RE-TERRITORIALISING SOUTH AFRICA.

POLITICAL ALLEGORY IN *THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG* BY J.M. COETZEE

Robert Kusek

ABSTRACT

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

Jednym z najważniejszych terminów w krytyce twórczości J.M. Coetzeego 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 opowiadanią o Republice Południowej Afryki w ostatnich latach apartheidu.
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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

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2 Ibidem.
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’

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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 missile 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-

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12 Ibid., p. 217.
13 Ibid., p. 218.
14 Ibid., p. 229.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 230.
18 Ibid., p. 184.