

# To Speak of This You Would Need the Tongue of a God: Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Township Violence, and the Classics

Derek Attridge

**Abstract** Coetzee's representation of township violence in *Age of Iron* is untypical of his work in depicting directly and vividly the horrors of life under apartheid, and the accuracy of his account can be verified by examining other documents referring to the events in Guguletu and neighbouring townships in 1986, when state-armed vigilantes destroyed the homes of supporters of the ANC. However, the literary dimension of his description is paramount, and the events are viewed through the perspective of Mrs Curren, who, as a former teacher of classics, cannot help interpreting her experience through the works she has read, and who urges her daughter not to trust her account. There are a number of echoes of Vergil, especially the episode of the Aeneid in which Aeneas visits the underworld. These echoes not only contribute to the presentation of a particular character, but associate the violence being observed to a history of violence and of literary representations of violence. As a work of literature, *Age of Iron* does not aim to have a direct political effect, but to offer readers an experience that may continue to haunt them and thus keep alive the memory of these terrible events.

**Key words** Coetzee; *Age of Iron*; classical allusions; township violence

**Author** **Derek Attridge** is Professor of English at the University of York and a Fellow of the British Academy. Among his many books are *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce*; *The Singularity of Literature*; *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory and History*; *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*; and *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces*. He is currently co-editing *Theory after 'Theory'* and *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*. Email: derek.attridge@york.ac.uk

The elderly, ailing Mrs Curren, whose letter to her daughter we are reading in the fictional world of J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, has offered to drive her maid Florence from central Cape Town to the Cape Flats in the early morning to help search for her son Bheki, who has gone missing. The pages that follow are some of the most memorable in the novel, and yet at the same time they seem untypical of it, and indeed of Coetzee's writing more generally: they attempt to convey the horror of the violence rending the townships and settlements in the traumatic year of 1986 with a directness that brings Coetzee closer to historical reportage than anywhere else in his fiction.

Mrs. Curren has been taken by Florence's cousin Mr. Thabane from the township of Guguletu to the edge of a nearby shantytown; the rain is beating against her face and she is shivering with cold. Her account, supposedly written once she is back home, continues as follows:

The path widened, then came to an end in a wide, flat pond. On the far side of the pond the shanties started, the lowest-lying cluster surrounded by water, flooded. Some built sturdily of wood and iron, others no more than skins of plastic sheeting over frames of branches, they straggled north over the dunes as far as I could see.

At the brink of the pond I hesitated. "Come," said Mr Thabane. Holding on to him I stepped in, and we waded across, in water up to our ankles. One of my shoes was sucked off. "Watch out for broken glass," he warned. I retrieved the shoe.

Save for an old woman with a sagging mouth standing in a doorway, there was no one in sight. But as we walked further the noise we had heard, which at first might have been taken for wind and rain, began to break up into shouts, cries, calls, over a ground-bass which I can only call a sigh; a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing.

Then the little boy, our guide, was with us again, tugging Mr Thabane's sleeve, talking excitedly. The two of them broke away; I struggled behind them up the duneside. (Coetzee 87)

Mrs Curren finds herself behind a huge crowd looking down at what she calls a "scene of devastation": burning and smouldering shanties, emitting black smoke. She struggles to comprehend what she is witnessing:

Jumbles of furniture, bedding, household objects stood in the pouring rain. Gangs of men were at work trying to rescue the contents of the burning shacks, going from one to another, putting out the fires; or so I thought till with a shock it came to me that these were no rescuers but incendiaries, that the battle I saw them waging was not with the flames but with the rain.

It was from the people gathered on the rim of this amphitheatre in the dunes that the sighing came. Like mourners at a funeral they stood in the downpour, men, women and children, sodden, hardly bothering to protect themselves, watching the destruction. (87-8)

Mrs Curren observes a man attacking the door of a shack with an axe and another setting fire to it; when stones are thrown at these men, they advance on the people in the crowd, who turn and run. One of the crowd knocks Mrs Curren to the ground, and when she manages to get up again she expresses her sense of complete disorientation:

A woman screamed, high and loud. How could I get away from this terrible

place? Where was the pond I had waded across, where was the path to the car? There were ponds everywhere, pools, lakes, sheets of water; there were paths everywhere, but where did they lead? (89)

Mr Thabane finds her, and, before a ring of spectators, asks her what sort of crime it is that she sees. Eventually, in what David Attwell calls an “especially memorable moment,” she gives the answer quoted in my title: “‘To speak of this’ — I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path — ‘You would need the tongue of a god’” (91). A little later they find the rain-beaten body of Bheki, laid out with four other victims of shooting in the roofless remains of a building. In the distance Mrs Curren sees a line of khaki-brown troop-carriers.<sup>1</sup>

The historical accuracy of the scene described here is not difficult to substantiate. In May and June 1986 the homes of around 60,000 people were destroyed in Guguletu, Crossroads and the neighbouring settlements, with about 60 deaths in the fighting.<sup>2</sup> Florence tells Mrs Curren that “They were giving guns to the witdoeke and the witdoeke were shooting” — not in Guguletu itself, she explains, but “out in the bush” (83). There is considerable evidence, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony and elsewhere, that residents hostile to the activities of the pro-UDF and ANC youth were armed and supported by the police; their arm- or headbands made of white cloth (witdoeke) were the notorious emblem of their affiliation. Although Florence says at first she thinks they will have to go to “Site C” — an area of the huge township of Khayelitsha some distance from Guguletu — Mrs Curren’s description of the journey suggests that a more likely candidate, if we want to fix on a precise location, is the shantytown known as KTC. (I haven’t come across any specific evidence for the flooding which plays a significant part in Mrs Curren’s experience, though the settlements on the Cape Flats are notorious for their liability to floods so this is not an unlikely scenario for a winter morning.) The description of the journey from Guguletu appears to lack geographical precision — Mr Thabane drives through a “landscape of scorched earth” beyond the houses, then turns north, “away from the mountain, then off the highway onto a dirt road” that soon becomes sand (86). If Mr Thabane’s house is near Lansdowne Road, along which Mrs Curren has driven and which borders Guguletu to the south, he would need to travel north to reach KTC. Another possibility for their destination is Crossroads, a little further away to the east. Site C is further away still, to the south-east, and I have not found any documentation of violence there in 1986 — in fact, there is evidence that it was a centre for the witdoeke:

During the months of March to June 1986 a bloody and devastating territorial war was fought between Ngxobongwana’s groups and the satellite camps. Ngxobongwana was in Ciskei at the time of the violence. The Wit Doeke from Crossroads were supported by Mali Hoza and his community in Site C of Khayelitsha. Many eye witnesses claimed that the Wit Doeke were also supported by the police and the army. It was claimed that there was identity of interest between Ngxobongwana, who wished to have the area cleared for his own people, and the State,

which wished to crush the “comrades” and pave the way for the establishment of a town council and an “orderly settlement”. Many lives were lost, shacks were destroyed and almost 65% of the area of KTC way [sic] razed to the ground.<sup>3</sup>

Although it’s probably not possible to identify exactly a place and a time to which the fictional events correspond, there is sufficient historical accuracy in Coetzee’s account for this section of the novel to work as effective reportage. One could say that this accuracy is a necessary condition for the success of these pages of *Age of Iron* — had Coetzee significantly distorted the historical record he could have been accused of irresponsibility and lost the reader’s confidence — but not a sufficient one: it is quite possible to be accurate and yet fail in the task of responsible representation. What, I want to ask in this essay, is specific to literary representations of traumatic experiences such as the township violence of 1986? To pursue this question further, we need to examine the way the novel raises the question of representation itself — something implicit in Mrs Curren’s expression of helplessness in the face of the task of description, a helplessness which seems to be more fundamental than that of the liberal white individual faced by the extreme suffering of the non-white poor, although that is of course an aspect of her situation that cannot be ignored<sup>4</sup> — It’s an aspect that Coetzee gives full expression to in the retort by “a man in the crowd”: “This woman talks shit” (91).

After a dozen pages giving an account of the violence and its aftermath as witnessed by Mrs Curren, written in a fairly conventional novelistic mode with vivid description and plenty of dialogue, we are suddenly reminded that we are, supposedly, reading a letter meant not for us, but for another fictional personage. Mrs Curren breaks off her account of her experiences in the squatter camp and township, and addresses her daughter directly:

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. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. (95)

The reader of the novel may not be the addressee of the letter, but it is hard not to take this passage as having him or her directly in its sights. At first it may sound like a version of the classic statement of the realistic novelist’s purpose; as Conrad famously put it in the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you see. That — and no more, and it is everything” (Conrad xiv). But Mrs Curren is not, in fact, making a realist writer’s assertion at all: the emphasis here is on the story-teller, not the story — the key phrases are “through my eyes . . . through me alone”. And because the story is not, cannot be, an objective representation — least of all, of such scenes as these — the responsible reader is obliged to mistrust the story-teller at every point. Mrs Curren — and we

might say Coetzee — expresses this powerfully in the next paragraph:

I am the one writing; I, I. So 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. (95 –96)

Even the warning that in her writing she may be being less than completely honest may itself be less than completely honest — we only have to turn to Coetzee's essay "Confession and Double Thoughts" to find a compelling account of the impossibility of a true confession in a secular context, since it is necessary to confess that one's confession is not as full and pure as it might be, and so on *ad infinitum*.

We are thus not allowed to forget that *Age of Iron*'s pages on township violence are the representation, firstly, of a (fictional) middle-class white woman who has benefited from an extensive education and, secondly, of a (real) middle-class white man who has similarly benefited. This does not, of course, render the representation invalid, but it does encourage us to examine it for its limitations and biases. Mrs Curren is a retired classics teacher, and in attempting to describe what she has just witnessed, she cannot but fall back on literary passages that have become part of the texture of her thinking. If we examine these echoes, we will find that they signal a very particular consciousness, with its own way of seeing.

As they approach Guguletu, the mist swirling around the car prompts a memory of Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*: "Wraiths, spirits. Aornos this place; birdless" (83). This is a recollection of Aeneas's arrival at the cave leading to the underworld:

There was a deep rugged cave, stupendous and yawning wide, protected by a lake of black water and the glooming forest. Over this lake no birds could wing a straight course without harm, so poisonous the breath which streamed up from those black jaws and rose to the vault of sky; and that is why the Greeks named this place "Aornos, the Birdless."<sup>5</sup>

And when their ten-year old guide to the shantytown arrives, Mrs Curren thinks back to the innocence of her own childhood, prompting another memory of a passage from the *Aeneid*, this one describing the weeping of the infant souls at the entrance to the underworld:

White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. White our colour, the colour of limbo; white sands, white rocks, a white light pouring down from all sides. . . *In limine primo*: on the threshold of death, the threshold of life. (85)

Aeneas has crossed the river Styx and escaped the three-headed Cerberus when he

hears cries.

These were the loud wailing of infant souls weeping at the very entrance-way; never had they had their share of life's sweetness, for the dark day had stolen them from their mother's breasts and plunged them to a death before their time. (160)

In the passages describing the encounter with the burning shantytown, there are no classical allusions as specific as these examples, but there is throughout a sense that the particularities of what Mrs Curren is witnessing are being understood through their relation to a long history of literary representations of the experience of horror and suffering. The wading across the pond is a factual matter, yet with the *Aeneid*'s depiction of the underworld already alluded to it's hard not to hear echoes of Aeneas's crossing of the River Styx into that place of otherness, of misery, of deathliness, "They crossed the river; and Charon eventually disembarked both the priestess and the hero, unharmed, on ugly slime amid grey reeds" (159). The extraordinary sighing that Mrs Curren hears — "a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing" — is more than a realistic detail, indeed, it may not strike the reader as particularly realistic, but draws some of its remarkable power from its suggestion of the myriad souls encountered by Aeneas in the underworld, such as those grieving in the "Fields of Mourning," which "stretch in every direction" like the shanties straggling over the dunes as far as Mrs Curren can see (160). When she is able to identify the source of the sighing as the shack dwellers gathered on the edge of the amphitheatre — itself a surprisingly classical word in this context — she compares them to "mourners at a funeral" (88). Later she will think "Hades, Hell; the domain of ideas. [...] Why can hell not be at the foot of Africa, and why can the creatures of hell not walk among the living?" (101)<sup>6</sup>

The other literary presence in this scene is Dante's *Inferno*, itself full of allusions to the journey to the underworld described by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, with Virgil himself, of course, acting as guide to the nether regions.<sup>7</sup> To emphasise the way in which Mrs Curren sees these scenes of horror and misery through the lens of her classical and post-classical reading is not to find fault with her, or with Coetzee; it is to highlight the fact that to witness an event of this kind is inevitably to struggle to interpret it, as Mrs Curren struggles to interpret the action of the men doing something to the shacks, and to draw on whatever frames of reference one has available. It is also a reflection of Coetzee's own perspective, an acknowledgement that he cannot speak for those more intimately involved in the violence he represents. In these pages of *Age of Iron*, Coetzee manages both to convey a traumatic experience by literary means — there is undeniable power in the classically-inflected account written after the event by Coetzee's fictional character — and to reveal the impossibility of truly conveying it by these means.

If Coetzee's novel, because of its circulation around the world, spurred some readers into action as a result of their being made aware of the evils perpetrated dur-

ing the 1986 Emergency, it did so as an extra, a by-product of its literary value, as it were, and not as a consequence of its importance of its working as literature. But if in linking the traumatic experience of an elderly woman in the burning settlements of South Africa in 1986 to one of western culture's profoundest imaginings of the place of the dead — and Virgil is of course echoing Homer, and will be echoed by Dante and a hundred other writers, painters, composers, and film-makers — the novel succeeds in taking readers through their own psychic and emotional underworld journeys, so that they continue to be haunted by the scene of the flat pond, the repeated sigh, the gangs of men at their terrible work, it will have succeeded as literature. And this is not, as I've been arguing, because it universalises the particular historical moment, but because that historical moment in its particularity gains cognitive and affective force from millennia-old cultural narratives that register the trauma of exposure to an underworld, or other world, of suffering and death.

### [ Notes ]

1. In focusing on these pages of *Age of Iron*, I am omitting all reference to the mysterious vagrant Vercueil, who plays such an important part in the novel from its first page to its last (an importance I have discussed in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*). The shift in tonality which his absence from the Guguletu episode creates is such that one feels one is reading a different novel. For an important discussion of the way in which the presence of Vercueil troubles the boundaries of the serious and the nonserious, see Patrick Hayes 144 – 64.
2. See the South African Press Association Report. Beinart also gives the figure of 60,000 rendered homeless. See Beinart 266. See also Davenport and Saunders 467 – 8.
3. See Goldstone Commission ; Report on Violence at Crossroads.
4. See Kossew 195 and Hayes 149. Rich sees Mrs Curren's inability to speak as an indication of the failure of "liberal discourse" which, "in a situation of acute crisis and polarization, is stretched to the point of silence"; while Kossew states that "the language of the colonizers with its eurocentric classical allusions is shown to be inadequate and evasive". These comments are undoubtedly true, but the scene also raises more general questions about language's capacity in the face of trauma. Hayes sees her inarticulacy as the result of a clash of genres, emphasising "the way she is confronted by the divergent forms of sociability asserted by the counter-genre that is unfolding around her"; in doing so, he unconsciously duplicates Mrs Curren's own tendency to interpret her experience in literary terms.
5. See Virgil 154. See also Laura Wright 68 – 72.
6. The crossing of the Styx in Book VI of the *Aeneid* is still in Mrs Curren's mind as she approaches death; she quotes four lines to Vercueil on the host of unburied souls clamouring to cross, though she gives him a jokily false translation. See *Age of Iron* J. M. Coetzee 176.
7. For a discussion of these allusions, see Hoegberg 31. Hoegberg's assertion that the act of leaving Florence's daughter Hope behind is "a clear reference to the sign on the gate of Dante's Hell" ("Abandon all hope ye who enter here") seems a little far-fetched, however. But then again, Mrs Curren does comment that being accompanied by children called Hope and Beauty is "like living in an allegory" . . . Hayes argues that the name "Vercueil" in some pronunciations sounds like "Virgil", and that Mrs Curren wants to cast him in this role, though he rejects, refusing to "escort her to the 'underworld' of Guguletu" with a curt "Fuck off" . For Hayes, "this particular trip to the underworld . . . owes rather more to Cervantes than to Dante". See also Hayes 144, 149. And for the quotation from *Age of Iron*, see Coetzee 84, 82.

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