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Looking backward to the 'new South Africa' – J.M. Coetzee's exploration of the protocols of travel writing¹

Abstract

This paper discusses J.M. Coetzee's deconstruction of the discourse of travel writing in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee". It contends that the novella foregrounds this colonialist genre's ethnographic inscription of the contact between coloniser and colonised in order to expose its role in the implication of Africa in the European plot of history. The paper also argues that the novella reveals the manner in which this mediation of the colonial encounter by western language and narrative systems prospectively determined the course of South African history. In the process, it relates this work's understanding of history to the contemporary South African reader's times.

1. Introduction

Referring to early colonialist literature in general, Abdul JanMohamed (1985:65) makes the point that "[i]nstead of being an exploration of the racial Other, such literature merely affirms its own ethnocentric assumptions, instead of actually depicting the outer limits of 'civilization', it simply codifies and preserves the structures of its own mentality". In this paper I shall argue that J.M. Coetzee's novella "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee", which is presented as a travelogue from "the great age of exploration when the White man first made contact with the native peoples of *our* interior" (emphasis added, 1974:115), suggests as much

¹ This essay was originally presented at the EACLALS conference in Graz, Austria in May 1993. Parts of it later appeared in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Volume 28

about the ethnocentricity of early South African travel writing.² Being a profoundly metarepresentational work, it foregrounds those strategies by which Europeans represent to themselves their others. In making this point, I shall trace the novella's thematisation of the mediation of the contact between the European self and the African other by language and the narrative systems of western culture. I shall also, as is suggested by the title of this essay, analyse the part played by the text's shifting temporal perspective in relating the consequences of this mediation to the contemporary South African reader and his/her times.

2. Discovering Africa

When Jacobus Coetzee leaves 'civilisation' and ventures forth into the unsettled wilderness, he encounters a world of things, what he refers to as an "undifferentiated plenum" (108)³ without polity. This world, elsewhere referred to as consisting of "interspersed plena and vacua" (88), is depicted as a void, the antithesis of all human sign systems. In order to comprehend this chaos of raw African matter, Jacobus Coetzee transforms it into human constructs, a transformation described as follows: "In his way Coetzee rode like a god through a world only partly named, differentiating and bringing into existence" (124). The analogy here between colonisation and divine creation *ex nihilo* suggests that the Africa which Jacobus Coetzee encounters and explores in the course of his expedition has been invented rather than found; instead of exploring a new world, he creates a discursive world on the base of a natural one. Furthermore, the linguistic terms in which this analogy is couched imply that the natural African reality is contingent and can only be rendered accessible to European minds by being settled conceptually through language. It follows, then, that in his account of his travels, Jacobus Coetzee does not represent Africa as much as present it for the first time and constitute it in his European reader's mind as a verbal construct.

This act of linguistic and conceptual transformation forms the basis for an active scheme of mediation and settlement by additional, secondary systems of social ordering. It is the first step in a process of literal colonisation aimed at containing

2 "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" is the second of the two narratives which form *Dusklands*. Since they are presented separately, the reader is invited to treat these narratives as independent novellas. There are, however, numerous integrative links between them which suggest that they might be approached as episodes in the same story. No doubt, the generic ambivalence here is quite deliberate and could even point to a parallel between the disruption of the reader's expectations in relation to the literary text and the disruption of Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn's expectations in relation to the racial other. For the purposes of this paper, though, I shall regard "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" as a novella.

3 Page numbers refer to Coetzee, J.M. 1974. *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*. In: *Dusklands*. Johannesburg: Ravan.

the land and rendering its infinitude finite by reducing it to an assortment of computable acres:

We cannot count the wild. The wild is one because it is boundless. We can count fig-trees, we can count sheep because the orchard and the farm are bounded. The essence of orchard tree and farm sheep is number. Our commerce with the wild is a tireless enterprise of turning it into orchard and farm. When we cannot fence it and count it we reduce it to number by other means (85).

As this passage makes clear, the African landscape is perceived not in terms of its *dasein* but in terms of the human principles of profit and gain. At stake here, though, is not simply the conceptual settlement of African territory through language and its mediation by European categories of trade and social use but the extent to which such mediation implies a certain conception of time and history (see Franklin, 1978: 27-28, 82 and Pratt, 1992:61, 178). In being mediated, colonial space, which is unordered in the present of observation, is transformed and given a "prefigurative order" (Franklin, 1978:27), that is, it is codified in the terms of a Euroexpansionist, capitalist future. Thus it is clear in the examples cited above that for Jacobus Coetzee the future consummation of the colonial project and with it the victory of European order in Africa is always extant in the moment of observation: instead of seeing wilderness, he sees orchards and farms. Upon being "bound to the future" (85) in this way, the raw colonial matter, which is contingent and unapproachable on its own terms, becomes part of a larger pattern and process and accordingly gains significance. The colonial habit of perception evinced by Jacobus Coetzee thus narrativises Africa and implicates it in the European plot of colonial history.

Once narrativised in this fashion, Africa becomes a term in a plot which is highly deterministic because the syncopation of time which occurs with the conflation of present and future in the colonial mode of perception prospectively determines the course of history in predicating a fixed, teleological line of development. Because there can be no deviation from this narrative line, all possibility of change is eliminated and history becomes a relatively simple affair, an inexorably advancing narrative which seeks its own end, that is, its *telos* – the realisation of imperial intention in Africa. Any colonial material which challenges this comic ending to the colonial story is consequently elided from the narrative.

Nowhere in the novella does this conception of colonial history emerge more clearly than in Jacobus Coetzee's encounter with the Khoi. Describing himself as a "tool in the hands of history" (114), he makes it very clear that the Khoi threaten the European story in Africa with teleological disorientation and must

therefore be removed from it:⁴ "If the Hottentots comprise an immense world of delight, it is an impenetrable world, impenetrable to men like me, who must either skirt it, which is to evade our mission, or clear it out of the way" (113). So, in order to preserve the end-directedness of the European plot, Jacobus Coetzee resorts to prospective plotting, a process which culminates in the elision of corrosive material from the tale. The fixation with its own completion which the colonial plot manifests here, is foregrounded by the iterative structure of the novella. In the text, Jacobus Coetzee's travelogue is followed by an afterword in which S.J. Coetzee, an historian who is presented as a twentieth-century descendant of Jacobus Coetzee, repeats his ancestor's actions by effacing all rival views from his own account of Jacobus Coetzee's expedition: "The present work ... offers the evidence of history to correct certain of the anti-heroic distortions that have been creeping into our conception of the great age of exploration when the White man first made contact with the native peoples of our interior" (115). By eliminating "anti-heroic distortions" from his record, S.J. Coetzee protects the colonial plot from dissenting histories which challenge its centrality. Where his forebear, the frontiersman, engages in prospective plotting by mapping out future events, S.J. Coetzee, the historiographer, engages in "retrospective plotting" (Franklin, 1979:13) by ordering events that have already occurred. In both cases the ordering process aestheticises history by rejecting material which does not fall into the ideal pattern of European experience in Africa.

3. The imperial syntax

These exercises in retrospective and prospective plotting reduce the dialogic nature of history to a monologic story in which the subject of Empire acts upon and predicates docile colonial objects. The imperial syntax which underpins this story and which installs this binaric relation between the European self and the colonial other is laid bare in the novella by Jacobus Coetzee's following description of his allegorical journey:

I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it. Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see (84).

The image of the travelling, disembodied eye and the pun on "eye" and "I" here, suggest that the collocations of subjects, verbs and objects in the text are thematically significant, and that the plot is informed by an imperial syntax in which the subject of the narrative sentences is the explorer, the journey the verb,

⁴ What I refer to as "telcological disorientation", here, is closely related to Wayne Franklin's concept of "terminal disorientation" (1979:13).

and African matter the direct object (compare Franklin, 1979:122, 141). This imperial grammar is not only confined to the particular story of European reaction to African space which the novella recounts, but also informs a much larger process. After all, the story of Jacobus Coetzee clearly allegorises the entire colonial project by presenting an explorer-hero as embodiment of European order on a journey of discovery which instead of 'discovering' anything merely subsumes raw colonial matter into prior categories and so confirms and celebrates the ability of European cognitive structures to contain African events and objects. Since it contains the seed in which can be detected the outlines of the concluded story, the imperial syntax could be said to constitute the narrative formula which informs the entire colonial effort. If adhered to, this formula regulates colonial history by excluding mordant matter from its plot and by placing those events which it does subsume in an acceptable relation to others, thus making them part of a single, inclusive line of action which leads inexorably to the *telos* of European success in Africa.

J.M. Coetzee's point here seems to be that colonial representations of Africa and aestheticisations of history are dictated by this imperial grammar of narrative. The iterative structure of the novella, for example, shows that it is the basic formula to which both Jacobus and S.J. Coetzee reduce the infinite variety of Africa. At the same time, however, the novella's structure, in juxtaposing Jacobus Coetzee's document with that of S.J. Coetzee, foregrounds the historiographer's elision of the explorer's "sojourn" (71) with the Khoi from his account of the expedition. Upon closer examination, the reader is able to see that S.J. Coetzee's dismissal of this episode as an "historical irrelevance" (128) can be ascribed to the fact that it constitutes a momentary departure from the grammar which informs the rest of Jacobus Coetzee's narrative and that it introduces another aesthetic governed by an-other syntax. Indeed, the episode is distinguished by the suspension of the journey of conquest and by the subject's loss of control over the world of objects which it had hoped to order. Ignored by both the villagers and his servants, Jacobus Coetzee spends his time convalescing from illness in a hut reserved for menstruating women. This passive position inverts the highly active, heroic role he assumes in the various scenarios he imagines upon first meeting the Khoi:

... the order to follow, the inner debate (resist? submit?), underlings rolling their eyeballs, words of moderation, calm, swift march, the hidden defile, the encampment ... firm tones, Peace! Tobacco!, demonstration of firearms, murmurs of awe, gifts, the vengeful wizard, the feast, glut, nightfall, murder foiled, dawn, farewell, trundling wheels (70).

This scenario and the ones which follow it are easily recognisable as standard variations on the formulaic plot which characterises frontier writing (see Gardiner, 1987:181; Dovey, 1988:86-90; Haarhof, 1991:218-219), a plot in

which the imperial syntax clearly manifests itself. Jacobus Coetzee thus positions himself in relation to the Khoi according to expectations created by European colonial discourse. In this regard it is significant that the entire encounter between explorer and native is described in aesthetic rather than existential terms, a description which constructs a reflexive analogy between the colonial encounter and the literary encounter of reader and text: just as the reader's approach to the text is conditioned by the codes and conventions of the literary intertext, so too is the coloniser's encounter with the native conditioned by the corpus of colonial discourse. Given this mediation, no direct contact takes place when Jacobus Coetzee meets the Great Namaqua. Instead of the actual Khoi, he encounters the verbal construct constituted in his mind by colonial discourse, a construct which occludes them. It is therefore quite obvious that he expects his encounter with the Khoi to ritualistically re-enact the classic plot of European expansionism.

In marked contrast to this expectation, however, Jacobus Coetzee is reduced by this encounter to a figure of endurance rather than one of achievement, a process which starts when the Khoi do not adopt the position of submissive colonial objects. Rather than confirming the expectations contained in the various interactions he imagines, they act contrarily to them and therefore undermine them. Thus, when he addresses the Namaqua "as befitted negotiations with possibly unfriendly powers" (71), they merely become bored and drift "out of [his] firm but friendly line of vision" (71); when he anticipates an attack, he finds that they display "no organized antagonism" (74). Finally, the epic flight which he envisages in one of his scenarios, becomes an abject scramble in which he is debased to a caricature of the intrepid "tamer of the wild" (82) that he imagines himself to be: "Held in position by Klawer I evacuated myself heroically over the tailgate" (80).

This disjunction between the treatment he expects from the Khoi and that which he actually receives is a measure of the extent to which Jacobus Coetzee's encounter with the Khoi differs from the ideal plot of European success in Africa. Instead of confirming the heroic themes that it sets out to affirm, his journey threatens the colonial plot with teleological disorientation. Not surprisingly, then, S.J. Coetzee, despite the fact that Jacobus Coetzee's eventual annihilation of the Khoi village reasserts the imperial syntax and thus constitutes a return to the original design of European intentions in Africa, deems it necessary not only to exorcise this evidence of radical discontinuity in the coherent colonial plot, but to rewrite the record in such a way that it reproduces the imperial syntax:

On the fifth [day] he emerged upon a flat and grassy plain, the land of the Great Namaqua. He parleyed with their leaders, assuring them that his only intention was to hunt elephants and reminding them that he came under the protection of the Governor. Pacified by this intelligence they allowed him to pass (128-129).

Thus rewritten, this episode becomes syntactically identical to the formulaic plot which generates Jacobus Coetzee's expectations in his encounter with the Khoi. Once again, he occupies the subject position in the imperial sentence and is able to negate the actual Khoi by reducing them to his barbarous other. So, through the historian's intervention and artifice, that which did not match and promote the ideal plot in fact is made to do so in fiction.

4. An alterior syntax

Although the original pattern of the colonial narrative is reasserted following Jacobus Coetzee's encounter with the Khoi, this momentary lapse from its imperial syntax is enough to foreground a dissonance between the contingent space of the African wilderness and the imported schema of European order. For a moment, the resistance to reification of the Khoi transforms the plot of history from one that represents Africa as a realm of imperial success to one that speaks of an-other Africa which blocks artificial, European designs and which denaturalises the seemingly seamless connection between the verbal construct 'Africa' constituted by colonial discourse and its referent. The consequence of this frustration of European intention is the collapse of the European plot in Africa and the disintegration of the appearance of totality it produced. Once this is accomplished, that which has been misrepresented and repressed is discovered, namely the boundless world in which the Khoi live. Jacobus Coetzee describes this world of unconfined Dionysian flux as "an immense world of delight" (113) "without polity" (104).

Significantly, it is only after he fails to "find a place for them in [his] history" (103), that is, after he fails to comprehend them narratively by reducing them to the objects of the aggressive verbs in his imperial sentences, that Jacobus Coetzee is able to *see* and describe the Namaqua in this way. Since it is unmediated by the schemes of European order and by the subject-object cognition of the imperial syntax, this is his first contact with the actual Khoi. As a result, this discoverer now makes his first true discovery, namely, of a seemingly timeless realm completely antithetical to western conceptions of selfhood and history, a world which does not recognise and affirm those oppositions, such as that between subject and object, out of which history erects itself (see Coetzee, 1988:2-5). Thus Jacobus Coetzee comes to suspect that European man seeking his *telos* is an irrelevance to the Khoi: "To these people to whom life was nothing but a sequence of accidents had I not been simply another accident?" (104). The implication, here, is that the Khoi's resistance to his imperial endeavours is not premised on adopting an oppositional position, on reducing him to an object. Accordingly, they do not *see* him as an object and this, in turn, suggests that their structures of perception are informed by an alterior grammar, one entirely different from the imperial syntax. In this regard, J.M. Coetzee's description of a middle-voice practice which

situates itself between the active and the passive voice is interesting. He contends that middle-voice practice does not construct the sharp divisions "between subject and verb, verb and object, subject and object" (1992:95) that transitive and active voice syntax does. The importance of this difference is that the blurring of these divisions prevents the self from assuming the subject position necessary to predicate the other.

This distinction between a syntax based on a clearly differentiated subject and object and one based on their interconnectedness also emerges in the novella when Jacobus Coetzee, in an attempt to define himself against the Khoi, does so by singing the following ditty: "Hottentot, Hottentot, / I am not a Hottentot" (101). He tells his reader that he chooses Dutch as the medium for this exercise in self-affirmation because "It was neater in Dutch than in Nama, which still lived in the flowering-time of inflexion" (101).⁵ Since it erects divisions between subject, verb and object, the syntactical structure of the European language accommodates notions of cultural superiority and inferiority more readily than does the highly inflected structure of Nama.

If Jacobus Coetzee's encounter with a syntax and structure of perception appropriate to Africa, such as that of the Namaqua, were to culminate in his rejection of the imperial syntax, Africa would become a site of regeneration; instead of being filled with the recognisable forms of European understanding by the European mind, it would prompt a decolonisation of that mind, a restructuring of its cognitive character and so induce a new epistemology, a new way of seeing, understanding and imagining. Following his expulsion by the Khoi, it at first seems that Jacobus Coetzee will accept the rhetorical challenge of devising an alterior syntax appropriate to Africa by "set[ting] out down a new path [and] implicat[ing] [him]self in a new life ... the life of the white Bushman that had been hinting itself to [him]" (105). The very existence of his 'narrative', though, in presupposing his return to European society and reaffirmation of its social orders, indicates that the outcome of this challenge is a collapse of the historical imagination. Reduced to a "pallid symbol" (113) by the failure of his plot in Africa, Jacobus Coetzee does not dissolve into the wilderness in a final disintegration of the divisions between subject, verb and object. Instead, he recuperates his self narratively by devising possible endings for the plot of his journey of discovery. While this self-conscious attempt "to translate [his] self soberly across the told tale" (105) indicates that he is an author of sorts, it also shows that rather than being an *auctor*, in the sense of an originator who devises a new aesthetic and identity, he is an author in the demystified post-structuralist

⁵ David Attwell describes this passage as a "Whorfian moment" which "reflects the Manichacism of the colonial situation – Jacobus Coetzee is defining himself against the Other, but more successfully in his own, the colonial, language" (Coetzee, 1992:143).

sense, one whose choice is dictated by the closures of the form of narrative history.

5. Looking backward to the 'new South Africa'

The success of Jacobus Coetzee's endeavour to reinscribe his self in narrative is suggested by the fact that the third section of his travelogue constitutes a syntactical transformation of the previous section: it rewrites his encounter with the Namaqua according to the dictates of the imperial syntax. In so doing, it reconstitutes him as a subject and eliminates all "anti-heroic distortions" (115) from the account. Indeed, the following citation invites the reader to read the genocide of the Khoi tribe as an epic battle in which Jacobus Coetzee is the hero: "WE DESCEND on their camp at dawn, the hour recommended by the classic writers on warfare" (107). This reassertion of the imperial idiom, of course, means that rather than becoming a site of regeneration Africa remains a site of conquest and the critical historical juncture at which its unconfined and complex plural reality presents itself is relegated to a minor episode in the eventual success of European intention.

Jacobus Coetzee's failure of the imagination also constitutes an act of prospective plotting which strives to ensure the realisation in future history of the original design of the colonial plot. By rehabilitating the imperial syntax, he entrenches a single, inclusive, converging action which cuts through the centuries and leads to the present. The suggestion here that Jacobus Coetzee's actions may provide the narrative germ or blueprint for the twentieth-century South African reader's times and identity and that he, in a sense, 'authors' the reader, challenges the latter's ontological reality. In a metaleptic reversal, the reader is confronted with the thought that s/he may be a character in the narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, a product of his failed imagination.

The novella's temporal and genealogical structure contributes to this metaleptic effect. For the most part the text consists of a succession of documents purportedly written by members of the Coetzee family over a period of two centuries. The fact that these characters all share the same name does not simply signify a familial affinity, it also indicates that the corporate identity which Jacobus Coetzee restored by reinstating the colonial plot has remained stable and intact over the centuries. The name "Coetzee" thus comes to signify the white, European identity inscribed in colonial history. Indeed, Dorian Haarhof, in referring to the recurrence of this name in the text, contends that "[t]hese Coetzees constitute the family frontier lineage of white South Africa incorporating space and zone over three hundred years of colonisation" (1991:222). Significantly, in this regard, Jacobus Coetzee is referred to by S.J. Coetzee as "one of the founders of our people" (115). The question which the genealogical structure of the novella

poses for the white South African reader in the late twentieth century is therefore whether his/her identity forms part of the genealogical line established by Jacobus Coetzee, that is, whether s/he is a character inscribed in the plot of white conquest.

In a final metaleptic manoeuvre calculated to implicate the ever-shifting present of reading, J.M. Coetzee leaves the reader to assume that the date of the Translator's Preface which frames all the other documents is also the date of publication of the novella, that is, 1974. This period in South African history was distinguished by the rise of the Black Consciousness movement, a movement which, as Stephen Biko's following words show, was intensely aware of the extent to which discursive practices inform oppression:

... attention has to be paid to our history if we as blacks want to aid each other in our coming into consciousness. We have to rewrite our history and produce in it the heroes that formed the core of our resistance to the white invaders (1973:44-45).

The fact that this novella, which emphasises the importance of narrative continuity to the national plot, should ostensibly both originate and conclude in the early 1970's, a period during which a threat of discontinuity to that plot emerged, should be deemed significant. In intimating a departure from the ideal plot of colonial history, it suggests that this plot may be a truncated tale, a tale which, given its obsession with its own completion, is therefore ironic in form. Ultimately, however, the novella, in an ateleological gesture, leaves it to the reader to determine the outcome of this dislocation of the *telos* of the colonial plot. In so doing, it positions him/her as the author of history – his/her actions or lack thereof in the arena of history will decide whether this deviation from the original design of the European plot in Africa constitutes its ultimate perversion and collapse or whether it is simply another minor episode in the eventual success of white intention. With regard to the white South African reader, the novella thus places him/her in a position which is analogous to that of Jacobus Coetzee, that is, s/he is prompted into making a choice which will help determine the future course of history. If this parallel between Jacobus Coetzee and the white reader were to hold and s/he were to re-enact Jacobus Coetzee's failure of the imagination by rehabilitating the monologic plot of colonial history, s/he would answer the question posed by the novella's structure by becoming part of its genealogy. Like Jacobus and S.J. Coetzee, s/he would be an author (in the demystified sense) engaged in the preservation of the colonial plot. And since history plays a constitutive role in the text, this authoring of history, if successful, would provide an ending for the novella, an ending which would continue its iterative structure, its seemingly endless replication and therefore validation of the imperial syntax.

Another ending, however, is possible, one to which the course of the South African national narrative over the nineteen or so years since 1974 has tended. In a manner of speaking, then, the rest is history. Rather than being a momentary lapse in the teleological momentum of the white plot, the trends of the early seventies led to Africa's sustained obstruction of the apartheid State's unreal designs. So, for example, they were followed by the Soweto uprising of 1976-1978 which initiated a period of low intensity guerilla warfare in South Africa in the seventies and eighties. The State's response to this period of teleological disorientation was, of course, to attempt through physical and verbal exorcism to recuperate the *telos* of white history. Thus, in successive states of emergency, black political organisations were banned, their leaders detained, tortured and in many cases killed. A concerted effort was made to stifle black expression in general by banning the work of black writers, by restricting their publishers, by closing down newspapers directed at a black audience, and by silencing the media in general – restricting in particular their coverage of political unrest in the black townships. In effect, then, these material realities of apartheid point to a discursive intent, that is, to delete competing stories from the coherently single plot of the national narrative.

These other tales, however, have proved inerasable and, following the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the African National Congress and Pan-Africanist Congress in 1990, the potential for a vastly different national plot has become evident. In responding to the novella's ending from the perspective of 1993, one can therefore say that white history is indeed a truncated tale, for the present is clearly a time of interregnum in which the old plot is dying and a new one is struggling to be born. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the contours of an alternative tale can be detected, a failure of the imagination is still possible. After all, an interregnum is, by definition, an open period with numerous aesthetic possibilities. Confronted with a large, diverse and complex order in which competing views abound, it remains for the contemporary South African reader and his/her compatriots to originate an aesthetic which represents the multiplicity of centres in southern African experience instead of replicating yet another exclusionary scheme of cultural dominance. In other words, a truly different nationhood and identity have yet to be imagined. And that is another journey, a difficult one along which *altera* Africa still awaits discovery.

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