

UNSAING ORIGINS IN J. M. COETZEE'S
IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

OTTILIA VERES
Christian University "Partium", Oradea

In her introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak defines Derrida's concept of origin as an "unoriginal origin," an "absent origin" (Spivak 1974: xi). In my reading of J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, I want to make use of Derrida's and Foucault's understanding of origin, with the assumption that their notions of origin shed light on the working and dynamics of Coetzee's text. Accordingly, I do not understand origin(s) as a metaphysical category denoting and being associated with presence, essence, substance, nor as one particular point in time (history) and space; instead, in this paper, I will use the term origin(s) in the poststructuralist (Derridian and Foucauldian) sense of the word, origins "featuring" as *stratified*, and being associated with absence and/or supplementarity.

In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Michel Foucault denies the existence/possibility of a linear genesis (1977: 139). This disclaimer could be the starting point of a discussion on the question of origins in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, a text that starts out by disrupting its narrative/narrated origin. The first sentences are stated only to be questioned and denied by the subsequent ones: "1. Today my father brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul. Or *perhaps* they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, *that is also possible*. [...] More detail I cannot give unless I begin to *embroider*" (Coetzee 1999: 1; italics mine). Designating embroidering/imagination as its guiding principle, this narrative begins by moving along the lines of uncertainty, lie and contradiction. After telling the story/scene of the arrival of her father with his new bride — a scene which she seems to witness —, the narrator Magda says: "I was not watching" (1999: 2), and thus claims for herself the position of the unreliable narrator par excellence.

With its “second start” (origin), this narrative denies the existence of an (original) origin of/to itself, and, instead, posits its origin as unoriginal: “Six months ago Hendrik brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in the donkey-cart [...]” (1999: 18). Ironically, the agentive position is now occupied by the servant Hendrik, rather than by the master. This scene can be read, thus, as a symptom and a foreshadowing of the future, in which the master/servant roles of the narrative are disrupted or subverted. This “second origin” cancels out the text’s origin, or, in another reading, renders it as repetitive, stratified, therefore no longer originary; the repetition of origins cancels itself out as origin. Derrida talks about the stratification/stranding of the origin(s), by means of which the origin is lost, impossible (1974: 36). He speaks of a “dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced *narcissistically*. In this play of representation, the point of origins becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin [. . .]” (1974: 36, italics mine). While marking the sexual metaphors in the discourse (promiscuity, seduction), the narcissistic attribute of the seduction has to be marked as well. Does the repetitive structure/dynamics of Coetzee’s text point towards its own narcissism? Does it display its pleasure in returning again and again to parts of its “body” and admire them narcissistically?

According to Spivak, Derrida’s “dissemination” occurs within a sexual fable: “Exploiting a false etymological kinship between semantics and semen, Derrida offers this version of textuality: A sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated. A semination that is not *insemination* but *dissemination*, seed spilled in vain, an emission that cannot return to its origin in the father. Not an exact and controlled polysemy, but a proliferation of always different, always postponed meanings” (Spivak 1974: lxxv). Admitting the existence of a “true double life” (Coetzee 1999: 4) in her imagination, Magda asks: “Is it merely a vision of a *second existence* passionate enough to carry me from the mundane of being into the *doubleness* of signification?” (1999: 4, italics mine). In the passionate weaving of her story, Magda proves unable — and unwilling — to write/tell a one-dimensional linear, temporal story leading from A to B. While feeling anxious about this incapability of hers, she seems, at the same time, to be flattered by the “degeneracy of [her] line” (1999: 25). Besides the opening passage

— of which we get several versions — Magda’s stories mostly contradict themselves when she gives accounts of her murder of her father. According to the first narrative, she axed down her father and his mistress in their conubial bed; in a later version we learn that she shot them with a rifle. The minute details of the corpses’ writhing also differ considerably. All the different versions of the murder are there only for the reader to find out later that “he [the father] does not die so easily after all” (1999: 18) and to find Magda nursing her ill father in the very last passages. Similarly, when Hendrik rapes her, Magda weaves the story of their fight on and on, offering several versions of their scuffle:

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. I pick up the first thing I see, a fork, and lunge at him. The tines scrape his shoulder, probably not even piercing the skin; but he exclaims in surprise and hurls me to the floor. I stumble up into a deluge of blows. (1999: 113–114, passage 205.)

The subsequent descriptions (passages 206, 207 and 208), significantly, are variations of this previous passage (and variations of one another, of course, at the same time). It is the logic of supplementarity that is at work here. Significantly enough, what Magda holds in her hand all through her fight with Hendrik — and all through these narrative variations — is a fork, symbolically marking the forking and stratification of her story and also symbolizing the narrative authority that lies in her hands. Thus, the physical *tour de force* with her oppressor Hendrik at the same time becomes/transforms into a storytelling game, a *narrative tour de force* as well.

Derrida defines decentering as the essential trace/characteristic of dissemination. On the one hand, I read the numbering of the diary entries as an act that aggressively tries to impose order upon a narrative that has no center and no origin. The numbering functions to impose some order on a chaotic narrative, on Magda’s “torment of And next? And next?” (1999: 22). The “and next” of her narration is, to some extent, assured and guaranteed by the implementation of the sequel of subsequent numbers upon the bits of narrative from 1 to 266. However, aware of the violent implementation of this sequencing and ordering of her tale, Magda admits the impotence/incapability of her tale to be(come) a narrative driven by and working according to the “and next” password of story-telling. Unlike Hendrik’s ancestors, who in the “old days crisscrossed the desert with their flocks and their chat-

tels, heading from A to B or from X to Y" (1999: 20), Magda's narrative cannot head in this — preferable — direction; therefore, at the same time, she cannot build up a story — with "a beginning, a middle, and an end" (1999: 46). The linear and epic line is disrupted in Magda's tale, bringing about centerlessness and a "delinear temporality" of her narrative. Instead of a one-dimensional linear model, Coetzee's text offers a diffuse, dissolving, decomposing, dissociating narrative line, which spreads in several directions, undoing its relatibility and narrativity. It is precisely the free motion and play of dissemination that is at work here.

In the medium of a multi-dimensional dismantling "narrative" — Derrida argues — the myth of the simplicity of the origin gets lost; the origin and the center are veiled (1974: 109). Accordingly, I read Klein-Anna's skirt as a symbolic space within Coetzee's text, as a veil the uncovering movement of which disrupts and blows up the core and center of Magda's story — that of the clear-cut boundary between master and servant and of the taboo of sexual intercourse between them. The disclosing, the opening up of Klein-Anna's skirt causes/brings about the chaos of both the plot and of the tale's narrativity: "She lifts her knees to push him [Hendrik] off; her dress falls over her hips. 'No,' she pleads with him, and I hear it all, stopping suddenly in the schoolhouse doorway, catching first the high-lights on her thigh and his cheekbones, then, as my eyes adjust to the gloom inside, everything else — 'No, not here, she'll catch us!'" (Coetzee 1999: 83). Though this sexual scene takes place between Klein-Anna and Hendrik, I read the disclosing of her skirt as a symbolic exposure, pertaining to her adulterous relationship with Magda's father, her master. So far, as this symbolic veil functions according to its "role" — that is, it veils, it covers — order is retained: the clear-cut — and desirable — boundary and distance between master and slave are respected. Independently of who is "responsible" for this transgression — whether it be Master Johannus forcing the girl into adultery or the girl willing to enter this sexual play offered by the other — the removing of this symbolic cover violates a central taboo of Magda's fable, and by doing this it breaks down a significant pillar of the narrative and leaves it centerless.

The lack of center in this narrative could also be linked to (the presence of) desire in Magda's tale. Is it the abundance of desire that deprives this narrative of a center? Is it desire that disrupts the order(liness) of the narrative? Significantly, this (symbolic) veil hides/covers Klein-Anna's geni-

tals, the primal object of desire both for Magda's father and for Hendrik (and, perhaps, for Magda herself?). Equally importantly, in the same scene the male genital organs are laid bare: "Hendrik comes upright on his knees. He grins straight at me. From his middle juts out unhidden what must be his organ, but grotesquely larger than it should be, unless I am mistaken" (Coetzee 1999: 83). Signifying excessive desire, the presence of the genital organs sets off (blows up) this narrative. Significantly, this scene is watched over by Magda, and thus she comes to represent the gaze determining and creating desire.

In the dissemination of meaning, Derrida says, the subject itself is absent, not present, or if it is present it is split, dispersed, diffuse — disseminated (1974: 111). He speaks of the loss of self-presence, when the subject is always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance (1974: 111). In Coetzee's text, Magda complains about her presence as absence: "I have been a zero, a null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, a turbulence, muffled, gray [. . .]" (Coetzee 1999: 2). Describing the arrival of her father with the new bride and adding that she, in fact, was not watching, Magda asserts: "I was absent" (1999: 2). Besides its obvious meaning — that she was not there when they arrived, or was not watching their arrival — considering the whole text, I read this statement of hers as referring to her absence as a subject or active agent of her story. She continuously complains that she is merely words, "a torrent of sound streaming," "an emblem signifying something" (1999: 10). "I create myself in the words that create me" (1999: 8), she asserts. What "there is" of her is merely her voice; this is what assures the certainty (and possibility) of her being, and of her presence. One might read her as merely a metonymy — a trope, as the prolongation of her voice. She narrates/talks/weaves to prolong herself: "prolong yourself, prolong yourself, that is the whisper I hear in my inmost. [. . .] (weave, weave!)" (1999: 6). Accordingly, I offer two possible readings to the following passage: "[. . .] the truth is that I am equal to anything" (1999: 17). Beside meaning "to meet," "to match," "to cope with something," I understand Magda's statement as denoting and referring to her "existence" as trope, e.g. as a metonymy, as explained above. However, in her attempts to define herself, Magda seems to find herself at a loss. Unable to find metaphors for herself — and, thus, to build a story for herself — she seems to be stuck in barren, unproductive repetitive structures: "I am I," "My story is my story" (1999: 5,

59, 78); or as Klein-Anna also asserts: “Miss is the miss” (1999: 32). In her incapability to define and tell a story of herself, the subject as subject is deleted, absent, “scrubbed out”: “I (scrub-scrub-scrub)” (1999: 17).

Foucault argues against an original identity of/at the origin (1977: 142). The idea of the subject in Coetzee’s text is not linear either; there is no sense of a beginning, middle and end to it. As Magda herself asserts: “I am inexplicable” (Coetzee 1999: 6). Though Magda uses the metaphor “maze of words” to refer to herself (1999: 17), by which she builds up the image of a centreless labyrinth of herself, I read this trope, at the same time, as a central metaphor to the whole text, itself a centreless labyrinth.

I read *In the Heart of the Country* as a deconstructive/deconstructing text that consciously disrupts its narrative origin and the truth-value of its narratives, positing its origins as stratified, multi-dimensional, and therefore “unoriginal.” Coetzee’s text denies linearity and a temporal causality, rendering the text unstable and the truth-value of its narratives undecidable. Accordingly, the text comes to seem a centreless narrative in which Klein-Anna’s skirt functions as a symbolic veil, the uncovering of which sets desire free and, at the same time, initiates the narrative. As my preceding discussion has argued, Coetzee’s text posits its subject, its origins and its narratives as disseminating.

References

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