-Deianeira myth complicates and shades the meaning of the act of carrying (and of intersubjectivity in general) in the novel. I argue that the motif of carrying another on one's back functions as the founding myth or primal scene of Coetzee's novel—of *Dusklands* and of Coetzee's other early novels—in that it functions as a key to Coetzeean intersubjectivity. In both the Sinbad and Herakles myths the idea and image of the parasite recurs and is of relevance. The allusion to the myth of Herakles illuminates a further aspect of the colonizer-colonized relationship in the novel. The motifs that are relevant to Coetzee's novel are centaur Nessus's abduction and carriage (on the back) of Herakles' wife Deianeira and the final fall and death of Herakles caused by centaur Nessus's poisoned shirt. The key scenes explored and discussed in the novel are the ones in which Jacobus and his servant Klawer, in a joint effort, are crossing the river, as well as the episodes in which they are carrying each other on their back, and the story of Jacobus's contamination with the Hottentot sickness. These motifs—carrying another on one's back, the crossing through a river—are shared elements of the Sinbad tale and the Herakles myth. The stories of Sinbad and Herakles are part of an economy of infiltration: the seeds of these stories are sown in Dawn's narrative but they grow into full-fledged stories in Jacobus's narrative.

In both *Dusklands* and *Foe*, the motif of carrying does not only stem from the parasitical act of strangling (as in the Sinbad tale); instead, it incorporates a wide range of the implications of the phenomenology of carrying and embracing (St. Christopher's legend provides a further aspect of the act of carrying in *Foe*). Opening with a further variation of the story of Sinbad and

the act of carrying someone on one's back, *Foe* offers a new—gendered/female—perspective on colonial intersubjectivity. The motif of carrying another on one's back intertwined with the act of embracing is enriched in *Foe* by the presence of the woman narrator who perceives the act of carriage between herself and the black servant Friday as a “strange backward embrace” (*Foe* 6). Drawing upon the Levinasian/Blanchotian aspect of Susan Barton's narrative, I focus on the ethical-intersubjective aspects of embracing, inquiring and storytelling, exploring the ways the mythical allusions of the text are made to speak about the colonizer-colonized encounter in Coetzee's novel. References to Barton's figure as a female Achilles and female Oedipus, as well as to Saint Christopher's legend, are read as shedding light on the intersubjective and ethical aspects of the novel.

Waiting for the Barbarians offers a new perspective of colonial intersubjectivity in the register of looking. I argue that, although the presence of the myth is not openly acknowledged, the text is pervaded by shreds of the Oedipus myth. Critical response to *Barbarians* has never noted the significance of the Oedipus subplot in the narrative, though, in my view, it is powerfully imbued in the text, not least because of the centrality of the gaze in both. The opening paragraph of *Barbarians* establishes looking as the “ur-motif” of the novel. Drawing upon Fanon's, Bhabha's and Sartre's theories of looking, I read the Oedipus myth as a subtext to the novel, examining acts of looking and the instances of the inhibition of looking to understand how Coetzee's novel dramatizes the fraught relationship between colonizer and colonized. While the act of embracing the other human being seems to be possible even in the colonial universe of *Dusklands* or *Foe* (as an aspect of carrying on the back and not only), *Waiting for the Barbarians* presents an even darker aspect of colonial reality where physical intimacy manifests itself primarily as torture. *Barbarians* suggests that, in the world of the Empire in which power pervades everything, “pure” intersubjectivity has no chance. The power-defined world of the (periphery of the) Empire makes “real” embraces—communion—

between colonizer and colonized impossible and, instead, torture appears as the only sincere act of intimacy, for it relinquishes the idea that communion between colonizer and colonized may be possible. Tracing the presence of the Oedipal motif of searching for another but finding oneself, I assign colonial significance to the disfunctionality of looking in the novel, while also arguing that the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl should be read as a traumatic Levinasian encounter. I read the various acts of looking in the complex triangular relationship of Colonel Joll, the Magistrate and the barbarian girl as unique colonial versions of the Oedipus myth. At the same time, I argue that instead of a clear-cut series of identifications of Coetzee's characters with respective characters in Sophocles' drama, the Oedipus myth is to be found in *Barbarians* in a dispersed manner as traits of the various characters of the novel.

Life and Times of Michael K treats the question of intersubjectivity in a way that is profoundly different from the previous novels. Finding that under the war conditions that strangle human relationships he is unable to live in the society of human beings, Michael K seeks his happiness in the solitude of his garden, in a wordless and companionless beetle-existence. Reading *Michael K* as one of Coetzee's most Beckettian novels, I refer to the myth and legend of Sisyphus and St. Roch alluded to in Beckett's *Molloy* as remnant myths and subtexts of Coetzee's novel, too. In the Sisyphus myth (and in the recurrent Sinbad tale) the motif of carrying a burden is central, while in the St. Roch legend the motif of sucking—and especially abstaining from sucking—acquires significance in relation to how intersubjectivity is addressed in this novel. The question both *Molloy* and *Michael K* seem to raise is whether intersubjectivity, the relationship with the other, is the only possible, viable way for man to live. Both novels raise the question whether the relationship between two strangers is in any way different from the relationship between mother and child.

The closing chapter of my dissertation addresses the mythopoetic dimension of Coetzee's early fiction. Referring to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice alluded to in Coetzee's

The Master of Petersburg, I read the unaccomplished encounter between Orpheus and Eurydice as an ur-myth of Coetzee's oeuvre, as a story that portrays the failed intersubjectivity plot of Coetzee's novels and that sums up the mythical narratives discussed in the novels.

d. The author's publications published in the field of the dissertation



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (3)

1. **Veres, O.:** Interszubszektívitás Samuel Beckett Molloy című regényében.
In: Argumentor Műhely : Közbeszédaktusok. Szerk.: Horváth Gizella, Bakó Rozália Klára, Partium Kiadó ; Debrecen : Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Nagyvárad, 197-210, 2016, (ISSN 2392-6155) ISBN: 9789633185766
2. **Veres, O.:** Úr-szolga retorika a Kacor királyban.
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4. **Veres, O.:** The Story of Sinbad and the Old Man of the Sea in One Thousand and One Nights.
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5. **Veres, O.:** Homo Solitarius: Intersubjectivity in Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K and Beckett's Molloy.
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6. **Veres, O.**: "Description of the Contrarious Emotions in a Lover:" The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Ovid, Rilke, "Sir Orfeo," and Duffy.
In: *Mens Sana : Rethinking the Role of Emotions : Proceedings of the Fourth Argumentor Conference*. Eds.: Gizella Horváth, Rozália Klára Bakó, Partium Press ; Debrecen University Press, Oradea ; Debrecen, 245-260, 2016, (ISSN 2285-682X) ISBN: 9789633185896
7. **Veres, O.**: J. M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians as a Colonial Oedipus.
In: *Proceedings of the third edition of ELLE International Conference*, Oradea, 13-15 September 2013. Ed.: Titus Pop, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 167-178, 2014, (ISSN 2285-5432)
8. **Veres, O.**: Remembering Beckett: J. M. Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K.
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9. **Veres, O.**: The Rhetoric of Mourning in J. M. Coetzee's The Master of Petersburg.
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11. **Veres, O.**: On Mourning: The Trope of Looking Backwards in J. M. Coetzee's The Master of Petersburg.
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Romanian J. Engl. Stud. 4, 240-152, 2007. ISSN: 1584-3734.
15. **Veres, O.**: Unsayng Origins in J. M. Coetzee's In the Heart of the Country.
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List of other publications

Other journal articles (1)

16. Mamber, S., ford. Márton, Z., **Veres, O.**: Mechanikus Narancs.
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In: XXVI. Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia, Humántudományi szekció / Veres
Ottília, Veszprémi Egyetem, Veszprém, 342, 2003.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on
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