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RE-TERRITORIALISING SOUTH AFRICA. POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN *THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG* BY J.M. COETZEE

One of the most important terms in the critical lexicon of John Maxwell Coetzee is allegory. As defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, allegory is a “description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance”.¹ The entry further reads: “an instance of such description, a figurative sentence, discourse, or narrative, in which properties and circumstances attributed to the apparent subject really refer to the subject they are meant to suggest; an extended or continued metaphor”.² The literal vs. symbolic controversy has surely dominated the critical discourse concerning J.M. Coetzee’s oeuvre and ranges from acknowledgement of allegory as a principal mode of reading (most notably the works of Dominic Head³ and Teresa Dovey⁴) to refusal of treatment of textual elements as metaphors or symbols of other, grander entities or ideas as exemplified by critical studies of Derek Attridge.⁵ When analysing the works, both fiction and non-fiction, of J.M. Coetzee, one inevitably encounters arguments that offer support to both positions taken by the critics. Though in an interview with David Attwell Coetzee refuses either to endorse or reject allegorical reading of his works,⁶ throughout his career he has been formulating opinions on the nature

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, Vol. 1, A – Bazouki, prepared by J.A. Simpson & E.S.C. Weiner, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 333.

² *Ibidem*.

³ D. Head, *J.M. Coetzee*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁴ T. Dovey, *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, Johannesburg: Ad. Dinker, 1988.

⁵ One of the chapters in D. Attridge’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* is entitled “Against Allegory” and refers to S. Sontag’s 1964 essay “Against Interpretation” which famously speaks against attempts to ascribe a set of meanings to works of art [in:] D. Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading, Literature in the Event*, Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2005, pp. 32–64.

⁶ D. Attwell (ed.), *J.M. Coetzee. Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1999, p. 204.

of his writing which cause conundrum among his readers and are bound to leave any researcher puzzled as far as an interplay of symbolic and literal orders in his oeuvre is concerned.

An inquiry into an anti-allegorical move provides a student of Coetzee's fiction with enough data to speak of Coetzee's reluctance to acknowledge his novels as being something else than what they are, saying or meaning more than their most literal reading allows. As early as in 1988, in his seminal essay "The Novel Today," Coetzee wrote:

No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any other game in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. Because (I parody the position somewhat) a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering.⁷

Coetzee's insistence on literal instead of symbolic is especially visible in his approach to body, the suffering body in particular (the broken feet of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, mutilated Friday in *Foe*, crippled Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*). In another of his interviews with David Attwell, J. M. Coetzee stated:

And let me 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.⁸

Coetzee has always been preoccupied, obsessed even, with corporeality, his pages being populated by images of the body and its detailed descriptions. What, however, remains of utmost importance, is, to use Coetzee's term, authority of the body; in other words, the body *is* the meaning and any attempt at charging it with extra significations or interpreting it as something else is an act of violation of that authority. In Coetzee's fiction the relation with the Other overflows the comprehension because it is not the relation with one's beliefs, religion, gender, nation and ethnic origin etc., but the relation with the Other's body. Body is all inclusive. It encapsulates somebody we "see, hear, touch and violate; hungering, thirsting, enjoying, suffering, working, loving, murdering human being in all its corporeality".⁹ Moreover, Coetzee, apparently following the ideas of Martin Buber¹⁰, inscribes the animals into the category of the Other as well. Both in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, the South African writer claims that although we do not share a language with the animals, we can connect with them at a certain level of consciousness. Just as we should recognise and respect the Other on the ground of his/her having a suffering body, likewise we should recognise animals'

⁷ J.M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today", *Upstream* 6 (1988), p. 4.

⁸ D. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee. Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, op. cit., p. 248.

⁹ S. Critchley, R. Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 71.

¹⁰ In his seminal work *I and Thou* Martin Buber claims that though the relation of I-Thou is different from the relation I-It, it can be ultimately replaced by He/She [in:] W. Herberg (ed.), *The Writings of Martin Buber*, New York: A Meridian Book, New American Library, 1950, p. 43.

“fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being (...), of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world”.¹¹ *Elizabeth Costello* is, in particular, an overt manifestation of Coetzee’s move against meanings, against interpretation, against symbols and allegories. In the conclusive chapter “At the Gate” Elizabeth Costello is asked to share a confession, a statement of belief with a gate-keeper. What she produces is an account of her childhood and frogs. Immediately, however, she insists on reading her story in a literal manner. “In my account,” she claims, “(...) the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing”.¹² And she adds: “I believe in what does not bother to believe in me”.¹³ The culmination of this anti-allegorical move is reached in the post-script to the novel, an imagined letter of Elizabeth Chandos to Francis Bacon. “All is allegory, says my Philip”, Elizabeth Chandos declares. “Each creature is key to all other creatures. A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation”.¹⁴ But Chandos’s missive is written to subvert and contradict the arguments of her husband. Being another fictional mouthpiece of Coetzee’s reasoning, she develops her own point: “How I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how? *We are not made for revelation*, I want to cry out, *nor I nor you, my Philip*, revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun”.¹⁵ What Elizabeth Chandos appears to speak is that nothing is allegory. Each creature writes out of their “separate fates”.¹⁶ A dog is a dog, not a vessel of meanings. “I don’t speak in parables”¹⁷, Fyodor Dostoevsky declares in *The Master of Petersburg* when accused by the revolutionary leader Nechaev of writing “perverse make-believe”¹⁸ – the statement which appears to be in total concord with Coetzee’s own beliefs.

So far I have briefly discussed the anti-allegorical components of Coetzee’s oeuvre. But as it has already been stated, a vision of the desirable mode of reading is, in a manner similar to Coetzee’s take on life-writing principles, governed by paradox and certain degree of inconsistency. Despite their insistence on literal reading, Coetzee’s works open themselves up to a number of interpretative procedures that scholars all over the world have been diligently embarking on over the last thirty years, following a release of what is believed Coetzee’s first fully-developed allegorical work¹⁹, namely *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980, which was seen as performing a double move of engaging with and simultaneously distancing from a social, political and historical context of South Africa. The sub-

¹¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, London: Secker & Warburg, 2003, p. 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, London: Vintage, 1999, p. 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁹ D. Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 48.

sequent works by Coetzee provided the critics with more evidence of Coetzee's literary tendencies. Perhaps one of the most important statements ever expressed by Coetzee's character in all of his fiction and the one that clearly determined the future processes of allegorising Coetzee is the opinion of the doctor in *Life and Times of Michael K*; a statement which refers to Michael but which can be extended to most of the marginalised figures populating the pages of his novels. "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" – the doctor states and, subsequently, adds – "Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michael, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to I that is merely a road, and only you know the way".²⁰ Other constitutive elements of Coetzee's fiction also played an important role in the critics ascribing allegorical interpretation to them – enigmatic and often anonymous protagonists (e.g. the barbarian girl in *Waiting for Barbarians*, Michael in *Life and Times of Michael K*, Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*), unspecified location (out of all of Coetzee's major novels only *Age of Iron* and, in particular, *Disgrace* are locatable in specific time and place, Cape Town and the Eastern Province of the mid 1980s and the late 1990s respectively²¹), rejection of a realist mode of representation, and an a-historical character of the narratives. It needs to be mentioned that this position of distancing oneself from a given socio-political context and, hence, allegorising one's work, has frequently been the object of serious attacks from Coetzee's fellow-writers and critics.²² In her review of *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer expressed the view that although Coetzee had written a marvellous work that left nothing unsaid about the suffering of human beings in South Africa, "he does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves".²³ It is the silent withdrawal of Coetzee's characters from participation in the discourse and swerving from an ethno-national or racial grounding – in particular by the refusal to participate in constituting an African and black subjectivity²⁴ – that a number of Coetzee's readers find intolerable. I believe that this mood among both critics and

²⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1983, p. 228.

²¹ I exclude from the group the representation of early eighteenth-century London in *Foe* and nineteenth-century St. Petersburg in *The Master of Petersburg* whose historicity, despite their local and temporal specificity, is questioned by other elements of the narratives, most importantly factual inaccuracy.

²² Though considered a general view, it was not shared by everyone. In 1984 Njabulo S. Ndebele famously called for writers to be 'storytellers, not just casemakers' [in:] N.S. Ndebele, "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction", *Staffrider*, 6, 1 (1984), p. 48.

²³ N. Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening" [in:] *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, S. Kossew (ed.), New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1998, p. 142.

²⁴ K.L. Korang, "An Allegory of Re-Reading: Post-colonialism, Resistance, and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*" [in:] S. Kossew, op. cit., p. 152.

readers was perhaps best captured by Michael Chapman's dismissive commentary on *Foe* in his review of Teresa Dovey's study of Coetzee's works in which he stated: "In our knowledge of the human suffering on our own doorstep of thousands of detainees who are denied recourse to the rule of law, *Foe* does not so much speak to Africa as to provide a kind of masturbatory release, in this country, for the Europeanising dreams of an intellectual coterie".²⁵ But the supporters and admirers of Coetzee's fiction suggested that there is some serious misunderstanding on the part of Gordimer and her acolytes. Tracing Coetzee's literary ancestry to Kafka and Beckett²⁶, they claimed that it is precisely through allegory, rejection of realist representation of Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, Breyten Breytenbach Alex la Guma or, to some extent, André Brink that he speaks of South Africa of his times.²⁷ Graham Pechey says of this phenomenon in the following way: "the more his work engages the Western literary canon of the past, the more it globalises, without dilution, the particular situation from which it speaks"²⁸; and he adds: "reading him, the world becomes for us, politically and culturally – and not just geographically – a sphere, a surface upon which any point is a centre".²⁹ This reading of Coetzee's works was finally and officially acknowledged by the Nobel Prize Committee which, when awarding Coetzee with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003, in an official verdict spoke of the South African writer as the one "who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider".³⁰ In a manner crucial for Coetzee's critical reception, the term used by the Committee was "guise" (also the key word in the definition of allegory as exemplified by the quoted entry from *The Oxford English Dictionary*) which is easily substituted by other synonymous expressions such as "figure" or "representation". It seems, then, that what Coetzee was partly awarded for is the allegorical character of his works.

However, Coetzee himself is also partly responsible for stimulating and encouraging non-literal reading of his works, not only by creating an impulse for such a strategy in his novels³¹, but also by means of pursuing the subject in his theoretical studies. In "The Novel Today", the already quoted essay by Coetzee and

²⁵ M. Chapman, "The Writing of Politics and the Politics of Writing: On Reading Dovey on Reading Lacan on Reading Coetzee on Reading...(?)", *Journal of Literary Studies* 4 (1988), p. 335.

²⁶ S. Van Zanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa. J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991, pp. 45 and 221.

²⁷ David Attwell uses the term "regional writer" to refer to J.M. Coetzee [in:] D. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1993, p. 25.

²⁸ G. Pechey, "The post-apartheid sublime rediscovering the extraordinary" [in:] D. Attridge & R. Jolly (eds.), *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy. 1970–1995*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 66–67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁰ The verdict of Committee of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003. Available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/#. Last accessed on October 5, 2010 at 11.14 a.m.

³¹ Apart from the already quoted passage in *Life and Times of Michael K.*, one should also note other instances of pro-allegorical gestures, just to mention *In the Heart of the Country* ("We have retired to sleep, to dream allegories of baulked desire such as we are blessedly unfitted to interpret"; "If I am and emblem then I am an emblem" [in:] J.M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country*, London:

one of the most powerful discussions of the novelistic practice, Coetzee writes of two modes in which history can be approached, one governed by the principle of “supplementation,” while the other by “rivalry”.³² Coetzee speaks against history from the novelist’s point of view. He argues against “the appropriating appetite of the discourse of history”³³ and “the colonisation of the novel”³⁴ by the former. What Coetzee identifies to be a governing rule concerning the novel and history in South Africa in the 1980s is “a tendency, a powerful tendency, perhaps even a dominant tendency, to subsume the novel under history”.³⁵ He clearly recognises two modes of writing, two responses to the colonising claims of history. On the one hand the novel can “supplement” history which he understands as “depending on the model of history” for “its principal structuration”.³⁶ This would result in realist novels practiced by most of his fellow South African writers. But Coetzee sees a way how to escape history and he identifies a solution to that in “rivalling” it, which he understands as “occupy[ing] an autonomous place (...), operate[ing] in terms of its own procedures and issues”.³⁷ Needless to say, Coetzee believes himself to be practicing the latter of the modes. However, what I find of utmost importance in Coetzee’s theoretical musings on the nature of writing in South Africa is that both “supplementation” and “rivalry” cannot escape the common point of reference, which is constituted by historical situatedness in a given time and place. Though assuming different forms, they both enter into a debate with a specific hypotext. It seems justifiable to claim that “allegorising” South Africa is one of the methods in which history is “rivalled” (one could wonder if the two could not be used synonymously in reference to Coetzee’s writing) and not simply “supplemented,” since it is in the very nature of allegory that it operates with “its own procedures and issues”.³⁸

What the present paper wishes to discuss is one of Coetzee’s articulation of the before mentioned “rivalry.” What I am interested in is a possibility of reading *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee’s 1994 novel which offers a fictional account of two months of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s life, as an allegorical work and, as such, addressing, in the guise, the issue of South Africa in line with Dominic Head’s statement that while Coetzee indeed “has betrayed a dynamic of resistance that challenges the dominance of the political over the literary”; his work also “acknowledges the power of contemporary politics to delimit any fictional power”.³⁹ In my reading I will also follow a contention of Edward Said who in the opening pages of *The World, the Text, and the Critic* stated that

Vintage, 1999, p. 3 and p. 10), and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (“form and allegory” [in:] J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1980, p. 112).

³² J.M. Coetzee, “The Novel Today”, op. cit., p. 2.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 2–4.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ D. Head, “A belief in Eros. J. M. Coetzee’s Enduring Faith in Fiction” [in:] J. Poyner (ed.), *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006, p. 100.

texts are worldly, to some degrees they are events, and, even when they appears to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.⁴⁰

Susan Gallagher directed my attention to the fact that the Dutch word ‘apartheid’ (meaning apartness, separateness) has never been translated into any other language.⁴¹ This fact has also been commented on by Jacques Derrida in his essay “Racism’s Last Word”. Derrida states:

no tongue has ever translated this name – as if all the languages of the world were defending themselves, shutting their mouths against a sinister incorporation of the thing by means of word, as if all tongues were refusing to give equivalent through the contagious hospitality of word-for-word.⁴²

As the language of extreme violence and evil cannot be translated into any other language, likewise, the language of suffering and unbearable anguish cannot be uttered in language other than its own. Following Benita Parry’s meditations on the subject, one could further add that although it is the language of silence, it nevertheless “shouts as if there were a thousand people screaming together”.⁴³ However, what can be identified in Coetzee’s literary oeuvre is precisely an act of translation of South Africa and, consequently, apartheid into an often nameless, timeless, spaceless and, above all, universal narrative. Bernard Levin in his 1980 review of *Waiting for the Barbarians* approached the issue of untranslatability of South Africa from the different point of view, claiming that it is the nature of the apartheid-governed society, its isolation and oppression that make it unable for the people of South Africa to “address themselves to themes of any wider significance than those represented by the tragic dilemma of their country”.⁴⁴ Unlike Derrida, he considered the writers’ focalisation on South Africa to be a serious constraint. According to Levin the works of Coetzee find the way out of the impasse since their author “sees the heart of darkness in all societies, and gradually it becomes clear that he is not dealing in politics at all, but inquiring into the nature of the beast that lurks within each of us, and needs no collective stimulus to turn and rend us”.⁴⁵

I believe that Coetzee’s fiction could serve as an exemplification of how the two conflicting orders and demands could be reconciled. I consider his writing to be performing a double move – on the one hand a gesture of escape and refusal to address the South African context in a realist mode (hence an allegorical mode resulting in Levin’s universal properties being ascribed to Coetzee’s works), and, simultaneously, a move of engagement and concern with South Africa achieved

⁴⁰ E. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 4.

⁴¹ S. Van Zanten Gallagher, op. cit., p. 1.

⁴² J. Derrida, “Racism’s Last Word”, *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985), p. 292.

⁴³ B. Parry, “Speech and Silence in J.M. Coetzee” [in:] G. Huggon, S. Watson (eds.), *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, p. 44.

⁴⁴ B. Levin, “On the Edge of the Empire,” *Sunday Times*, November 23 (1980), p. 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

by means of intricate set of “translation” procedures. It is the latter that remains of utmost importance and interest to the present discussion.

The Master of Petersburg begins in October 1869 when Dostoevsky (under the name of Isaev) arrives in Saint Petersburg from Germany following a telegram which announced the death of his stepson Pavel Isaev. The circumstances of Pavel’s demise are not clear and not even once does the novel provide its readers with a conclusive answer as to its nature and causes – the act being considered an accident, a suicide, a murder committed by Pavel’s revolutionary comrades and, ultimately, the police crime against a person associated with the anti-Tsarist movement. Dostoevsky moves in to Pavel’s former lodgings also occupied by Anna Sergeyevna Kolenkina, his son’s landlady, and her daughter Matryona. The former soon becomes Dostoevsky’s lover, while the latter an object of fascination, also of sexual nature. Twenty chapters of the novel trace Dostoevsky’s days (October and November 1869) in Saint Petersburg as he is preoccupied with constant and obsessive thoughts of Pavel as well as with activities, primarily meetings with Councillor Maximov, an officer of Tsarist police who investigates the death of Pavel and, subsequently, Sergei Nechaev, a revolutionary leader suspected of being Pavel’s murderer. Trying to come to terms with the loss, Dostoevsky involuntarily becomes entangled in the political debate of his times against nihilists and the Tsarist state. The novel ends with Dostoevsky embarking on a process of writing his masterpiece, namely *Devils*.⁴⁶ Despite its promises, *The Master of Petersburg* can by no means be read as a biographical novel about Fyodor Dostoevsky and 19th century Russia – such an act of reading is in fact blocked by anti-historical (in October and November 1869 Dostoevsky lived in Dresden) and a-factual (Dostoevsky’s stepson Pasha survived his father) move of the narrative. Consequently, a question that any researcher of this “perversion of the truth...”⁴⁷ inevitably needs to pose is what the novel, if not Dostoevsky and Tsarist Russia, is really about?

To a perceptive reader of Coetzee’s works, who is further acquainted with the writer’s precision of style and language, the title of the novel could already be read as a first trace of the novel’s not only anti-realist and allegorical properties, but its South African component as well, of its position of “being in the world but not of the world”⁴⁸. Patrick McGrath in *The New York Times Book Review* wrote immediately on the novels’ release of its being emblematic not only of a general, but of a specific form of tyranny as well: “The relevance of this political allegory to apartheid era South Africa, and the increasingly vicious response of a doomed regime to what it perceives as the enemy at its gates, is clear at once”.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Also translated in English as *The Possessed and Demons*.

⁴⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, op. cit., p. 236.

⁴⁸ M. Marais, “Death and the Space of the Response to the Other in J.M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg*” [in:] J. Poyner, op. cit., p. 94.

⁴⁹ P. McGrath, “To be Conscious is to Suffer”, *The New York Times Book Review*, November 20, 1994, p. 9.

The first element that should draw the attention of any Coetzee's scholar⁵⁰ is the lack of the word "Saint" before Petersburg⁵¹ as in English the name of the Russia city always consists of the two elements. A quick inquiry into world geography reveals that the city of Pietersburg is a major urban settlement in the Northern Transvaal.⁵² Is it possible that the locale of Coetzee's novel is in fact a South African city of the Northern Transvaal? Pietersburg, in a manner similar to Saint Petersburg is both a border city (Northern Transvaal having borders with Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Botswana) and the biggest South African city reaching into the heart of the continent. Moreover, its white (minority) and black (majority) society was particularly divided during the years of apartheid and was one of the first to stand against and overthrow the apartheid government. Still, differences between the two cities seems to outnumber the possible similarities. Pietersburg up to 2000⁵³ was a provincial and conservative town and if one is to look for an equivalent of Saint Petersburg in South Africa, an obvious choice would be Cape Town, the most European of all South African urban centres and Coetzee's hometown for many years. Surely I do not wish to read Coetzee's Petersburg as a direct guise of the Northern Transvaal city, which, nevertheless, he must have been familiar with. Yet, I certainly see Coetzee's misnaming of Saint Petersburg as a deliberate move which is to emphasise an a-historical character of his novel and, possibly, accentuate certain South African reference that *The Master of Petersburg* contains.

There are further echoes of South Africa and its history in the novel that I would like to elaborate on. *The Master of Petersburg* is a book about revolutionaries and revolution itself. Every character of the novel (with the sole exception of Dostoevsky who constantly refuses to identify himself with either revolutionaries led by Nechaev or people of the system, despite constant expectation to do so on both parts) belongs to one of the opposing orders. Towards the end of the novel even the child Matryona reveals herself to be an ally and associate of Nechaev and his comrades (she does not only provide a hiding place for Nechaevists but gives a bottle of poison to the Finn girl, Nechaev's associate, when the latter is caught by the Tsarist police). *The Master of Petersburg* was published in 1994, the year of the first multiracial elections in South Africa. Hence, the years of writing the novel witnessed the final demise of apartheid – the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and unbanning of the National African Congress which ultimately did win the 1994 election and put an end to the age of apartheid. What Coetzee

⁵⁰ The issue was problematised in early reviews of *The Master of Petersburg*, e.g. B. Beynen, "The Master of Petersburg – review", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 39 (1995), pp. 447–448.

⁵¹ However, the first sentence of the novel announces: "October, 1869. A doroshky passes slowly down a street in the Haymarket district of S. Petersburg" (J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, op. cit., p. 1), hence, further problematising the issue of the narrative's diegesis.

⁵² The city's name is spelt "Pietersburg" in Afrikaans but pronounceable like "Petersburg" in English. In 2005, following the government's declaration on the change of the city names, Pietersburg was changed to Polokwane which is a Northern Sotho word meaning "a place of safety".

⁵³ The city enjoyed a considerable growth following its selection as one of the host cities of the 2010 FIFA World Cup with a population exceeding 500 000 people. Information on the city available at <http://www.polokwane.org.za/>. Last accessed on October 7, 2010 at 2.19 p.m.

observed in the early 1990s was the South African revolution which shattered the existing order and introduced new laws and regulations and, as Dominic Head observes, “the prospect of being ruled by a party headed (for obvious reasons) by revolutionary leaders”.⁵⁴ It appears more than justifiable to read the world of Saint Petersburg in 1869 as an allegory of South Africa of the first years of the 1990s – especially that incidents and constitutive elements of the novel’s diegesis are hardly attributable to the realities of Tsarist Russia. I have already mentioned a specific type of polarisation of the society of Saint Petersburg which characterises the protagonists of Coetzee’s novel, an entirely inaccurate move as far as social history is concerned. The second half of the 19th century saw, indeed, the emergence of new revolutionary systems (Marxism being the most important one), but social awareness, not to mention people’s involvement into a new ideological system, was not an experience to be shared by the majority, let alone the whole of society. However, undoubtedly, the experience of belonging to either of the two existing categories (white vs. black), a principle of being unshakeably equipped with characteristics which define one’s status of insider/outsider, were to be shared by each and every individual in apartheid-governed South Africa. Ron Nixon’s study entitled *Homelands* is particularly instructive on the nature of this social polarisation in South Africa which he acknowledges as “the Manichean clarity (...) a showdown between good and evil, victims and villains, black and white, oppressed and oppressors, the masses and a racist minority”.⁵⁵ Pro- and anti-revolutionary tendencies that are inherently inscribed into the protagonists of *The Master of Petersburg* are, in my opinion, representations of pro- and anti-apartheid attitudes that no South African could escape from. This inevitable polarisation and ideological positioning of every individual born in South Africa was addressed by Coetzee in his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”:

Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with (can the leopard change its spots?), you cannot resign from the caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform symbolic resignation, but, short of shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually *doing* it.⁵⁶

But the inaccuracies of *The Master of Petersburg* are not only of social, but, above all, of historical character. In Coetzee’s novel the readers accompany Dostoevsky who does not only witness the final days before the outbreak of revolution, but the revolution itself. Chapter nineteen entitled “The fires” sees the beginning of the revolt as Anna Sergeyevna arrives at home to share with Dostoevsky the following news:

“We had to close the shop”, she says. “There have been battles going on all day between students and the police. In the Petrogradskaya district mainly, but on this side of the river too. All the business have closed – it’s too dangerous to be out on the streets. Yakovlev’s nephew was coming back from market in the cart and someone threw a cobblestone at him,

⁵⁴ D. Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee*, op. cit., p. 72.

⁵⁵ R. Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond*, London 1994, p. 204.

⁵⁶ J.M. Coetzee, “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech” [in:] D. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee. Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, op. cit., p. 96.

for no reason at all. It hit him on the wrist; he is in great pain, he can't move his fingers, he thinks a bone is broken. He says the working-men have begun to join in. And the students are setting fires again".⁵⁷

When Dostoevsky leaves the apartment, he learns of "widespread indiscipline among the student body"⁵⁸ and the closing of the university. Importantly, he does not discover any news in the newspapers – an evident expression of state censorship. But the revolution cannot be hidden from the society at large. "All the bridges are barred; gendarmes in sky-blue uniforms and plumed helmets stand on guard with fixed bayonets. On the far bank fires glow against the twilight".⁵⁹ At night, when Dostoevsky wakes up, the revolution is in full swing as "flames leap into the night sky less than a mile away. The fire across the river rages so hugely that he can swear he feels its heat".⁶⁰ It takes no expertise in Russian history to know that such a revolt did not take place in late 1869. The citizens of Saint Petersburg had to wait another thirty six years for the first mass social and political unrest to arrive in Russia. I would claim that if there was anyone who could feel the heat of revolt, it was J. M. Coetzee as he observed the dismantling of apartheid in the early 1990s (dismantling which included an armed struggle, often involving Afrikaner and English speaking youth).

The Master of Petersburg also shows a number of mechanism to be in operation in the Russian state which any researcher would find impossible to contextualise in the historical period of the 1860s. Oppression and suffering compose the tissue of Russia as portrayed by Coetzee, "a place where you get beaten".⁶¹ In a conversation with Matryona Dostoevsky draws a metaphor in which the people of Russia are represented as horses:

"A horse does not understand that it has been born into the world to pull carts. It thinks it is here to be beaten. It thinks of a cart as a huge object it is tied to so that it cannot run away while it is being beaten." (...) He knows she rejects with all her soul the vision of the world he is offering. She wants to believe in goodness. But her belief is tentative, without resilience. (...) This is Russia! He wants to say, forcing the words upon her, rubbing her face in them. In Russia you cannot afford to be a delicate flower. In Russia you must be a burdock or a dandelion.⁶²

Saint Petersburg, a city of starving children and mothers selling themselves on the street, "the poorest of our black poor of Petersburg"⁶³, is, according to Coetzee, a place of a totalitarian regime which wishes to take control over every aspects of its people's daily activities. As confirmed by research⁶⁴, pre-revolutionary

⁵⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, op. cit., p. 229.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 72.

⁶² Ibid., p. 73.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 180.

⁶⁴ I find B. Beynen's comments on the political realities of 1860s Russia as well as Nancy L. Clark study of apartheid to be most useful in formulating my claims concerning *The Master of Petersburg*. See B. Beynen, "The Master of Petersburg – review", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 39 (1995), pp. 447–448 and N.L. Clark, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, London: Longman, 2004.

Russian police and the Tsarist state in general cannot be seen as using the instruments that were to be later associated with oppressive systems of the 20th century. In *The Master of Petersburg* one constantly remains under the watchful surveillance of the state, both officially (Dostoevsky is to report to the police station every day following his meeting with Nechaev and not to leave Russia unless permitted) and unofficially (Dostoevsky being spied on by Ivanov). However, the most striking (and telling) historical inaccuracy is the idea put forward by Nechaev, namely that Pavel's death was a political murder committed by the state and staged to suggest an act of suicide. This method was by no means used by pre-revolutionary Russia; however, the historical sources are rich in providing accounts of "dozens of anti-Apartheid activists [who] died in police custody when they jumped, supposedly, to their death from windows or stairs".⁶⁵ The process that Coetzee appears to execute is transplantation of the mechanisms of a totalitarian state into the fictional reality of 1860s Russia. But the mechanisms in question are not the only link with the oppressive society of South Africa. Ideological tenets of Nechaevism bear striking resemblance to Marxist postulates; more so, in Coetzee's take on the story of Nechaev, nihilism, which was the governing principle of Nechaev's manifesto, almost entirely disappears to offer space to Marxist ideology. Nechaev's vision of revolution is as follows:

Once the spiders and their webs are destroyed, children like these will be freed. All over Russia children will be able to emerge from their cellars. There will be food and clothes and housing, proper housing, for everyone. And there will be work to do – so much work! The first will be to raze the banks to the ground, and the stock exchanges, and the government ministries, raze them so thoroughly that they will never be rebuilt.⁶⁶

This fact brings one back to the story of South Africa since Marxism was indeed highly relevant to anti-apartheid activists of the period who considered the categories of class and race to be entirely interchangeable, two axes of significance. The race conflict was believed to be on a par with the class struggle. For example, the African National Congress, the major revolutionary force of South Africa, has always been a left-wing organisation; moreover, it has always operated in an alliance with the South African Communist Party. I do not wish to claim that the revolutionaries of *The Master of Petersburg* should be read as "a salute to the fighting members"⁶⁷ of the ANC or the South African Communist Party.⁶⁸ However, I do intend to emphasise the fact that not only the diegetic and

⁶⁵ B. Beynen, op. cit., p. 448.

⁶⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, op. cit., pp. 181–182.

⁶⁷ D. Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, op. cit., p. 119.

⁶⁸ Attention should be paid to the paradoxical double application of communist ideology to the South African context. On the one hand, the anti-apartheid movement was clearly characterised by Marxist beliefs; on the other hand, apartheid was long identified with Eastern European communism, especially as far as its respectable, morally robust and liberal oppositional literature was concerned (e.g. J.M. Coetzee's interest in Russian and Polish writers of the period, Joseph Brodsky and Zbigniew Herbert in particular), [in:] J.M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores. Literary Essays 1986–1999*, London: Penguin Books, 2001, pp. 16, 127–138.

pragmatic character of *The Master of Petersburg*, but the “relevance” (to use the term of André Viola⁶⁹) of the story are attributable to the South African reality.

There are also other elements of the narrative, “transcendings”⁷⁰ as Clive Barnett calls them, that could possibly guide the readers of Coetzee from one context to another. Nechaev’s insistence on Dostoevsky writing a statement so that it could be printed by the revolutionaries and distributed (“«The source of every writer’s power», says Nechaev, giving the machine a slap. «Your statement will be distributed to the cells tonight and on the streets tomorrow. Or, if you prefer, we can hold it up till you are across the border. If ever you are taxed with it, you can say it was a forgery. It won’t matter by then – it will have had its effect»”⁷¹) echoes both expectations and practice of a number of writers in the oppressive societies (as well as all parties of the system, including the oppressor and the oppressed) to engage their writing into the dismantling or maintaining the system. I read Nechaev’s demands on Dostoevsky to be the claims on Coetzee that were repeatedly made by those who found his refusal to address the South African conflict and openly oppose the apartheid government intolerable. I have no doubts that an implication of a writer into politics which *The Master of Petersburg* exemplifies is an ostensible reference to Coetzee’s own context. Moreover, Nechaev’s temptation of Dostoevsky (especially in the chapters entitled “The cellar” and “The printing press”), a perverse relationship between the two men, bears an uncanny resemblance to a story of a South African poet Breyten Breytenbach and his oppressor, the lead investigator for the domestic security police, Kalfie Broodryk.⁷² Lawrence Weschler in his study *Calamities of Exile* recounts the relationship between the two men (Broodryk enjoyed a perverse play with the poet – taking him out of his cell, arranging random meetings, taking him into his own house, yet not allowing Breytenbach to meet his wife Yolande) describing it as a “strange dance” and a “frightening symbiosis”.⁷³ The perverted and deviant nature of the relationship between the men is best exemplified by the fact that Breytenbach dedicated a book of poems written in prison to his oppressor. When Breytenbach was convicted for sabotage, Broodryk started crying, Weschler reports elsewhere.⁷⁴ A similar claim on translation of one context into another could be formulated in respect to the confessional mode which, to a great extent, dominates the narrative of *The Master of Petersburg*, in particular the voices of Dostoevsky and Nechaev, and which anticipates a method to be later used by the Truth and Reconciliation

⁶⁹ A. Viola, *New Fiction in English from Africa. West, East, and South*, Amsterdam–Atlanta: Radopi, 1998, pp. 200–215.

⁷⁰ C. Barnett, “Construction of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of J.M. Coetzee”, *Journal of South African Studies* 25, November 2 (1999), p. 289.

⁷¹ J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, op. cit., pp. 197–198.

⁷² Coetzee was familiar with the story as he wrote an essay on the memoir of Breytenbach in 1993. See J.M. Coetzee, “The Memoirs of Breyten Breytenbach” [in:] J.M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores. Literary Essays*, op. cit., pp. 249–260.

⁷³ L. Weschler, *Calamities of Exile*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 167–168.

⁷⁴ L. Weschler, “An Afrikaner Dante”, *The New Yorker*, November 8 (1993), pp. 90–92.

Commission set up a year after the publication of Coetzee's novel.⁷⁵ However, in my opinion, the most important trace of the South African context, an imperative which makes me think of *The Master of Petersburg* as a means of cultural mediation of the totalitarian regime is the book's acknowledgment of an impossibility of escape from the oppressive system one is born into, of contamination, of evil that one finds no cure for.

The Master of Petersburg is pervaded by feelings of great injustice and suffering that take place in Russia; an imagined country which, as I have repeatedly argued in the present paper, could be read as a representation of South Africa. "Must multitudes perish before the heavens will tremble?"⁷⁶ Dostoevsky asks rhetorically in one of the opening pages of the novel, hence emphasising a particular kind of sickness that Russia is infected with and suffers from. In chapter three entitled "Pavel" Dostoevsky has a vision of Petersburg "stretched out vast and low under the pitiless stars. Written in a scroll across is a word in Hebrew characters. He cannot read the word but knows it is a condemnation, a curse".⁷⁷ In one of the conversations of Dostoevsky with Maximov a key sentence as far as the analysis of *The Master of Petersburg* is concerned is uttered by the former: "Nechaevism (...) is a spirit, and Nechaev himself is not its embodiment but its host; or rather, he is under possession by it".⁷⁸ Towards the end of the book the readers observe how the spirit overtakes Dostoevsky – we do not only stop just a moment before he commits the act of rape on Matryona, but we actually witness visitation of the real devil that precedes the creation of the *Devils* episodes (narrated) and the rape (not narrated):

(...) at last the face is revealed, even if it's is the ox-face of Baal?

The head of the figure across the table is slightly too large, larger than a human head ought to be. In fact, in all its proportions there is something subtly wrong with the figure, something excessive. (...)

From the figure he feels nothing, nothing at all. Or rather, he feels around it a field of indifference tremendous in its force, like a cloak of darkness. Is that why he cannot find the name – not because the name is hidden but because the figure is indifferent to all names, all words, anything that might be said about it?

The force is so strong that he feels it pressing out upon him, wave upon silent wave.⁷⁹

One, and in my opinion the most convincing interpretation of the act of possession that Dostoevsky falls victim to in the final pages of the novel while he embarks on writing *Devils* could be that he finally becomes contaminated with evil that Russia hosts. At least that is what an earlier conversation with his landlady implies: "I mean that I am not here in Russia in this time of ours to live a life free of pain. I am required to live – what shall I call it? – a Russian life:

⁷⁵ It is worth noting that despite Coetzee's criticism and scepticism as to the "truthfulness" and moral status of the confessional mode, the methods applied by the South African government is generally considered to have been a successful enterprises.

⁷⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 43–44.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 238.

a life inside Russia, or with Russia inside me, and whatever Russia means, It is not a fate I can evade".⁸⁰ A couple of pages later Dostoevsky confirms the diagnosis: "To live in Russia and hear the voices of Russia murmuring within him. To hold it all within him: Russia, Pavel, death".⁸¹ What Russia means is madness, an act of possession by evil. "I am the one", Dostoevsky adds, "I am the one who carries the madness".⁸² What I would like to suggest in my analysis of *The Master of Petersburg* is substitution of Russia with South Africa and, consequently, reading the novel as a story of one's inescapable implication into the oppressive system whose evil and corruption spare nobody. From this point of view, *The Master of Petersburg* could be seen as an example of a "travelling text"⁸³ (a term introduced by T. Kai Norris Easton), a kind that first dislocates the narrative from its topography and, consequently, re-inscribes it, hence creating a new kind of mapmaking⁸⁴, or as Graham Huggan would call it, a sign of "re-territorialisation".⁸⁵ The key to such an interpretation can actually be found in Coetzee's own writing of non-fiction. I have already quoted extensively from Coetzee's "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" about impossibility of "shaking the dust of the country off [one's] feet".⁸⁶ His speech continues in the following manner:

About these [unnatural] structures of power [that define the South African state] there is a great deal to be said (...). The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity. I make this observation with due deliberation, and in the fullest awareness that it applies to myself and my own writing as much as to anyone else.⁸⁷

In a similar mode Coetzee spoke of South African literature:

South African literature is an enslaved literature (...). It is a literature which is not fully human; being more preoccupied than is natural, with power and with the torsions of power, it does not know how to pass from the elementary relations of contestation, of domination, and of subjugation, to the vast and complex human world which extends beyond (...) the power which the world (where his body lives) has to impose itself on him, and (in the last instance) on his imagination (...). The coarseness of life in South Africa, the naked force of its seductions, not only on the physical level, but also on the moral level, its harshness and

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 235.

⁸² Ibid., p. 202.

⁸³ T. Kai Norris Easton, "Text and Hindreland: J.M. Coetzee and the South African Novel", *Journal of South African Studies* 21, 4 (1995), p. 585.

⁸⁴ T. Kai Norris Easton also speaks of "landscapes in the making; boundaries are renegotiated, erased, or ever-shifting", [in:] T. Kai Norris Easton, op. cit., p. 597.

⁸⁵ G. Huggan, "Decolonising the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection" [in:] *Past the Land Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, eds. I. Adam, H. Tiffin, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1991, p. 131.

⁸⁶ J.M. Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" [in:] D. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee. Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*, op. cit., p. 96.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 97–98.

its savageries, its hungers and its furies, its greediness and its lies make it as irresistible and it is displeasing.⁸⁸

Coetzee believes that once born in the oppressive society, one is “cursed” (to use the term from *The Master of Petersburg*) to live the “cursed” life (life of madness, evil, possession, deformity, stuntedness, Russia – to apply a number of mutually interchangeable words from Coetzee’s vocabulary), Everyone is afflicted, nobody spared, including the writer, not only Dostoevsky, but Coetzee himself as well.

“He is a specialist of the story”, David Attwell stated in one of his studies of J.M. Coetzee’s oeuvre, “and has declared his allegiance to this vocation without apology”.⁸⁹ He further added: “against this position – though I trust, in ways that I respect his version of fictionality – I assert again and again the historicity of the act of storytelling, continually reading the novels back into their context”.⁹⁰ The reading of *The Master of Petersburg* that I have suggested in the present paper could by all means be categorised as such an attempt; a move to read this novel back into its South African context.

Streszczenie

Reterytorializacja Republiki Południowej Afryki. Alegoria polityczna w *Mistrzu z Petersburga* J.M. Coetzeeego

Jednym z najważniejszych terminów w krytyce twórczości J.M. Coetzeeego jest alegoria. Kontrowersje wokół prób literalnego i symbolicznego odczytania twórczości tego południowoafrykańskiego pisarza zdominowały dyskurs naukowy na temat jego twórczości, poczynając od uznania alegorii za podstawową metodę recepcji dzieła literackiego (zwłaszcza w ujęciu takich badaczy jak Dominic Head czy Teresa Dovey), a kończąc na odrzuceniu symbolicznej próby odczytania powieści noblisty (prace Dereka Attridge’a). Niniejszy artykuł dokonuje alegorycznej interpretacji powieści *Mistrz z Petersburga* z roku 1994, będącej fikcyjną biografią Fiodora Dostojewskiego, a jednocześnie, jak twierdzi autor, zakamuflowaną opowieścią o Republice Południowej Afryki w ostatnich latach apartheidu.

⁸⁸ J.M. Coetzee, “Apartheid: La Littérature Muutilée”, *Le Nouvel Observateur* May 8–14, 1987, p. 58.

⁸⁹ D. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Berkeley. Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Ibid.