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“I am making a start; or, if not that, making a gesture”: J. M. Coetzee’s Aesthetics of Tentativeness

Scholars have often criticized Coetzee for the indecision of his characters, but also for the political and stylistic vacillation they see in his writing. A closer examination of the stylistic devices used by Coetzee, in particular his use of italics, of repetitions and linguistic variations, as well as of implicit translation, on the contrary reveals that tentativeness can become a powerful verbal gesture.

Characters in what can be called J. M. Coetzee’s South African novels may almost all be defined by their willingness to make new starts, like Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* or Lucy in *Disgrace*. Such a desire is, however, just as often coupled with an extreme circumspection which verges at times on indecision. Their “gestures” (Coetzee, *Country* 110) have to stand the high moral test of their servants’ or their domestics’ judgements: “Florence is the judge”, Mrs Curren acknowledges in *Age of Iron* (141-142), a judge with whom she has so little in common she fears her “impulse” may well be misunderstood or overlooked. The characters themselves are often their most severe critics, questioning the motives lying behind their every act. They appear ready to dismiss their own attempts at crossing political or social barriers, at worst as a way to save their skins (*Disgrace* 112), at best as stemming from a faint feeling of white guilt, as in *Age of Iron*. Critics have been prompt to attribute this reluctance to commit oneself clearly to one side of the political struggle to the dilemma experienced by the lukewarm Liberal in South Africa. They have often blamed Coetzee himself for failing to assert his political allegiance more strongly, and indeed, his style itself displays signs of vacillation, through the overwhelming presence of corrections and repetitions.

However, may this characteristic feature of J. M. Coetzee’s style not be seen as more akin to musical variations than to political vacillation? One can justifiably wonder whether the novelist should be put on trial, as he almost was after the publication of *Disgrace*, or on the contrary, whether readers should rather deduce that this use of constant emendations may be the sign that, long before his character David Lurie, the novelist had begun to adopt revision as a mode of writing. He would be writing by trial and error – where trial here could also mean accepting, as Mrs Curren does, that somebody else (Florence, the critics) be “the judge” (*Iron* 142). Coetzee’s style, like his characters’ attitudes, is not so much due to a passive and fruitless indecision as to an attempt to prevent foreclosure and to leave room for other points of view. This essay will address the manner in which

this aesthetics of tentativeness is to be read and interpreted, and will engage with what kind of reading and reader it calls for. It will investigate how this prevalent aspect informs several, if not all, of Coetzee's South African novels as an attempt to offer a multiplicity of simultaneous points of view, which can indeed only be perceived if readers accept the invitation constantly to oscillate, rather than vacillate, between modes and media of representation, as well as to move back and forth between stories and novels. Through this uninterrupted play on texts, on language as well as on tongues, I will try and see how Coetzee sketches a new mode of writing in and about the New South Africa.

Coetzee's novels seem mainly to narrate failed attempts and false starts. Most characters in his novels seem to share at least one characteristic, that of indecision. It is only several months after the army of Colonel Joll has arrived in the settlement, and only after Joll himself has actually returned to the capital, that the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* decides to take action and return the Barbarian girl to her people. He is later tried for what is then seen as an act of disobedience, but although he gradually separates himself from the other representatives of the state, it is only almost at the very end of the novel that he clearly states that, like Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, he "stand[s] on the other side" (153-154). Only then does he detach himself from the collective "we", by stressing the difference of the "you" whom the Colonel represents and which is italicised in the text: "*You!* [...] *You* are the enemy, Colonel' I can restrain myself no longer. [...] '*You* are the enemy'" (*Barbarians* 106 and 114). Although Mrs Curren voices her disapproval of the apartheid regime early on, it is again only well into the second half of the novel that she geographically crosses to the other side. After symbolically refusing to cross her garden gate to meet the police van on their grounds (*Iron* 52-53), she later finds herself literally on the side of the black population from the burning township, on the night she takes her domestic servant home. However, she quickly goes back "home", and, "followi[ng] the signs of civilisation" (107), finally manages to find her bearings, to "f[i]nd herself" (108), once she reaches the colonial landmark of Voortrekker Road. Even if she does not support the regime of white supremacy, she refuses fully to endorse the means used to fight it, precisely because it may involve violence, and she seems to waver as to the attitude she should adopt. Her attempts are closely similar to Magda's, the protagonist of Coetzee's second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*. Both Mrs Curren's and Magda's efforts mainly remain intentions, which is underlined by the use of the first-person narrative in both novels and their similarities with confessions or diaries. Mrs Curren muses about her actions and would-be deeds of justice in the letter she is writing to her daughter, while there are numerous allusions which compare the narrative to diary keeping and to writing more generally in Magda's story. Her thoughts rather than her actions are recorded in what is most of the time a monologue, or else mere short dialogues recorded and written after the event and filtered through the character's single perspective.

As a matter of fact, neither Magda nor Mrs Curren, nor even Lucy later on in *Disgrace*, can be sure of how their attempts to bond with black people are perceived, and whether they are at all noticed. Magda's monologue will not reach Hendrik's ears; even when she seems to have been directly talking to him, which always remains doubtful given the nature of the narrative, she is not sure he has stayed until the end and heard her through (*Country* 117). "Is a true confession still true if it is not heard?" Mrs Curren similarly wonders (*Iron* 166). Or, to take up again the issue of perspectives, the question she repeats over and over again as to what would count in Florence's eyes is made all the more complex because the latter barely ever seems to look at her. Their eyes never meet on an "equal" level, as Magda also puts it: "I [...] have never beheld myself in the equal regard of another's eye, have never held another in the equal regard of mine" (*Country* 8). The interplay of glances and looks throughout *Age of Iron* could be glossed as a whole by the phrase Mrs Curren uses early on to describe her life: one's "existence from day to day has become a matter of averting [one's] eyes". Only once during her trip to the township do Florence's and her eyes meet. Until this moment, the novel records a series of failed attempts at such an exchange of glances with either Florence, John or Bheki. Florence never looks at or never sees Mrs Curren, either because her gaze seems either dehumanized or indirect, filtered through her glasses, which prevent any direct exchange and remind the reader of Colonel Joll's impervious black lenses, or because hers is never a simple gaze, but always a means to address a reproach or a question. The verbs testify to what amounts to an absence of contact; alternatively, the adverbs and adjectives which accompany neutral verbs or nouns of perception highlight this absence of reciprocity¹. The process is similar in the exchanges, or rather in the absence of such exchanges, with John and Bheki – when they are not "forced" (147). The contrast could not be greater with the various exchanges occurring between the two boys or between Bheki and his mother. "Exchange" is indeed the word mostly used then, together with locutions suggesting mutual understanding. The occasional glance they spare for Mrs Curren is altogether different, and the act of looking becomes a whole attitude which conveys a feeling of both contempt and of challenge². Not surprisingly, Mrs Curren again refers several times to *The King of the Alders*, as blindness gradually comes to characterize everyone in the novel, be they children or adults, white or black. It becomes almost impossible for anyone to be acknowledged by other people, or to acknowledge them. In the end, despite Mrs Curren's sudden revelation before Bheki's exposed corpse, violence and death finally deprive the human body of any expression and expressivity: "His eyes were open and staring. [T]heir clothes, their very hair, had a flattened,

1. "Florence regarded me suspiciously;" "she glared at me;" "Florence gave me a malicious look;" "[s]he gave me a puzzled look" (*Iron* 48, 49, 59 and 88 respectively).

2. "The boy stopped speaking to Bheki and regarded me. I did not like that look: arrogant, combative. [...] challenging me" (*Iron* 47).

dead *look*" (102, emphasis added). Even when their eyes do meet, the exchange between Mrs Curren and Florence remains short, undercut by pain and violence. When the two women meet again outside the burnt down school in which Bheki's corpse is exposed, Florence no longer acknowledges Mrs Curren's glance, or extremely briefly, "dully", out of mere "duty", as the repeated echo between those two words in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K* would suggest. Thus, she becomes again the figure with no eyes, or with no time to so much as look at Mrs Curren. The characters' willingness to move from a rather passive state of indecision to a more positive one of tentativeness where their actions should pass the trial-and-error test of the other's judgement seems at times threatened by the other's reluctance to take part in the process. Judgment without trial even seems more alluring to some: "One Settler One Bullet", one of the war-chants of the Pan-Africanist Congress in the 1980s and which Coetzee comments on his essay "Taking Offense", is undoubtedly one of the mottoes adopted by John and Bheki.

From a historical and political perspective, the characters' uncertainty regarding their motives as well as the results of their various ventures have conversely been read as symbolic of the situation of the Liberals in South Africa, who suffer from "white guilt" and can therefore never be sure of the reasons underlying their decisions, nor of the effect these will have or the way they will be perceived. Mrs Curren no doubt epitomises the figure of the white Liberal, and indeed forever questions her own motives. There is a strange echo in that respect between *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*, as the questioning mode becomes just as well that which characterises David's and Lucy's discourse. When Lucy speaks of her decision to stay on the farm, which is actually less a well-informed decision than a tentative attempt not to make any definite move, expressions of doubt start invading her speech: "Perhaps that is a good point to start from again. [...] To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. [...] Like a dog" (*Disgrace* 205). Modulators like "maybe" or "perhaps" punctuate all her utterances, which dwindle to truncated, nominal sentences that are riddled and almost hollowed out by suspension marks. David seems to repeat Mrs Curren's very words when asking about his daughter's motives and even questioning them: is she trying to save her life to set an example for all other whites who may wish to attempt to stay on in South Africa, on the farms? (112) Although Lucy is adamant that there is no such thing at the back of her mind, the conversation ends on a similar note of doubt and uncertainty.

Critics have often highlighted the fact that Mrs Curren's plight is also Coetzee's. Criticisms addressed at the character's indecision have also been directed at Coetzee himself. A university professor like his protagonist, he has also repeatedly stressed his distrust of set phrases and catchwords. In a politically troubled era, the author of an essay on slogans like "One Settler One Bullet" believes that, like his character, he "must find [his] own words, from [him]self. Otherwise it is not the truth" (*Iron* 99). In his often quoted article "The Novel Today", Coetzee

insists that the novel should not be influenced by any political agenda: "History is not reality, history is a kind of discourse; a novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a different kind of discourse" ("Novel" 1-5). The discourse of the novel, however, does seem to reflect the characters' hesitations. If they at least partly embody the dilemma of the white Liberals in South Africa, readers cannot but notice how their political qualms seem gradually to invade the text itself. Critics like Graham Pechey or Michael Holland have commented for instance on how the characters constantly correct themselves and rephrase their utterances, and on Coetzee's obvious tendency to resort to the rhetorical devices of chiasmus and repetition. The former is very noticeable in *The Master of Petersburg*, the latter probably more prevalent in *Disgrace*.

Yet this already signals their different natures. The figure of the chiasmus, with its sense of closure, seems to indicate that Fiodor, like Mrs Curren, is like a dog lost in the maze of words (*Iron* 131-137). Whatever Fiodor writes with the revolutionary watching over his shoulder, he is going to lose control over his text, which is bound to be used against him and against his will. By contrast, *Disgrace* is a reflection on the perfective mode; the style therefore adopted in the pseudo-interior monologue which constitutes the narrative reflects what David Attwell calls this "sense of post-ness" (Attwell, "Post-Apartheid" 865). It calls attention to the permanent changes affecting the character's personal situation as well as the country as a whole in this period of transition to democracy. Repetitions and declensions seem appropriate, coming from a professor who only "[t]wo weeks [before] was in a classroom explaining [...] the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*". The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion" (*Disgrace* 71). Another remark by his main character, David Lurie, reveals what seems to be Coetzee's main concern – that of finding the appropriate way of writing about the events currently happening in South Africa, which includes accepting the limits of English as a means to convey the experience of all its citizens: "More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness" (117). Coetzee, like his character David, realizes the limits of the perspective offered by the white community, which includes writers like himself. Like David, he is aware that "[d]oubtless Petrus" and people like him "ha[ve] a story to tell. He would not mind hearing Petrus's story one day" (117). The "articulatedness" he tries to bring back to the English language by acknowledging its very limits, thanks to the figure of the variation, is also a call for Petrus, and for other writers, to take up their pens and give voice to their own stories.

It could be argued, however, that other aspects of David's attitude contradict this analysis, such as his refusal to reform his behaviour – at least initially, and despite his accepting and even preferring a trial to an inquiry, provided sentence is not passed before the trial (42). One could easily claim that *Disgrace* displays signs of a mounting sense of real distrust and even of growing violence. Two

typographical signs attract the reader's attention and confirm this impression: the recurring use of italics on the one hand, which are otherwise seldom found in Coetzee's novels, and the silences created by truncated, open-ended sentences and suspension marks. Italics in *Disgrace* are normally reserved for quotations, for instance from Italian or from the libretto David wishes to write for his opera. Their other remarkable use is for any reference to reprehensible relations of a sexual nature between people of different backgrounds, as between David and Melanie, whose affair is seen as an act "*contra naturam*" (190), the Latin expression being italicised in the text, and Lucy's rape at the hands of three black men on the farm, where no use of a foreign language can account for the use of italics. Although David has frequent nightmares of his daughter "*covered in blood*" (158-159), and although the event dramatically affects the characters' lives, none of them seem able to mention it by its name. Only at the very end of his stay in Grahamstown does David summon up the courage to speak: "I will pronounce the word we have avoided hitherto" (157). It is as if language itself were tainted, and had in turn become a vector of further contamination. Instead of a direct reference to the rape, the characters resort to the lame understatement of the periphrasis "what I mean", which reveals both their desire to avoid the topic and the obsession of which this avoidance is the sign. Paradoxically, the less the event is mentioned, the better it is deemed to be known, as indicated by the shift from the verb "to guess" to the verb "to know" and from the modal "can" to "must". The dialogue between David and Petrus could almost seem comic as a consequence, were it not for its dramatic undertones: "You know what I mean, or if you don't know you can surely guess. [...] You must know what I mean" (119 and 139). The logic here seems to be the same as in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where the obsession with the threat represented by the imagined Barbarians, although never specific or certain, is all the greater precisely because it cannot be named. Paralyzed with fear, Mai, one of the Magistrate's women friends, can only repeat the same indefinite pronoun, first in the indirect and then the direct interrogative form, as her fear grows:

"I am terrified to think what is going to become of us. [S]ometimes all of a sudden I find myself imagining what might happen and I am paralyzed with fear. I don't know what to do anymore. [...] What is going to become of the children? [...] What is going to become of the children?" she demands vehemently" (*Barbarians* 152-153. Italics are in the original text, the underlining is mine).

The italics once again combine with the somewhat deliberate imprecision to contribute to this sense of fear, and as a consequence to fuel the enmity between the two peoples. In both novels, therefore, hysteria feeds on itself. The impossibility to name one's fear stems from the impossibility and the unwillingness to name the other, who remains an unspecified "Barbarian", the word not being less derogatory for its lack of specificity. When David in *Disgrace* finally meets again with one of Lucy's aggressors, he similarly refuses to call him by any specific or proper name, but incidentally reverts to set phrases, to insults signposted in italics, and other

“phrases that all his life he has avoided” and which “seem suddenly just and right” (*Disgrace* 206).

The use of italics underlines the eruption of violence, which actually spreads to the text itself. Unlike repetitions, which only record the character's thoughts, italics work at another textual level. Because they are a typographical sign and as such are visible on the page, inscribed on and within the body of the text, as Francine Cicurel and Jacqueline Authier-Revuz rightly showed (Cicurel 53; Authier-Revuz 77), they suggest that the text itself becomes contaminated by violence. Not surprisingly, it is because dialogue is impossible with Petrus, because neither he nor David can acknowledge what happened by labeling it precisely and by calling rape by its proper name, that David almost loses his temper and goes into what Lucy calls one of his eruptions. But it is also for this reason that both he and Petrus fall back on the old rhetoric which pits one community against the other: “So that is it. No more lies. *My people*. As naked an answer as he could wish. [...] Well, Lucy is *his people*” (*Disgrace* 201). Italics combine and clash here with euphemisms, which actually refer back to the source of the tension: to the apartheid era and the opposition between whites and blacks, which David now reads as the cultural opposition between “We Westernisers” and the people they formerly colonised. However, if this is how David ends up reading the situation, he does not explicitly say so. He “almost” resorts to this old rhetoric, but what matters is that he ultimately does not. He stops just in time, and the text records both what he said and what he did not say – and the fact that he did not say it. This phenomenon is akin to the more general phenomenon that Mike Kissack and Michael Titlestad note in the novel:

David displays a relinquishment of confidence in the rational schemes and precepts associated with an intellectual life, producing an immersion in daily encounters and challenges. This does not imply the adoption of an anti-intellectual stance, but rather an appreciation of the inherent limitations of rational reflection and control, [...] a sense of the importance of the limitations of the present and the immediate, and of the need to engage with these in a way that mitigates harm. (Kissack and Titlestad 146)

He does not go as far as Elizabeth Costello does subsequently, but, rather like Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, he learns to stop relying on abstract reasoning with a pretension to universality in favour of letting his own voice speak, or at least his personal and individual feelings which can only be granted any value within a specific situation – in favour, that is, of a more tentative, trial-and-error approach. Unlike the Magistrate who, probably because he has no other choice at a time when Colonel Joll identifies the enemy by writing the very word on the back of his prisoners, David refuses to be the other “sid[e] of the imperial rule, no more, no less” (*Barbarians* 135), to mimic its violence and to similarly designate the enemy, in his case Petrus, in what would then be a situation of direct opposition. The solution that the text apparently advocates, however painful and difficult it

may be, seems to be not to choose sides, to withdraw from the battlefield, even though the battle is still raging in some form and its conclusion remains uncertain. Coetzee's answer to the logic of apartheid and its legacy in post-1994 South Africa therefore echoes not so much *Candide's* motto (which Nadine Gordimer thought she read in the ending of *Life and Times of Michael K*), as it does Descartes, whose only certainty was ultimately doubt or Montaigne's own motto: "Que sais-je?". Even though this may be "little enough, less than little: nothing" (*Disgrace* 220), there does however remain on the page a trace of these doubts. The readers should thus be attuned to the nuances in the text between the free indirect discourse and what is actually said. Yet this can only be achieved if they also pay attention to the almost musical variations in the novels themselves (as in *Disgrace* and *The Master of Petersburg*), among the novels (notably the echoes between *Disgrace*, *Age of Iron*, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*), as well as between versions of the same novel (in Afrikaans or in English).

The other major work by Coetzee to which tentativeness and variations are central is *In the Heart of the Country*. Critics have amply commented on the repetitions, variations and contradictions in Magda's narrative³ yet what has been less analysed, if at all, are the variations between the two published versions of the text: the first entirely in English, published internationally, and the second, written earlier but published the following year in South Africa in both English for the narrative and Afrikaans for the dialogues. What a close analysis of the text reveals is that the variations between Afrikaans and English are carefully worked out to reveal that, despite the self-centered nature of Madga's narrative and her doubts as to whether Hendrik responds to her peace offerings, she is indeed "making a start, or if not that, making a gesture" (*Country* 110). Repetitions here take the form of attempts to find a proper way to address the other and to define him or her as a human being. Words that refer to the other are thus carefully translated within the Afrikaans edition as well as from the Afrikaans version to the English one. Well before *Disgrace*, these translations reflect a growing sensitivity to the humanity, not of the *volkies*, as Coloureds in general used to be called, but of the two "peoples" Madga knows and lives with. David's reluctance to use a word such as *volkies* in *Disgrace* can indeed be traced back to the variations in its meaning in the course of Coetzee's writing. The way in which David "almost" uses it (*Disgrace* 201), or in which Dawn, the secretary with whom he once had an affair, refers to "you people" of the apartheid era who supposedly "had it easier" because rules, but also differences between races, were clearer (8-9), are reminiscent of how the same word served to entrench differences between two strictly differentiated "peoples" or "Volks" in the utterances of another character called Dawn in *Dusklands*, the American Eugene Dawn, and of his South African counterpart in the second part of

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3. For instance Attwell 1993, 67 or Sévry 25.

Coetzee's first novel, *Jacobus Coetzee* (*Dusklands* 57).⁴ Coetzee's recurring use of this term reveals his acute awareness of the racism which minute variations in its meaning may convey. It is precisely this attitude which Magda refuses to adopt when she states her individuality: "I am not simply one of the whites, I am *! I am I*, not a people" (*Country* 118). The new opposition she draws is even clearer in the Afrikaans version⁵.

By refusing and actually deconstructing the equivalence between "boer" (peasant) and "Boer", the settlers who conquered ever greater parts of South African soil and the Afrikaner Volk from which white supremacist attitudes mostly derived, Magda indeed calls for a greater emphasis on the humanity of the various characters, produced here through the suffix "-mens". This can probably explain the further variations in the words referring to the two Coloured people on the farm. The word "volkies" is gradually replaced by phrases like "black folk", "bruinmens", "black people" and "people", whereas in standard South African speech at the time "[o]nly whites are 'men' and 'women' to most South African whites, whether English- or Afrikaans-speaking. Coloured farm labourers, collectively, are *volk* (people) or sometimes *skepsels* (creatures)" (Patterson 140). On the contrary, all of the terms used by Magda anticipate the later acknowledgment that Hendrik and Anna are "country folk" with just as much right to the land as the white settlers (*Country* 54), and linguistically at least they gradually give them back their identity as individual human beings rather than assimilate them under a collective designation. Magda, Hendrik and Anna can be "at last simply man and woman" (54 and 114).⁶ Those variations underline that which will become central in Mrs Curren's thoughts when she ponders over the English word, "people": "A curious expression: to have people. Do I have people? Are you my people? I think not. Perhaps only Florence qualifies to have people" (*Iron* 11). She then concludes: "We are all people together" (47). What may sound a little

4. For the meaning of these two words, and in particular for the use of Volk, see for instance Bullier 36, Coquerel 36 or Etherington 7.

5. "Ek is nie sommer een van die boermense nie, ek is *ek!* Ek is ek, nie 'n volk nie. [...] Jy weet hoe ek hier op die plaas leef, heeltemal buite die *menslike* genootskap, amper buite die *mensdom* self! [...] Besef jy nie dat jy en Anna die enigste *mense* ter wêreld is aan wie ek geheg is?" (116, South African edition, emphasis added). This can be loosely rendered as: "You know how I live here on the farm, totally outside human society, almost outside humanity. [...] Can't you see that you and Anna are the only people in the world I am attached to?"

6. Patterson translates "volk" as "people", which could suggest some inconsistency in my reasoning. One should note, however, that volk (with no capital letter) is always used in reference to Volk (with a capital letter): "Coloured farm labourers" are indeed seen "collectively" more as a people, rather than as people (men and women, human beings). Magda's hesitations show just such an awareness of the ambiguity of the words volk, folk and people, and it is all the more meaningful that she should ultimately prefer the phrase "man and woman". For more details, see Rogez 216-244.

too optimistic is actually allowed by those very linguistic musings throughout the novel.

Such linguistic variations within the same novel and among novels themselves indeed indicate at least two things. First, that tentativeness and hesitation become for Coetzee not, as has too often been said, a means to disengage himself from the political and historical demands of his time, but on the contrary a verbal gesture, in order to highlight the impossibility to draw clear boundaries between races, even of a linguistic nature, and to offer a return to the personal as a possible solution, however frail and limited, to the problems caused precisely by the rhetoric of generalization on which racism is founded. Secondly, that tentativeness is part and parcel of Coetzee's aesthetics, of the very texture of the language, or languages, which he uses in his novels. "They are not Yes, they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word," Mrs Curren argues as she tries to talk the young boy who has taken refuge in her house out of taking up arms against the regime (145). "Yes-no: every woman knows what it means as it defeats every man", she said a few pages before (116). If Mrs Curren is to be believed, "there is such a word, but it has never been allowed into the dictionaries" (116). That is not completely true, if one bothers to check a dictionary: "Ja-nee" is a word fully recorded in Afrikaans.⁷ What the English-speaking Mrs Curren and what Coetzee himself, a novelist of Afrikaans origins but who writes in English, invite the reader to do is to renounce binarism, which lies at the roots of so many of South Africa's troubles. What their variations rather than their hesitations or indecisions further suggest is that it is up to readers to read the texts like a permanent dialogue, which is also a dialogue between Afrikaans and English, to give them both back some of "their articulateness, their articulatedness" (*Disgrace* 117).

What Coetzee does in his novels is thus certainly not what one critic once called "sitting on the fence" (Worsfold 62). Even Michael K, precariously balanced as he straddles the fence of Jakkalsdrif, realizes how dangerous his situation is should he remain too long in that position, where "he was an easy shot against the silver-blue sky" (*Michael* 97). Coetzee's aesthetics of tentativeness just as easily lends itself to criticism and is probably therefore not a model to follow in the field of politics, probably not even in the realm of writing. It is, at best, a mode of writing rather than a model. Yet, to return to the trial motif, before summarily passing judgment and dismissing the mode of writing as critics have done after the publication of *Disgrace*,⁸ or even regarding previous novels, one should also

7. Ironically, however, its meaning seems to vary: Zoë Wicomb sees it as a double assertion, "[l]iterally, yes-no. Used, however, to signify a doubly strong affirmative, an emphatic yes" (Wicomb 274); but Bruce C. Donaldson seems on the other hand to agree with Coetzee, even to stress its use as a non-committal answer: "'yes, I suppose' (agreement); 'sigh; what should one do?'" (Donaldson 475). What is interesting is how the two languages, English and Afrikaans, implicitly echo each other in Coetzee's play with them.

8. *Disgrace* was strongly criticized by the general public and in newspapers reviews for what was felt to be its indecision, above all in its inconclusive ending, which was read as

realize that it is precisely where the strength of such a style lies, as it calls not for passivity, but for further personal action, on the part of readers as well as fellow South African writers from all sides of the political fences.⁹

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a criticism of the limited achievements of the new political regime. The best insight into the debate may be provided by the articles published in the special issue of *Interventions*, in particular the editorial by Derek Attridge.

9. One is left to wonder whether it is because such a call was not heeded that Coetzee left South Africa for Australia, as he left precisely when the debate around *Disgrace* was raging. It is still early to say whether he addresses his fellow Australian writers in a similar manner.

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