Undertaking to analyze Coetzee’s fifth novel, *Foe*, Theresa Dovey expresses her uneasiness *vis-à-vis* a fictional work whose bewildering ‘multidimensionality’ openly resists the literary critic’s natural tendency to finalize the text: «My own reading of the novel, my deciphering of the allegory, while it risks becoming reductive and too conclusive, is, at the same time, not conclusive enough, in that it omits much that the novel takes in» 1.

Words to the same effect are likely to recur as a prefatory or a conclusive remark in any reading of *Age of Iron*; as if sympathetically anticipating the difficulties which a critic/reader engaged in deciphering this novel will have to face, Coetzee, himself a critic and a literary scholar, has its narrator recognize the labyrinthine nature of her narrative: «I have written about blood before, I know. I have written about everything. I am written out, bled dry and still I go on. This letter has become a maze, and I dog in the maze, scurrying up and down the branches and tunnels, scratching and whining at the same old places, tiring, tired» (italics mine) 2. While the image of the dog «scratching and whining at the same old places» besides illustrating the narrator’s predicament (to be discussed later on in the present work) also affords an apt representation of the form which critical activity centred on this novel is likely to take, the term «maze» suggests awareness of the baffling nature of this fictional work and, by implication, of the fact that it can accommodate a host of different readings, including conflicting ones 3. And indeed this

3 See Tony Morphet, «The Inside Story», *South African Literary Review* 1(1991): 1-3, p. 1: «The internal relations of the text – its connections, suppressions, contrasts, disruptions, combinations and extensions are alternately so close and so distant as to set up a potentially limitless field of readings». 
possibility is confirmed by Benita Parry, who, though probably one of the first to have reviewed this novel, in her article «Thanatophany for South Africa: Death With/out Transfiguration» already refers to «benevolent reviewers» (unfortunately she omits to name them) whose reading of Coetzee's latest novel differs widely from hers. «Thanatophany for South Africa» is not a full-length study, but, though cursorily, it draws attention to a number of interesting facts about Age of Iron and for this reason can be usefully employed as a starting point for the present discussion.

In her turn, Benita Parry starts by referring to previous reviewers, the above-mentioned «benevolent reviewers», who have welcomed Age of Iron «as a political allegory», thus mistaking «an exercise in displaying the impossibility of such a form for its intended and accomplished performance». Quite accurately, she charges this ‘political’ interpretation with a failure to recognize the process of displacement and estrangement at work in the novel, although it must be admitted that this misapprehension was predictable in view of the fact that Coetzee’s touch here is lighter than in previous novels: as Benita Parry observes, the irony in Age of Iron is less «flagrant» than in Coetzee’s preceding production; and, it can be added, the censure of South Africa’s regime vehement and passionate enough for hasty reviewers to overlook other aspects of the novel which cannot be fitted into the frame of a political allegory. Benita Parry’s definition of Age of Iron, however, in its turn seems somehow reductive: when she states that the novel is «an exercise in displaying the impossibility of such a form» (i.e. political allegory), she appears to be mistaking an exemplification of the novel’s main concern with the concern itself. At the core of Age of Iron, that is to say, there seems to be not so much the failure to record South Africa’s disgraceful state in allegorical terms as the much wider issue of language and of the various discourses which it generates, including the novelistic discourse and its conventions. Thus, in Age of Iron too Coetzee’s project remains consistent, i.e. like its predecessors this novel constitutes an example of what Theresa Dovey calls «criticism-as-fiction» or «fiction-as-criticism», the etymological connection between «crisis» and «criticism» being particularly revealing in this

---

5 ibidem
6 ibidem
7 ibidem
8 Dovey, Novels of J.M. Coetzee, p. 330.
case, since *Age of Iron* charts the crisis of language in its manifold ramifications. Or, to put it differently, and perhaps more accurately, it records the struggle of a narrator increasingly aware of the shortcomings of language and of the different types of discourse originating from it -more and more conscious, as the narrative develops, that the roles they have taken on are not the roles traditionally assigned to them, but new, unsettling ones, and yet trapped inside their prison-house, hardly able to envisage a form of salvation outside the domain of language and thus doggedly determined not to give up her nominalistic effort. This crisis is pervasive: exemplified by the failure of the narrator’s discourse «to find a noun adequate to the scale and intensity of white oppression in south Africa» ⁹, it is not, however, restricted to it, as Benita Parry’s review implies, since it also affects the record of the narrator’s dying. Benita Parry insists on the separation between the narrative centred on South Africa’s «bloody interregnum» ¹⁰ and the narrative of Elizabeth Curren’s last agonizing days: while the novel is unable to envisage some form of regeneration and metamorphosis for South Africa, for the narrator it «can contemplate a personal redemption... which is an epiphany to the conservation of integrity» ¹¹. She may be right, althouth it is by no means certain that Elizabeth Curren achieves salvation in the end ¹². Yet, it is undeniable than in both narratives the protagonist’s discourse registers the same awareness of its own limits, the same struggle to overcome them, the same contradictions. Besides representing the struggle to find a name for South Africa’s degradation the novel also, and more importantly, illustrates the narrator’s struggle to make sense of death by rendering it into words, by finding a name for it in her own discourse, by trying to represent it verbally. The record of this attempt shows Elizabeth Curren using up all the resources of the discourse she has access to – a composite discourse, or rather a multiplicity of discourses, each corresponding to one of her roles in life: «a person of British ancestry, a wife, mother, retired lecturer in classics, a liberal» ¹³ – in order to say the ultimate word

---

⁹ Parry, «Thanatophany», p. 10.
¹⁰ Parry, «Thanatophany», p. 11.
¹¹ ibidem
¹² It could not be otherwise in a novel which is unreadable if «by ‘readable’ one means open to a single, definitive, univocal interpretation» (J. Hillis Miller, «The critic as host», *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1977): 439-47, p. 447). As Morphet (*Inside Story*, p. 1) puts it, «we privilege any one of its narratives at our peril». The issue of Mrs Curren’s salvation is discussed below, in connection with that of Vercueil’s role/function.
¹³ Parry, «Thanatophany», p. 10. Morphet (*Inside Story*, p. 2) refers to these
on death. As the above mentioned reference to «the same old places» makes clear, however, she perceives, exactly as the reader does, that all these efforts continuously take her back to the sea of the déjà dit on death, the choice of death as the focus of the narrator’s linguistic efforts being peculiarly apt to illustrate the impossibility to avoid redundancy and repetition, since death, in so far as it is one of the basic facts of human life and at the same time one of the most mysterious, is the object of an immense, all-embracing sea of déjà dit.

The ultimate word, thus, remains unsaid: by the end of the novel, Elizabeth Curren’s search for the words which should, one surmises, render the essence of what she is facing, i.e. death, and thus confer meaning on it, without, at the same time, being «borrowed» words, «other people’s words» (p. 90), has yielded a long sequence of images of death or, anyway, connected with death, meditations on death, figurative renderings of the idea of death, illness, afterlife, each conjuring up another, often contradicting or denying a previous one, in an endless deconstructionist postponement of the final truth.

Elizabeth Curren, then, valiantly continuing her narrative in the face of difficulties which she becomes increasingly aware of and cause her to repeatedly interrogate her own discourse, is a typical representative of our self-conscious and self-reflexive stage of culture, in so far as she embodies «the very contradiction of endlessly using the meaning-making machine of language to demonstrate the endless flight of meaning» 14. Or, to put it differently, in a flagrantly contradictory way, her insistence on resorting to language to bring her own truth to light, and thus achieve salvation, runs parallel to her discovery that every discourse, instead of being free and innocent, is deceptive and heavily pre-determined, that words are highly unstable entities and hence not reliable as conveyors of meaning, that language often fails to do justice to the complexity of reality. This is the truth, or perhaps one of the truths inscribed in the narrative of Elizabeth Curren’s utopian nominalistic search for her

«semes» converging on the narrator’s name (see Roland Barthes, S/Z (Paris: 1973); trans. by Richard Miller, S/Z (New York: 1974), passim) as the «stories» by which Mrs Curren is written: «some of [these stories] we can see quite clearly. Some specific version of the story of colonial expansion sets her family in Uniondale. Education gives her the inheritance of classical Europe. She has retired from her work at the university. She is divorced».

truth, (although its direct consequence, the impossibility of salvation, is a merely provisional notion, not an established fact, since, in a manner characteristic of this as well as of all Coetzee’s other novels, it is shown to enact a continuous dialectic with its opposite, i.e. the idea that some sort of salvation – here problematically embodied in the mysterious presence of Vercueil – is after all attainable). It is a truth which has become a common acquisition of our stage of culture, yet the various forms which its discovery takes on throughout Age of Iron are remarkable for their originality and the intriguing displacement of linguistic-literary conventions which they effect, and for this reason deserve a detailed analysis.

Benita Parry points out that «as Elizabeth Curren reconstitutes herself in the letter she writes to an absent daughter she becomes fascinated with the instability of words» 15, an instability which, it must be added, manifests itself in a variety of ways. Early in the novel the stability of the language system as the vehicle of concepts and of meaningful communication appears to be endangered by the disruption of what is normally regarded as an indissoluble bond: the link between signifier and signified. That this supposedly unalterable correspondence in fact does not hold any longer is the inescapable conclusion the reader comes to as signifiers are shown to combine with each other autonomously, on the basis of mere phonetic resemblances, irrespective of other considerations, such as etymological accuracy or the rules of combination of signifieds. This is the case in the following example, where, in open defiance to her own classical education, the narrator posits a false etymological connection between «charity» and «the Latin word for the heart»: «What is the point of charity when it does not go from heart to heart? What do you think charity is? Money? Charity: from the Latin word for the heart» (p. 20; italics mine). And later on, while trying to justify to Vercueil the line she has taken with respect to her daughter, she says: «I may long for her but I don’t want her here That is why it is called longing. It has to go a long way» (p. 68; italics mine).

While these false etymologies constitute minor transgressions 16, in so far as they show the narrator deliberately gaming with language, Age of Iron also affords several instances in which this free association of words is depicted as a phenomenon independent of the narrator’s agency, a fact that she cannot account for:

15 Parry, «Thanatophany», p. 10.
16 Acknowledged as such — cf. p. 20: «a lie: charity, charitas, has nothing to do with the heart»; and p. 68: «to his credit, he was not deflected by this nonsense» (italics mine).
Gratitude: I write down the word and read it back. What does it mean? Before my eyes it grows dense, dark, mysterious. Then, something happens. Slowly, like a pomegranate, my heart bursts with gratitude; like a fruit splitting open to reveal the seeds of love. Gratitude, pomegranate: sister words (p. 51)

and whose disquieting inexplicability even haunts her: «Borodino, Diconal: I stare at the words. Are they anagrams? They look like anagrams. But for what, and in what language?» (p. 126). In the case of the proper nouns the disruption is not between signifier and signified, but between the signifier and its referent 17. The incongruity of a noun full of poetic associations designating a noisy and rather vulgar holiday resort exemplifies the dissociation between words and the things they stand for:

Piesangs River. Such a lovely golden name! I was sure it must be the most beautiful place on earth. Years after my mother’s death I... saw the Piesangs River for the first time. Not a river at all, just a trickle of water choked with reeds, mosquitoes in the evenings, and a caravan park full of screaming children... Not Paradise at all (p. 16)

The name, Piesangs River, is completely independent of the physical reality of the place, which is not even a river, in the same way as the connection between «gratitude» and «pomegranate» is completely independent of the two words’ respective signifieds.

The signifier, however, has to pay a price for the acquisition of autonomy: the loss of the role which the common view of language assigns to it, i.e. that of conveying a core of signification unanimously recognized as such by all the members of the speaking community. The direct consequence is, of course, a lack of homogeneity in the use and interpretation of linguistic signs, which takes the form of a hiatus breaking the continuity of linguistic exchanges. Benita Parry recognizes that this hiatus is repeatedly represented in Age of Iron but ascribes it to the peculiarities of the Southern-African situation, i.e. she views it as a result of the conflict between the blacks and the whites rather than as an instance of a more widespread phenomenon, the disintegration of language. Accordingly she quotes examples in which members of the black community are shown to have a «linguistic» distrust of white people: «Elizabeth Curren knows that her servant Florence does not ‘entrust’ her with the real

17 SEE DARREL MANSELL, «The Ghost of Language in The Turn of the Screw», Modern Language Quarterly 46 (1985): 48-63, p. 48: «Proper nouns... are also special in that the meaning they do have is usually said merely to refer outward to a referent; the referent itself is meaning».
name of the baby daughter, and that the name of the son known to
her as Digby is Bhek: she learns that Mr Thabane who is intro-
duced as Florence’s cousin refers to her as ‘my sister’.\textsuperscript{18} The novel,
however, also affords examples in which something more disturbing
than linguistic distrust hampers communication between the two
races, i.e. sheer incomprehension, as in the following passage, in
which Mrs Curren is talking to a black ten-year-old girl: «But do
you know Mrs Mkubukeli?» ‘Yes, I know him’ ‘Mrs Mkubukeli?’
‘Yes’» (p. 158)

The little girl’s choice of the pronoun «him» in referring to
Florence remains somewhat mysteriously inexplicable, but the notion
of «words as signs of differentials and disjunctions»\textsuperscript{19} makes its
appearance, although implicitly, earlier on, in Section 1; its mouth-
piece is of course Elizabeth Curren, whose interest in linguistic facts,
in keeping with her former occupation, makes her a highly self-
conscious language user. Referring to her black servant Florence she
explains that she is away, «visiting her people», and immediately
afterwards muses on her own words: «A curious expression: to have
people. Do I have people? Are you my people? I think not. Perhaps
only Florence qualifies to have people» (p. 10).

Yet, in spite of the numerous examples of linguistic incom-
prehension ascribable to the existence of two conflicting worlds in
South Africa there is, inscribed in the novel, also the possibility that
the differences in the interpretation of the same linguistic sign affect
communication within the same racial community too; Vercueil’s
first verbal response to Mrs Curren’s words, for example, suggests
the idea of a complete failure of communication, devoid as it is of
any bearing whatsoever on the subject of her illness:

'I have cancer,' I said. 'It has made its way into the bone. That is what hurts'.
I was not at all sure he understood.
A long silence. Then: 'This is a big house', he said. 'You could turn it into a
boarding house' (p. 9).

If the incongruity of this exchange can be thought to have a
different cause from linguistic incomprehension, owing to the
peculiarities of Vercueil’s function in the novel (to be discussed later
on), this does not apply to the following case: «Yesterday, with the
pantry bare, I had to go shopping. Trudging home with my bags, I
had a bad spell... A woman in a car slowed down. 'Are you all right?

\textsuperscript{18} Parry, «Thanatophany», p. 10.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibidem.
she called. ‘I have been shopping’ I panted” (p. 121). Thus, in a characteristic way, the ‘racial’ explanation, which the novel itself had seemed to offer, is deconstructed, although it might be argued that just as the impossibility of writing a political allegory on the situation of South Africa constitutes an exemplification of a much more widespread predicament (i.e. the writer’s awareness that his/her narrative inevitably carries the agents of its own deconstruction within itself), in the same way the above-mentioned linguistic ‘hiatus’ between the blacks and the whites in South Africa cannot but represent an extreme manifestation, which a writer writing in South Africa cannot fail to record, of a generalized phenomenon regarding all communication, independently of racial or other differences.

In an attempt to explain to Vercueil why she cannot bring herself to commit suicide in front of the «house of shame», as she had planned to do, to protest against South Africa’s regime, the narrator resorts to a literary example:

There is a famous novel in which a woman is convicted of adultery... and condemned to go in public with the letter A stitched on her dress. She wears the A for so many years that people forget what it stands for. They forget it stands for anything. It simply becomes something she wears, like a ring or a brooch... These public shows, these manifestations – this is the point of the story – how can one ever be sure what they stand for? (pp. 104-105)

Here, Elizabeth Curren offers her explanation for the two related linguistic phenomena we have been discussing, i.e. the autonomy of the signifier and its consequent failure to function as the vehicle of a communally accepted and recognized meaning: the protagonist of The Scarlet Letter has worn the signifier (the letter A) for too many years for it to retain its meaning; similarly, owing to continuous use, words lose their power to signify. It is the well-known «banana» phenomenon: as a result of it, they are reduced to pure sound, to which everyone can attach his/her own private meaning. Interestingly, however, the reference to «these public shows, these manifestations» (the narrator, of course, is thinking of her idea of committing suicide in public) seems to suggest that this epistemological crisis extends beyond the realm of language to all signifying systems. If the devaluation of language as a signifying system is brought to the reader’s attention more explicitly (cf. p. 49: «enunciating clearly each old, discredited comical word») and more insistently, this is simply due to the fact that Elizabeth Curren is working within the language medium and thus, quite naturally, is led to interrogate linguistic signs rather than others.

As has been pointed out, this interrogation brings about the
discovery that linguistic signs are more autonomous than they are normally thought to be (the layman's view of language assigns a purely subordinate, instrumental function to them) and yet, at the same time, more limited in their power to signify. One of their limitations, which Elizabeth Curren becomes aware of, is that they are incapable of doing justice, of giving full expression to the complexity of reality. Language, that is to say, is charged with being too rigid a means of representation of reality to render its shadows, even when failure to do so involves a crucial loss: the inescapability of the yes-no alternative, the absence of a medium term between the two extremes of assertion and negation, for example, repeatedly frustrates the narrator's desire for accuracy and adherence to reality:

is that the truth? Yes. No. Yes-No. There is such a word, but it has never been allowed into dictionaries. Yes-No: every woman knows what it means, as it defeats every man (p. 106)

But let me tell you what it is like to utter that «Yes». It is like being on trial for your life and being allowed only two words, Yes and No. Whenever you take a breath to speak out, you are warned by the judges: «Yes or No: no speeches». «Yes», you say. Yet all the time you feel other words stirring inside you... They [my words] are not Yes, they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it... fighting for it not to be stifled (pp. 132-133)

Unfortunately, it is not possible to quote the context of the second passage at length; for the purpose of the present discussion suffice it to say that, like the first passage (p. 106), it can be read as a reference to two different discourses, exhibiting contrasting features: a male discourse, identified with the judges' attitude, with their refusal to listen to «other words stirring inside you», their yes-no vision of reality; and the narrator's female discourse, arguing in favour of the «stifled word», of «everything else, everything indefinite» which is «condemned unheard» (pp. 133-34). The implicit comparison contained in the passage between two different discourses is interesting because it shows that the narrator, however intent on her own discourse and its shortcomings and limitations, is by no means blind to the faults of other discourses, which she judges even more harshly than her own. This, as has been seen, applies to the male discourse; it applies also, and much more conspicuously, to what can be described as the discourse of the age of iron. Before tackling this issue, however, it will be well to cursorily mention that if, throughout the novel, Elizabeth Curren is eloquent and vehement in the expression of her disgust at «the intensity and ramifications of
white oppression in South Africa» 20, yet she also recoils from the blacks' «mystique of death» (p. 148), «killings», «bloodletting» (p. 136), so that the designation «age of iron» does not apply to sanctioned state cruelty only, but indicates the state of war of a degraded present, in which both armies fight a «war without mercy» (p. 46) with equal zealotry. This is a fact which must be pointed out to make it clear that, although the discourse of the age of iron has two sides, a black one and a white one, which the novel examines separately, yet the narrator sees it in its entirety, as the voice of a harsh cruel epoch, the rhetoric of violent death, of hatred of «the other», of clearcut black-and-white divisions, of the strictest puritanical adherence to a rule which admits of no exceptions. In this respect the two sides at war in the age of iron are shown to have exactly the same attitude:

What a nightmare from beginning to end! The spirit of Geneva triumphant in Africa. Calvin, black-robed, thin-blooded, forever cold, rubbing his hands in the afterworld, smiling his wintry smile. Calvin victorious, reborn in the dogmatists and witch-hunters of both armies (p. 47; italics mine)

And, again in this respect, their discourse is the very opposite of the narrator's liberal-humanist female rhetoric. This opposition is condensed memorably in the confrontation between Elizabeth Curren and a group of Africans, the climactic point in the episode of the Dantean descent to the hell of the black township. 21. Mr Thabane, acting as the spokesman of a group of Africans, calls on the narrator to give a name to the crime she has just witnessed (the murder of four black boys), but his attempt at linguistic manipulation is promptly recognized and exposed as «ventriloquism, the legacy of Socrates, as oppressive in Africa as in Athens» (p. 92) by Elizabeth Curren (who is even able to trace it back to Mr Thabane's former occupation) and countered by her liberal-humanist claim to autonomous expression:

I am not evading your question. There are terrible things going on here. But what I think of them I must say in my own way... These are terrible sights... But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words... Otherwise it is not the truth. (p. 91)

20 ibidem.
21 Where, not surprisingly in view of the novel's dominant concern with language, the indictment of the age of iron culminates in the excoriation of the rhetoric it produces.
The superiority of her discursive stance vis-à-vis Mr Thabane’s clumsy attempt at linguistic manipulation and ingenious assumption that a word, a label, can circumscribe and sum up the whole extent and ramifications of South Africa’s evil is however sterile since, after asserting her right to independent expression, she has to admit that her own words would prove inadequate anyway: «To speak of this you would need the tongue of a God» (p. 91).

There is no direct confrontation between Elizabeth Curren and the representatives of the «white» rhetoric of the age of iron; the discourse of South Africa’s white hegemony is represented exclusively in the form of two broadcasts, both of them treated by the narrator with the utmost contempt, both of them representing the climax in the process of devaluation of language which the novel constantly returns to, the sound-and-fury stage of language: words as pure acoustic shapes and yet (or, perhaps, because of this) endowed with a frightening stupefying force:

I was watching television. One of the tribe of Ministers and Onderministers was making an announcement to the nation... Ons buig nie vor dreigemente nie, he was saying: we do not bow to threats: one of those speeches... So I turned up the sound, enough for, if not the words, then the cadences to reach him [Vercueil], the slow, truculent Afrikaans rhythms with their deadening closes, like a hammer beating a post into the ground. Together, blow after blow, we listened (p. 9).

The passage uncoils in many directions at the same time; first of all, it identifies the unnamed politician’s speech as an unmistakable product of the rhetoric of the age of iron. The speech indeed recalls the idea of iron in two ways: through its content («We do not bow to threats» evokes the hardness and lack of flexibility characteristically associated with iron) and through its rhythmic effect comparable with the effect produced by an iron tool («a hammer beating a post into the ground»). Secondly, the passage describes the unnamed politician’s announcement 22 in terms which insist on its being first of all and above all a vocal performance (cf. «cadences», «slow, truculent Afrikaans rhythms», «deadening closes»), whose content is unworthy of notice.

And indeed, as if to underline that the conceptual element, the «propositional component» 23 of this kind of discourse is utterly neg-

\[^22\] The comment «one of those speeches» invites the reader to regard it as a typical specimen of South Africa’s political discourse.

ligible, there is no direct reference to any sort of content in the
second passage on the rhetoric of South Africa’s regime (in the
previous quotation the declaration «We do not bow to threats»
retained a semblance of meaningful communication); instead, the
passage focuses on the absence of content, on its indefinite post-
ponement:

And their message stupidly unchanging, stupidly forever the same. Their feat, after
years of etymological meditation on the word, to have raised stupidity to a virtue.
To stupefy: to deprive of feeling; to benumb, deaden; to stun with amazement.
Stupor: insensibility, apathy, torpor of mind. Stupid: dulled in the faculties, indiffe-
rent, estute of thought of feeling. From stupere to be stunned, astounded. A
gradient from stupid to astonished, to be turned to stone. The message: that the
message never changes. A message that turns people to stone. (p. 26)

The typical deconstructionist way of exemplifying the everlasting
deerment of meaning is employed as a brilliant metaphor of a
repetitive, hypnotic rhetoric creating a continuous illusion that there
is a meaning looming in the distance. The stupid message, repeated
over and over again, stupefies its addressee, astonishes him, i.e. turns
him to stone (!): the paradoxical climax developed here exemplifies
the process of autonomous combination of signifiers previously referred to;
yet there is at work in this case the additional suggestion of intentionall
deceptive linguistic manipulation (the «years of ety-
mological mediation») aiming at transforming a vice, stupidity, into a
virtue.

Thus, the novel acknowledges the fact that different discourses
are characterized by different degrees of culpability. None of them,
however, is completely innocent. As befits a person endowed with a
peculiarly strong awareness of the medium within which she is work-
ing, Elizabeth Curren knows that her narrative (her «letter» to her
absent daughter) is not a transparent mirror she holds up to reality
but an artefact whose functioning is regulated by a set of conve-
tions: on several occasions she makes reference to them. In the
following quotation, for example, she alludes to the distance in time
between writer and reader («in her own time»), an ineluctable fact,
however hard a narrative can try to create the illusion of immediacy;
and also to the reader’s different reactions to texts («devour or
discard»: the use of «devour» in the figurative sense of «reading
eagerly» is of course prompted by the equation words = sweets):

I render myself into words and pack the words into the pages like sweets...words...
for her to unpack in her own time...drops... fashioned and packed with love, the
love we have no alternative but to feel towards those to whom we give ourselves to
devour or discard (p. 8; italics mine)
The temporal distance between writer and reader is again hinted at in the form of a shift from the Present Perfect to the Future Tense: «These papers, these words... Will they reach you? Have they reached you?» (p. 28). And later on mention is made of an important convention of first person narrative: «For as long as the trail of words continues, you know with certainty that I have not gone through with it [i.e. she has not committed suicide]; a rule, another rule» (p. 106).

The novel’s self-reflexive commentary, however, does not merely direct the reader’s attention to the fact that there is always a set of conventions at work in fiction, but also reflects the narrator’s desperate effort to circumvent them in a useless attempt at avoiding the charge of dishonesty which she levels against other discourses and, as she perceives, can be levelled against her own too. Thus, she disclaims the «place of right» which a long-established novelistic convention assigns to the narrator:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine... To me your sympathies flow; your heart beats with mine... Now I ask you to draw back... I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye (p. 95-96).

Commenting on this passage Benita Parry observes that the narrator’s interrogation of her own discourse «reveals its limitations by being taken to its limits» 24 no doubt the exhortation «attend to the writing, not to me» is based on a fallacy, i.e. the idea, repeatedly disproved by contemporary literary criticism, that it is possible to consider a narrative in isolation from its source, as if its source were not inscribed in it.

At another point, however, the novel’s self-reflexive commentary expresses the resigned recognition that the conventions of fictional writing, far from letting themselves be circumvented, are in fact the only kind of truth which a narrative can reveal; a narrative, that is to say, cannot disclose anything but the set of rules by which it is governed. Contemplating the state of decay in which her house is Elizabeth Curren says:

Last summer, when the workmen were re-laying the drains, I watched them dig out the old pipes. Two metres down into the earth they went, bringing up mouldering brick, rusty iron, even a solitary horseshoe. But not bones. (p. 13)

And concludes:

A site without a human past; to spirits, as to angels, of no interest.
This letter is not a baring of my heart. It is a baring of something, but not of my heart (p. 13)

The final sentence is admittedly cryptic; yet, its proximity to the description of what the workmen brought to light, in fact what they «bared» while digging («mouldering brick, rusty iron» etc.) invites the reader to establish an analogy between the rusty, decaying objects and what is being brought to light in the narrative, especially since the heart, which the narrative so overtly disclaims knowledge of, is traditionally a metaphor for the very qualities the old, rusty objects lack. In other words, the novel disclaims the faculty, traditionally accorded to narratives, of representing, revealing human life (the heart), its faculty of revealing being limited to what is lifeless, to decaying artefacts. And the telling choice of the word «baring», often used in literary criticism in expressions like «the baring of narrative devices» or «the baring of novelistic conventions», seems to indicate that the decaying artefacts are the decrepit, worn-out conventions of novel writing.

The metafictional remarks scattered throughout the novel, then, undermine the narrative from within: through them, the narrative is proved to be unfit to fulfil its representational function, trapped in the prison of its worn-out conventions and even unable to get the narrator’s message across, or, at least, unreliable in this function: «To me this letter will forever be words committed to the waves: a message in a bottle» (p. 18). At the literal level, this can be read as a reference to Vercueil’s unreliability as messenger; but, since the narrator has just mentioned one of the inescapable gaps between the act of writing a message and the act of reading it, i.e. the time gap (the sentence follows the questions quoted above, «Will they reach you? Have they reached you?»), this remark can also be taken as further pursuing the issue of the distance between writer and reader: in this case, however, the distance is not temporal, but a distance inherent in the unreliability of words, which, owing to their instability («words committed to the waves» is a peculiarly apt image in this connection), admit of a great distance between the narrator’s usage of them and the reader’s interpretation of them.

The conclusion is that Elizabeth Curren is producing a narrative and at the same time producing evidence of its limitations, unreliability and even impossibility; as the foregoing analysis has hopefully indicated, no level of the narrative work is spared: language, narra-
tive conventions, cultural frames of reference are all equally unreliable, limiting and limited. Yet, Elizabeth Curren keeps writing, because she is given no choice. After witnessing the accident in which Bheki and his friend are hurt she feels weak («There was a coldness in me, my limbs felt distant»): her immediate reaction, «The word fainting occurred to me though I have never fainted in my life» (p. 55), reflects an approach to reality which is not merely mediated by words, but in which the knowledge of «the word for the thing» precedes all knowledge of «the thing» itself. Here, as well as on many other occasions in the novel, Elizabeth Curren declares herself to be the representative of a logocentric culture: no wonder, then, that, faced with the prospect of her imminent death, she instinctively turns to writing.

It is the promise of salvation that writing seems to hold out that causes Elisabeth Curren to take the pen and begin her narrative on the day of her death sentence (and, later on, to say that writing is the foe of death); what shape this salvation is to take remains uncertain – in a manner reminiscent of the vague expectations connected with Godot in Beckett’s play – and is perhaps relatively unimportant. In fact, it seems to be not a specifically invested form of salvation, but almost a spiritual category. However, as this promise recedes in the distance, the narrator’s relationship to Vercueil, the «saturnine» tramp, gets closer and closer. For the adjective «saturnine», which effectively captures the essence of this figure, a «dry creature» «given to laconic utterances» 25, I am indebted to Benita Parry 26, who, in her review of Age of Iron, touches on the issue of Vercueil’s characteristics and function in the novel. She limits herself to a few scattered observations, rather than try to offer a finalized analysis of this character’s role and significance, and this choice, probably determined by limits of space, exempts her from rather a difficult task, involving the risk mentioned by Theresa Dovey in the passage quoted at the beginning of the present work, especially since, to a certain extent, Vercueil’s elusiveness seems to constitute an integral part of his significance 27. What follows is not, therefore, an attempt at deciphering Vercueil in a conclusive way, but an analysis of the evidence in favour of one possible reading of his role which does not exclude others.

25 Parry, «Thanatophany», p. 11.
26 ibidem.
27 Benita Parry, («Thanatophany», p. 11) observes that his name might signify «verskui, that is Afrikaans for concealment or masking of the self». 

19
As has been said previously, the development of Elizabeth Curren's attachment to Vercueil, who gradually comes to be her constant companion, parallels her discovery that her writing after all might fail to keep the promise of redemption which it had seemed to offer. And in her continuous speculations on his unexpected arrival she repeatedly voices the hope that he can be the agent of her salvation. Again, the specific investment of this salvation is left unspecified, but the hope is expressed clearly enough for the reader to recognize it; it is not more than a hope, however: Benita Parry's statement that «the arrival of Vercueil, the tramp as-angel-of-death, is an annunciation of her salvation — a theophany anticipated when she is reading Tolstoy...» (p. 11) needs qualifying, because the narrator's musings show her continuously frustrated in her attempt to establish the transcendental significance of Vercueil's presence beyond doubt. Until the end, she fluctuates between the hypothesis of a theophany and the down-to-earth explanation offered by Vercueil himself (he chose the only house without a dog), which could put an end to all her metaphysical assumptions. On the other hand, an interpretation of Vercueil, even though offered with the proviso that it does not claim to be conclusive or incontrovertible, requires a consideration of other things besides the narrator's speculations: in the novel Vercueil is not only the object of Elizabeth Curren's hopes and expectations, he is also seen to act; besides, on a different level, as a vagrant he can be seen as Coetzee's re-writing of previous tramp-figures, in particular, as will be seen later on, of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon. There are, of course, numerous other viewpoints from which he can be considered: for the purposes of the present discussion I will limit myself to the interplay of suggestions concerning his role which emerges from these three perspectives.

Benita Parry uses the term «angel-of-death» in referring to Vercueil's supposedly transcendental role, and in this choice of a term which is at the same time highly suggestive and yet vague (for example, is an angel of death sent from heaven or from hell?) she faithfully renders the mysteriously transcendental atmosphere full of foreboding which, in Elizabeth Curren's eyes, surrounds Vercueil's arrival. Indeed, the record of Vercueil's first appearance on the day in which the narrator is informed of her imminent death is couched in terms whose markedly religious connotation and/or flavour is unmistakable: the notion of Biblical punishment is contained in the reference to Vercueil, at the beginning of the first section, as «A visitor, visiting himself on me on this of all days» (p. 3), while on the next page the representation of the tramps of Cape Town, whom Vercueil typifies, is an obvious re-writing of a passage from the gospel
(Matthew 6:26 and 6:28): «The scavengers of Cape Town... go bare and feel no cold. Who sleep outdoors and do not sicken. Who starve and do not waste» (p. 4)\textsuperscript{28}. On the same page, Vercueil’s arrival is described as «this reconnaissance, this other annunciation» (italics mine), and it is just this ecclesiastical term designating «the announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus Christ» that seems to suggest to her the possibility that Vercueil is an angel-messenger (if other language users may be unaware of the fact that «angel» contains the idea of «messenger», this cannot be the case with Mrs Curren, who, being a retired lecturer in classics, knows ancient Greek very well). Whatever its origin, the first explicit connection between Vercueil and the role of angel-messenger is established a few pages later; characteristically, at first Elizabeth Curren rejects the possibility that has presented itself to her mind, yet ends by acknowledging her desire to recognize an angel in the «ragged stranger» who «comes knocking at the door»:

Read Tolstoy – not the famous cancer story... but the story of the angel who takes up residence with the shoemaker. What chance is there, if I take a walk down to Mill Street, of finding my own angel... None, I think,... The suburbs, deserted by the angels. When a ragged stranger comes knocking at the door, he is never anything but a derelict, a lost soul. Yet how, in our hearts, we long for these sedate houses of ours to tremble, as in the story, with angelic chanting! (p. 13)

The mood of this passage, alternating between hope and doubt, exemplifies the character of all the narrator’s subsequent reflections on the possibility that Vercueil’s arrival is not accidental, while the religious tones connoting the first encounter are conspicuously present in the rest of the novel too: she «confesses» to Vercueil (p. 151) and, when called on by a policeman to explain who Vercueil is, she stages a traditional medieval deathbed scene in which she has Vercueil play the part of the angel who stands by the dying person’s bed:

‘...Come here, Mr Vercueil’.  
I reached out and found Vercueil’s trouser-leg, then his hand, the bad hand with the curled fingers. With the numb, clawlike grip of the old I clung to it.  
‘In Godsnaam’, said the detective somewhere far away. (p. 157)

\textsuperscript{28} Mrs Curren’s representation of «the scavengers of Cape Town» includes an image «[the contagions and infections in their blood consumed in liquid flame]» which constitutes a revealing index of one of her literary affiliations. The link it establishes between blood and the idea of contagion/defilement is indeed, as Coetzee himself indicates (see \textit{White Writing: on the Culture of Letters in South Africa}, New Haven, London: Yale U.P.), a \textit{topos} of Southern African literature.
Her determination to have Vercueil act as her messenger after her death (i.e. to send her letter to her daughter) takes on symbolic meaning in the light of what has been said thus far: she wants him to be her messenger in the concrete, physical sense of the term, because, of course, she hopes that he will act as a messenger to her in a metaphysical sense.

In ironic contrast to Elizabeth Curren’s expectations, the «facts» show him obdurately silent; in the course of the first section he hardly ever speaks: «Like water against a rock my words thudded against his silence» (p. 29), at the end of this section, is the poetic image that sums up all the numerous previous references to his stubborn refusal to speak. Under the pressure of the narrator’s questions he limits himself to non-verbal answers: a nod or, as in the following example, «a gob of spit».

‘...How can you live like this? How can you lie around and do nothing all day?... He did something that shocked me. With a straight look... he spat a gob of spit... The thing itself, I thought shaken: the thing itself brought out between us... His word, his kind of word, from his own mouth... A word, undeniable, from a language before language. (p. 7)

The «thing» is recalled later on, when, describing her nominalistic effort, Elizabeth Curren says: «My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word for the thing inching through my body» (p. 36; italics mine). Characteristically, trapped as she is inside the prison-house of language, the narrator shifts her attention from the «thing» to the word which should designate it; by contrast, Vercueil’s physical response situates him outside language, just as his silence does, and inside an inarticulate, pre-linguistic dimension. And not only does he seem to be outside language, he is also shown to be almost completely outside culture, in the anthropological sense of the term; in the narrator’s words, Vercueil is portrayed as an archetype; he is the representation of man reduced to his physical dimension, to the basic facts of human existence: birth, death. Consider for example the image conjured up by the following passage:

See Morphet, «Inside Story», p. 2: «[Vercueil’s language] is hardly a language at all... He is, from the linguistic point of view, barely present... He is outside Mrs Curren’s speech world».

See Morphet, «Inside Story», p. 3: «His presence is a bodily thing – soft and yielding and free of the burdens of the historical tracks that the others carry».
Behind the garage the shelter was set up as before with the black plastic neatly spanned over it. Inside lay the man, his legs curled up and the dog beside him... A collie, young, little more than a pup, black with white points... (p. 6; italics mine) in which the black-white symbolism is reinforced by the conflation of death («lay the man») and birth (the foetal position recalled by Vercueil’s posture: «with his legs curled up») in a single image, which constitutes almost the physical embodiment of Pozzo’s metaphor in Waiting for Godot, «They give birth astride of a grave» 31. The quotation from Beckett is not accidental, for, as tramps and as human prototypes, Vladimir and Estragon are Vercueil’s obvious literary precedent. If the figure of a «prototypal derridalect» is palimpsestic, however, it must be admitted that the displacements effected with respect to the original reveal a high degree of audacity 32. Vladimir and Estragon are re-written as a single man and his dog, but what differentiates them from Vercueil in a striking manner is their position in relation to language and culture. Beckett’s tramps, Vladimir in particular, seem to be under the compulsion to speak; they are devotees of speech just as Vercueil is a devotee of silence. And while Vercueil, as Benita Parry points out, is the tramp who lives «on the refuse of Western cities» 33, as his cardboard shelter and black plastic indicate, Vladimir and Estragon’s talk may be said to live on the remnants of Western culture, culture in the form of linguistic snippets, which, detached from their original context, have become clichés, commonplaces, topoi of the Western discourse. Their stance inside culture keeps them under the compulsion not only to speak but also to wait, prisoners inside one of the basic categories of this discourse, i.e. the religious notion that the human condition, however absurd or unaccountable it may seen, can be made sense of in terms of a wait for a word, a message which is to relieve its absurdity and sorrow. Thus, Vladimir and Estragon cannot but wait for Godot; he doesn’t turn up, but sends a messenger who delivers a highly dubious message. Vercueil, instead, does not have to speak, he does not have to wait for an ambiguous message and for recognition on the messenger’s part; in a sort of process of «evolution backwards», his loss of language and culture makes for the superiority of his position in relation to that of Beck-

32 Predictable, anyway, if one considers Coetzee’s previous production, and, in particular, Foe.
33 Parry, «Thanatophany», p. 11.
ett’s tramps; his purely physical dimension, *vis-à-vis* the disintegration of language and culture, makes a daring displacement with regard to *Waiting for Godot* possible: he becomes the messenger himself and somebody else (the narrator) seeks recognition from him.

In fact, the possibility that Vercueil’s position outside language is superior to the linguistic-nominalistic approach to reality is repeatedly hinted at, although it is not voiced explicidy until the final part of the novel, where, however, Mrs Curren is careful to present it as a projection of her own desire «for guidance, for help»:

“So I have continued to tell myself stories in which you lead I follow. And if you say not a word, that is, I tell myself, because the angel is wordless. The angel goes before, the woman follows. His eyes are open, he sees; hers are shut, she is still sunk in the sleep of worldliness. That is why I keep turning to you for guidance, for help». (p. 153).

Yet, before this passage, it is often suggested by means of a very simple device: instances of Vercueil’s refusal to speak are frequently made to closely follow or precede flagrantly dishonest speech. The sheer force of the contrast hints at the possibility of an equation words = lies, silence = truth. In this connection, for example, it can be interesting to consider the episode in which eventually Vercueil gives up (midway through the book, pp. 68-69) and is seen in his first «real» conversation with the narrator (i.e. a conversation in which he takes an active part instead of merely listening): significantly, his laconic utterances have the function of stripping bare the lies hidden behind her words and – by means of a blunt alternative («tell her or don’t tell her») – of exposing the contradiction inherent in her discourse, which reverts obsessively to the issue of death and to her desperate desire to be comforted, in spite of her previous assertion that «the first task laid on me from today [is] to resist the craving to share my death... to embrace death as my own, mine only» (p. 5).

Thus, the narrator’s obscure feeling that Vercueil is endowed with the gift of superior truth, as befits an angel-messenger, is far from being disproved, and the religious significance which she attaches to his presence not without a *raison d’être*. Perhaps, however, Elizabeth Curren’s logocentric assumptions prevent her from recognizing that it is no use trying to elicit the tramp’s message or waiting for it to be uttered in words. The message, his silence, is non-verbal and already there for her to see: Vercueil, after all, might turn out to be not the «angel of death», but the angel of the «life-in-
death offered by the possibility of a retreat from the discursive arena» 34.

Works Cited


DOVEY, THERESA, The Novels of J.M. Coetzee (Craig Hall: Donker, 1988).


34 DOVEY, Novels of J.M. Coetzee, p. 215.