

# Poetics and Politics: Reading Inside-Out or Outside-In

*It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone  
the course of the world* ó Theodor Adorno, 1977



Master Thesis Literatuurwetenschap

Annet van Dijk, 3150526

Utrecht University, January 2013

Supervisor: dr. B. M. Kaiser

Second Reader: prof. dr. R. L. Buikema

## Content

- 1 Preface
- 2 Reading Politics in J.M. Coetzee's work
- 3 Politics and Poetics
- 4 Allegory
- 5 Literariness
- 6 Reading Inside- Out
- 7 Conclusion
- 8 Bibliography

## 1. Preface

Since the 1950s the field of literary studies has been subject to various changes and influences. As Richard Rorty puts it: 'no healthy humanistic discipline ever looks the same for more than a generation or two.'<sup>1</sup> These changes in the field are due to the close relation between literature and society. Texts are written and read in the discourse of the time that influences the writer or reader. As society changes, the way we write, read and interpret literature changes too.

In the second half of the twentieth century developments in society caused a shift in theoretical thinking about art. The end of colonialism, for example, gave rise to a wide range of theories on post-colonial society and literature emerging from it. The situation in South Africa, where apartheid was ended but the different ethnic groups still live alongside their former oppressor and oppressed, is quite unique. Not only are the former oppressed searching for their own identity but the former colonizer, the white population, is also concerned with the way to deal with the new situation. How to deal with the past and how to overcome one's own racism? These questions often become themes of literature written in this time and place. One of the best known writers from this era is J.M. Coetzee.

While talking about the interpretation of texts discussing the position of the reader in relation to the text is inevitable. In the context of this thesis the allegorical function of literature is a very important factor in relation to the reader. The allegorical exists not only in the text but also in the eye of the beholder and in the experience when the two meet. The difficulties and necessities of the allegorical are elaborately explained by Derek Attridge in several of his theoretical works. He shows how the allegorical is necessary for reading in the first place but does not have to determine the interpretation all together.

The different texts written by Coetzee have been widely interpreted and criticized. In the light of the changes in society, these interpretations are many times influenced by theories and ideas of postcolonialism<sup>2</sup>. In this thesis I will investigate to what extent the use of socio-political theories, like postcolonialism, influence the interpretation of an object of art. To do so, I will look into a selection of the wide range of critique on two of Coetzee's novels: *Foe* and *Disgrace*.

In general I will investigate in what way the political and the poetical coexist in these interpretations and how they relate to each other. This means the focus will be on the reading and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Rorty, Richard, 2006. 'Looking back at 'Literary Theory'' In *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press. 67

<sup>2</sup> In the spelling of postcolonialism I choose to follow John McLeod. He defines post-colonialism as the definition for the historical period as in 'after colonialism' and postcolonialism as 'referring to disparate forms of representation, reading practices and values'. In this thesis it will be the latter form of postcolonialism that will be discussed. McLeod, John, 2000, *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 5

reading politically or poetically specifically and not on writing or writing political<sup>3</sup> or on the socio-political implications of the text itself. The specific relation of the allegorical in postcolonialism or texts emerging from a (post-)colonial situation is thoroughly investigated and discussed by Réda Bensmaïa. His ideas on this relationship are a great help in untying the knot of the coexistence of the political and the poetical in literature.

As will become clear, closely related to the allegorical reading of a text is the attention for the aesthetic part of literature. The object of art is in danger of being seen only for its socio-political value:

Many a committed research project in the humanities is in danger of reducing popular culture and artistic expression to a message about the construction of gender, ethnicity, nationality and/or sexuality, thereby paying too little attention to the specific nature of the medium and the effects of its form.<sup>4</sup>

Rosemarie Buikema therefore suggests closer attention for the literariness of a work of art that does credit to its singularity and uniqueness. The way to interpret literature avoiding the pitfalls of a too political reading can be the reading inside-out and starting with the text itself instead of outside-in which starts with the socio-political context.

---

<sup>3</sup> On politics on the side of writing or the text itself, Theodor Adorno wrote a very enlightening article published in *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977) edited by Frederic Jameson.

<sup>4</sup> Buikema, Rosemarie, 2009. 'Crossing the Borders of Identity Politics. *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee and *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk' In *European Journal of Women's Studies*. Vol. 16 (4), p. 309-323. 313

## 2. Reading Politics in J.M. Coetzee's work

One of the most criticized texts of the last decades is J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*. His 1986 novel is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* written in 1719. Many critics used this text to illustrate their ideas on a changed world in the centuries lying between the two books and the new discursive world of modern day. Because of this wide range of reactions to the novel, an investigation of the different interpretations gives a lot of information about the way critics today read a text and react to it. So did Lewis MacLeod, at the same time questioning the way in which critics read the novel and interpret it:

Bluntly, I would like to suggest that the *Foe*'s critical oeuvre inadvertently duplicates the processes of discursive mystification the novel seems to critique, that the critical frameworks applied to the novel (operating as specific discursive structures) might lead us further from, not closer to, the truth.<sup>5</sup>

Another very much discussed text in the field of postcolonial studies, is Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*. This text was received with great hostility in different parts of South African society: the publication of *Disgrace* caused irritation among a number of members of the governing African National Congress and controversial debates in parliament.<sup>6</sup> *Disgrace* and *Foe* are two very different texts but are both interpreted as dealing with the (post-) apartheid in South African society. A very significant difference in the light of this interpretation is that *Foe* is placed in a totally different time and place than post-apartheid South Africa, whereas *Disgrace* is placed in the time and era of post-apartheid and is seen as a direct representation of reality. The tendency to interpret *Disgrace* as a direct representation is not hard to understand. In the novel there are several major events that are similar to events occurring in society and that are important topics in social debate. The attack of David Lurie and his daughter Lucy at her farm for example can be seen as a representation of the major contemporary problem in South African society of the attack and murder of white South African farmers. *Foe* on the other hand is seen as an indirect representation of post-apartheid South African society. The characters, their mutual relations and the events described are interpreted as icons of the socio-political topics in reality. Still, apparent similarities to reality do not automatically legitimate the interpretation of a text as direct representation. That these two novels by many critics are primarily interpreted as a representation of post-apartheid South Africa is probably motivated by the time and place of their origin and by the events occurring in the narratives.

The wide range and large numbers of reactions to and interpretations of the novels in both cases seems to be caused by their apparent close relation to reality. To investigate the influence of the

---

<sup>5</sup> MacLeod, Lewis, 2006. "Do we of necessity become puppets in a story?" or narrating the world: on speech, silence and discourse in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* In *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Spring 2006, p. 1-18. 2

<sup>6</sup> Leusmann, Harald, 2004. "J.M. Coetzee's Cultural Critique" In *World Literature Today*, Vol. 78, No. 3/4, p. 60-63. 61

relation between socio-political reality and the text, I will discuss a few of the reactions to the novels that focus on the interpretation of the texts in relation to the context.

For critics there are two major points of interest in Coetzee's *Foe*. First there are the possibilities and implications for gender theory the character of Susan Barton gives. Secondly the speechless Friday creates a platform for discussing the power relations he finds himself in, or even more: where we as a reader find him. The two are closely related because the power relations mentioned are primarily shown in the relation between Barton and Friday, and because of the narratological structure of the text. Especially this last point of interest is often linked to the socio-political context of the text and therefore will be illuminating to discuss here.

The relation between Susan Barton and Friday is quite complicated. Friday is clearly not British: "The man squatted down beside me. He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers."<sup>7</sup> Susan chooses to take him with her to England when they are rescued and Crusoe dies on the ship. Although she tries to get him on a ship that might lead him back to what is possibly his home country, she does not pursue this because she is afraid others will enslave him. What further, or mostly, complicates their relationship is the absence of communication. On the island, Crusoe taught Friday a few words in English to get him to do specific tasks, but otherwise Friday does not understand English. On the other hand, he is not able to communicate with Susan and does not seem to be inclined to do so either. Susan tries her very best to teach him but this appears to be unmanageable. The only thing that is left to her is to try to read Friday as best as she can. In one of her attempts she makes music to which Friday seems to respond with dancing. Robert Post interprets this part of the story as: "Susan discovers that he dances to remove himself, or his spirit, from Newington and England, and from me too."<sup>8</sup> To Post it is a given fact that this removal from all sorts of things is the reason why Friday dances. What he does not acknowledge is that this is not a discovery made by Susan but an interpretation on her side of what she sees happening. She has no information whatsoever to backup this interpretation but it gives her the opportunity to at least have the illusion of knowing a part of Friday's story. What Post misinterprets here, is that he sees the storyteller Susan Barton as an authority on Friday. The same thing happens when he says: "Freedom to Friday is less than a word, a noise, one of the multitude of noises I make when I open my mouth."<sup>9</sup> This is Susan talking and, again, her interpretation of Friday's possible thoughts. She is putting these words in his mouth and they are not a representation of what his character thinks or says.

---

<sup>7</sup> Coetzee, J.M., 1986. *Foe*. London: Penguin Books. 5-6

<sup>8</sup> Post, Robert M., 1989. "The noise of Freedom: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*." In *Critique*, Spring 1989, p.143-154. 147

<sup>9</sup> Post, 148

Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran do acknowledge the complexity of the matter. They see the difference between the utterances made by Susan on behalf of Friday and Friday's own thoughts or ideas (which we do not know): "Susan's plan [í ] is, given the unreliability of memory and the difficulties inherent in speaking on behalf of some other voice, complex enough, but the plan is utterly undone by Susan's desire for veracity and for wholeness."<sup>10</sup> This gives them the opportunity to take the analysis to another level and see what this might say on a socio-political level: "Speaking on behalf of others [í ] constitutes the crucial issue in political representation, an issue Coetzee refuses to leave uncriticized."<sup>11</sup> This view on the political representation made by Coetzee is therefore a very legitimate one because Macaskill and Colleran take into account the different parts of the text to base their interpretation on. Not only do they look at what is said, but also to how it is said and by whom. That this distinction is made on narratological arguments is made clear by Lewis MacLeod: "Foe's skills outrival hers [Barton's] and this has a negative effect on her sense of control in the world, but the discrepancy arises out of a difference in narrative ability, not power or ethical intentionality."<sup>12</sup> As he points out, there are no linguistic signs in the text that indicate a collision in the power relation between Foe and Barton causing her not to write her own story other than the capacity to write, which Foe has and Susan does not<sup>13</sup>.

The essence of the problem encountered by Post above on the representation of the thoughts of Friday, is in the narratological position of Susan Barton. What Post did not take into account is that the text is Susan's representation of the events taking place. She is the narrator of at least the largest part of the novel<sup>14</sup>.

The main problem in many interpretations of *Foe* I want to address here, is the way in which socio-political ideas and theories are made part of the analysis. The text is not situated in the time and place in which it was written. Coetzee being a white South African writer born in 1940, his texts are often linked to the situation of apartheid and post-apartheid in his country. The novel *Foe* is no exception to this rule: "Through his speaker, Susan Barton, the poetic imagination of Coetzee is calling out for nonwhite South Africans to be permitted speech so that their plight will be heard and recognized throughout the world."<sup>15</sup> This conclusion claims that Coetzee's text is specifically bound to the South

---

<sup>10</sup> Macaskill, Brian and Jeanne Colleran, 1992. "Reading History, Writing Hersey: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*" In *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Autumn 1992, p.432-457. 445

<sup>11</sup> Macaskill and Colleran, 446

<sup>12</sup> MacLeod, 5

<sup>13</sup> Susan Barton does have the technical ability to write, showing the letters she writes to Foe, but she herself believes she lacks the artistic or creative skills that enable her to write a story that is worth reading.

<sup>14</sup> The last part of Coetzee's novel differs very much in style and tone from the preceding parts which makes it reasonable to argue it is not narrated by Susan Barton as the rest of the novel is.

<sup>15</sup> Post, 152-153

African situation and tries to speak a message which is to be heard by the world. In Post's point of view this would be a text so much committed to the political situation and the cause of coming to a solution for a very complicated situation in the nation that it can actually play an active role in coming to this solution. Still, there is no reason to dismiss a socio-political interpretation of a text as a whole. What I would like to point out is that an interpretation that is focussed only on the text as a direct or indirect representation of reality is at risk of losing sight of the other parts of a text that together form the totality of it. These other parts such as form and narratological structures can contribute to or resist the reading that is based on context alone and by doing so give a totally different outcome to the analysis.

In his reading the text in the light of the South African context, Post tries to fit everything in the frame of his socio-political interpretation: 'Cruso's recurring fever could symbolize the diseased South African government, and his death might stand for hope of overturning that government.'<sup>16</sup> This analysis seems to be a bit farfetched. Even though it is plausible to link *Foe* to the social debate in South Africa, when an interpretation is that debatable and not helped with arguments from the text, it is not an interpretation but searching for meaning. The preoccupation Post has with the South African situation is clear from the very first sentence of his article:

Whether or not their works are set in Africa, anti-apartheid South African authors often write, directly or in-directly, about slave-master relationships and call upon images and metaphors of imprisonment and escape or freedom to embody their themes ó themes that more often than not reflect the injustices experienced by the oppressed at the hand of the victimizer and by the majority nonwhite South Africans at the hand of the minority white South Africans.<sup>17</sup>

To start his article with this can be seen as a simple historical introduction of his text and an introduction to Post's hypothesis. However, when it also is the beginning of his interpretation, he is at risk of reading outside-in instead of first looking at the text itself. With this claim as a starting point, it is no surprise that Post's article is not about Coetzee's novel. The primary purpose seems to be something else in which *Foe* helps to illustrate what Post wants to tell us. To commence an interpretation of *Foe* with a reference to anti-apartheid South Africa could be the introduction of a valuable analysis. The way Post engages in it in this case though, there is no other possibility than to read the text in a socio-political context. He seems to validate his interpretation a priori in his statement that there are (hardly) other interpretations possible of South African text. The withdrawal from the text itself as an object of study starts right at the beginning. This interpretation not only does not do justice to the text, it also simplifies the cultural situation it is applied to. If it was as easy as

---

<sup>16</sup> Post, 146

<sup>17</sup> Post, 143



represented by Post, there would hardly be an issue in society to discuss. That Post's way of interpreting *Foe* is somewhat problematic is also recognized by others:

Coetzee's novels easily escape the efforts of admiring but inexperienced wreckers like Robert M. Post, who seems committed to running *Foe* aground on the flat rocks of a naïve allegorical correspondence between the novel and the social circumstances that contributed to its production. Exegetes of Post's stature are not the only would-be wreckers, however, for Coetzee is further beleaguered on one side by those (like Vaughan and Rich) who would have the work of art subordinate itself directly to a political function, and on the other side by those (like Dovey and Beressem) who would have the work serve as stitches within the theoretically seamless fabric of postcolonial *écriture*.<sup>18</sup>

Post's reading is clearly very much concerned with the socio-political context from which the text emanates. The contemporary debate in reality is a recurring topic in his analyses of *Foe*. This is what I would like to call a 'reading outside-in'. Post starts his interpretation by investigating the relation between the text and reality by discussing the similarities between the two. From the outset of the context he moves towards the text.

What has become clear in this discussion of a few of the interpretations of Coetzee's work, is that a preoccupation with socio-political ideas and theories can tempt a critic to conclusions that are not legitimised by the text itself. In the case of *Foe*, the text is seen as an indirect representation of South African society. The events are 'translated' from a different time and place to contemporary reality. Because of this mode of translation, it is relatively easy to pin-point where an interpretation loses sight of the text itself.

*Disgrace* on the other hand, shows a very different setting. The society pictured is very much similar to the situation in South African society. Because of that, there is no 'translation' necessary to interpret this text as a direct representation of South African society. Still this does not mean we can read this text as a direct comment on or answer for difficulties in reality. There is always a tension between art and reality despite the necessity of the two going hand in hand. As mentioned earlier, *Disgrace* shows events that are very much similar to disturbing events in society and that are extensively discussed in social debate. An interpretation that is primarily concerned with the contextual implications of the text will be focused on the comparison between the text and reality. In the case of *Disgrace* the resemblances are so obvious that it is easily forgotten to get beyond that point. The interpretations often stop at summarizing the similarities between text and reality and for *Disgrace* this meant a wide range of reactions in (political) society like the African National Congress.

---

<sup>18</sup> Macaskill and Colleran, 435

The novel was seen as a direct representation of post-apartheid South African society and the events of the attack and gang rape of Lucy as a comment on social relations and certain ethnic groups:

The ANC's criticism was echoed by others like Aggrey Klaaste, who wrote in *Sowetan* that the novel was the perspective of a disgruntled Afrikaner and that the story of black men raping white women was offensive (qtd. in McDonald 325). Jakes Gerwel, professor and Director General of the President's office under Nelson Mandela, was dismayed by the novel's almost barbaric post-colonial claims of black Africans, its representation of mixed race characters as whores, seducers, complainers, conceited accusers, and its exclusion of the possibility of civilized reconciliation (qtd. in McDonald 325).<sup>19</sup>

For the critics who protest so fiercely against the novel, the description of the dreadful events on Lucy's farm overshadow every other part of the text. They extract those parts from the narrative and comment on that without mentioning the other parts or regarding the text as a whole. The assumed direct representation of South African society in *Disgrace* leads to a different form of reading outside-in than in the case of *Foe*. The isolation of specific parts of the text disjoints the work of literature. When such events from the text are analysed as a separate entity the other fundamental features of literature are not acknowledged. The form, medium, and use of language cannot be appreciated to their full extent and their influence on the content is impossible to determine. In the last chapter I will show how thorough reading and close analyses can give a totally different view on the represented events.

---

<sup>19</sup> Roy, Sohinee, 2012. "Speaking with a Forked Tongue: *Disgrace* and the Irony of Reconciliation in Postapartheid South Africa." In *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4, p. 699-722. 700

### 3. Politics and Poetics

In the previous section it has become clear that even though the final conclusion in some cases can be very plausible a political interpretation of literature can cause a removal from the text in several ways. In this chapter, I will focus on the question what is missing in the argumentation in such interpretations. Many writers and critics from (post-)colonial societies have argued against this kind of analysis of their texts:

What has long struck me was the nonchalance with which the work of these writers [so-called postcolonial writers] was analyzed. Whenever these novels were studied, they were almost invariably reduced to anthropological or cultural case studies. Their literariness was rarely taken seriously. And once they were finally integrated into the deconstructed canon of world literature, they were made to serve as tools for political or ideological agendas.<sup>20</sup>

To determine what is exactly the problem in the interpretations of these critics, we will have to look closely into the way they analyse a text and what this implies about their view on literature.

As we have seen, a lot of critics look at South African literature in the light of the main themes and theories of postcolonialism to find out what the writer was trying to say. The ambivalence of this manner of interpretation is made clear by Réda Bensmaïa when he says:

If it is indeed true that an allegorical dimension persists in most so-called postcolonial texts, allegory is clearly almost never the primary or sole ambition of the authors in question. When it is, however, experience has shown that we often find ourselves faced with texts that could be called didactic, the artistic or literary value of which is slight or nil.<sup>21</sup>

Thus the literary work that is analysed above all in the light of the socio-political context in which it is written, disregards the idea of the text as a work of art.

The first problem we encounter in interpretations overdetermined with the socio-political context is that of focussing on the intention of the writer and looking for an essentialist meaning or message hidden in the text. In several cases, the writer is even criticised or attacked based on the message critics thought they found in a text. To look at the intention of the writer is always a hazardous enterprise:

---

<sup>20</sup> Bensmaïa, Réda, 2003. *Experimental Nations or, the Invention of the Maghreb*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 6

<sup>21</sup> Bensmaïa, 68-69

We may impatiently insist that it is simply the author speaking to us directly, but it is worth remembering that this is not in any sense the author's 'true' voice, since he or she only uses this precise tone, pace, degree of detail, and so on, when narrating a work of fiction.<sup>22</sup>

To this statement on the writer of Peter Barry one could even add, that this voice he or she uses only when narrating this *specific* work of fiction. We can never assume that a previous or subsequent work of literature is written in precisely the same tone, because, to start with, the difference in time of writing.

To find a clear cut message or reaction to society in a text, it seems as if literature has and provides answers for (complex) situations in reality. In the case of Coetzee's *Foe* it has become clear that the easy solutions found by critics on many occasions do not do justice to the complexity of the work as Derek Attridge also concludes: 'His novels demand, and deserve, responses that do not claim to tell their truths, but ones that participate in their inventive openings.'<sup>23</sup>

To come to easy solutions, a critic needs to approach the work of art with a very clear set of theories ready. There is no space to see the work at hand in a different light: 'It brings with it the danger that writing emanating from South Africa will be read *only* as a reflection of or a resistance to a particular political situation, whereas the high literary canon, in its most traditional form, is premised upon an assumption of universal moral and aesthetic values.'<sup>24</sup> Attridge further elaborates on the way such an interpretation functions and introduces the term 'instrumentalism' for modes in literary studies 'collapsing together under this term a diverse but interconnected group of preconceptions and tendencies'<sup>25</sup>. He further explains:

what I have in mind could be crudely summarized as the treating of a text (or other cultural artifact) as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce, that usefulness. The project in question may be political, moral, historical, biographical, psychological, cognitive, or linguistic.<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty of his project is immediately made clear when he explains:

What I am calling an instrumental attitude to literature, I must at once add, is a necessary one for most of our dealings with verbal texts: it enables us to process them efficiently, it prevents

---

<sup>22</sup> Barry, Peter, 2002. *Beginning Theory: an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 234

<sup>23</sup> Attridge, Derek, 2004. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 64

<sup>24</sup> Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 71

<sup>25</sup> Attridge, Derek, 2004. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge. 7

<sup>26</sup> Attridge, *Singularity*, 7

the continual re-evaluation of our beliefs and assumptions, and it is in accord with the main function of most of the writing and speech we encounter.<sup>27</sup>

This means that it can be very difficult to determine when an interpretation is primarily based on instrumentalism. The final conclusion can be the same whether an interpretation has started and is based on close reading and arguments extracted from the text itself, or was drawn from the text by means of a preoccupation with certain theories and ideologies and with recognition of the formal textual characteristics of the text. One sign Attridge gives us to spot instrumentalism in an interpretation is when a critic dismisses other theories easily: 'Instrumentalism of a kind is evident every time a commentator observes, disparagingly, that such-and-such a theoretical approach of literary preference is now out of date, as if their value resided wholly in their fashionableness and marketability.'<sup>28</sup>

Otherwise we have to acknowledge that we need a certain degree of instrumentalism to read a text to begin with: 'Making sense of a text requires an integration of its elements with each other, an integration which involves an appeal to various familiar models of coherence.'<sup>29</sup> On the one hand we need the connection to reality to read a narrative in a text, and therefore understand it, and on the other hand we need this possibility of reality or verisimilitude to be able to interpret and finally judge a text: 'we spend a great deal of our energy as critics (professional or casual) responding to literature as something else: as social history, as personal confession, as formal object, as ideological weapon, as moral lesson, as cultural instruction, as linguistic exercise, and so on.'<sup>30</sup> Therefore the distinction is thin but it is important that we are critical of our own methods of reading and interpretation because of the possible consequences.

As mentioned earlier, *Disgrace* is seen as a direct representation of South African society in the post-apartheid era by several critics. Although the events in the text show much similarity to events in reality this does not mean we can copy the represented ideas and opinions the text is telling us into a valid interpretation of the situation in South Africa. In examining its form one can come to a much more nuanced interpretation of the text. Rita Barnard shows this in her interpretation of *Disgrace*:

A crisis of definitions, relationships, and responsibilities lies at the heart of *Disgrace*.

This crisis is investigated on the level of fundamental linguistic structures – both grammatical and lexical. The novel's free indirect narration conveys a curious sense that word choices are

---

<sup>27</sup> Attridge, Derek, 2006. *Reading and Responsibility*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd. 7

<sup>28</sup> Attridge, *Singularity*, 8

<sup>29</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, Schlomith, [1983] 2002. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Abingdon: Routledge.

124

<sup>30</sup> Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility*, 20

imperfect, still in the process of being made: words are handled with a meticulous and even burdensome awareness of their morphological, semantic, and cultural complexities.<sup>31</sup>

In this interpretation Barnard shows how the use of the medium language can have an influence on the statements given in the text. The highlight of (this part of) her interpretation is therefore not on the political ideologies represented, but on the way and in what form they are represented in the text. This means that even a text that seems to be a direct representation of society cannot be read like that by definition. Another very significant point in her interpretation is that it is not specifically bound to the post-apartheid situation in South Africa. She does not mention 'the whites' or 'the non-whites' but talks about power structures in relationships between people and identity politics in general. In doing so, she disconnects the texts of its specific context and lifts it up to a level where the texts implications can be made universalisable.

---

<sup>31</sup> Barnard, Rita, 2003. 'J.M. Coetzee's "Disgrace" and the South African Pastoral' In *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 199-224. 206.

#### 4. Allegory

What readers read into the text when they interpret literature emanating from South Africa as a representation of the socio-political situation of the nation, is a direct or indirect representation of reality. In Coetzee's *Foe* this is an indirect representation, whereas in the case of another of Coetzee's works, *Disgrace*, this can be seen as a direct representation. In either case, the story, characters, and events represented, are seen as reaction to or solution for the complex (post-) apartheid situation in South Africa. This is what is called an allegorical reading. In an allegory the represented characters and events are seen as a personification or representation of a deeper meaning. The tendency to read texts like this, is not hard to understand and depends for a large part on the necessity of a reader present: Without a reader prepared to interpret the text, the text would remain pretty meaningless. At the same time, a reader's interpretations depend on her/his historical and cultural context.<sup>32</sup> Without a reader a text remains nothing more than paper and ink. For a text to become more than that, a reader needs to read it and translate it into a narrative based on his or her discourse. This knowledge of reality helps the reader to understand the implications of the words written and construct a story. The text therefore needs a reader to gain meaning. In this way the allegorical is an essential part of literature. Without it, we do not make sense of a text as a story or narrative of some kind: Allegory may thus be *staged* in literature, along with so many other aspects of the way we make sense of the world.<sup>33</sup> The allegorical thus can be seen as part of the medium of literature.

In the recognition of the allegorical of literature, is a risk of over determination. A reader might be tempted to give too much weight to the context of the text in comparison to the text itself. Especially in cases of apparent direct representation (where, in the case of literature emanating from post-apartheid South Africa, the narration is situated in a (post-) apartheid society), the reader is tempted to read the text into the given framework of socio-political circumstances: the impulse to translate apparently distant locales and periods into the South Africa of the time of writing, and treat fictional characters as representatives of South African types or even particular individuals.<sup>34</sup> As a consequence of focussing too much on the allegorical, the text is no longer the starting point of the interpretation but the context is. This is what we have seen happening in the interpretations of Coetzee's work discussed in the previous chapters. In the focus on the allegorical mode of the texts, the interpretation becomes more about fitting the text to the context than about the text itself.

In critically reading the texts of Coetzee, it is not the allegorical that appears to be significant, but the resistance to the allegorical: a narrative that offers strong resistance to the masterful reader or critic, frequently becoming opaque just when a systematic or allegorical meaning seems to be

---

<sup>32</sup> Cavallaro, Dani, 2001. *Critical and Cultural Theory*. London: the Athlone Press. 50

<sup>33</sup> Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 61

<sup>34</sup> Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 33

emerging.<sup>35</sup> An interpretation focussed too much on the allegorical would be at risk of overseeing the moments where the text itself goes against the allegorical reading.

The allegorical thus is a necessity in literature for the texts to be read as a narrative. In some cases though, like literature emanating from a post-colonial society, the allegorical can get too much attention in an interpretation. In those cases, the artistic value of the text becomes obscured by its own possible relation to reality and is overshadowed by the political context of the text. The definition of the allegorical seems to be no longer sufficient to deal with the complex relationship between art and society:

..it seems crucial to effect a displacement or, more precisely, a recentering of the questions, and to inscribe them in a critical and theoretical context in which the notion of allegory no longer introduces the same characteristics of interpretive stability and transparency we have granted it until now [í ]. In this case, the men, women, and events described in the novel, ðare not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic,ö but rather, ða complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive addressö.<sup>36</sup>

Still it cannot be dismissed that there is a strong relation between the texts and reality in the novels of Coetzee. Even when it is only that the narratives are often staged in the (post-) apartheid society of South Africa. As we have seen, this can tempt a critic to stop his or her interpretation at the point of the allegorical reading. However, when doing justice to the text, this point could be the start of a much more thorough and nuanced interpretation. An excellent example of such an interpretation is made by Molly Abel Travis on Coetzee's *Disgrace*:

í they [the novels] confront historical traumas and foreground the contested relationship between empathy and ethics through the narrative distancing. By keeping readers at a distance and preventing too easy an empathy with their protagonists, [í ] Coetzee's novels pose searing ethical questions that convey the uncanny haunting of the real that marks the self's inability to arrest the meaning of the other.<sup>37</sup>

Travis's interpretation shows a balanced mix of the different features of the text. She recognises the relation to reality in which the narrative is staged and which forms such an important role in South African literature. She does not stop there. She uses the form of the text to look at the way the text relates to the reader. By showing how the narratological modes of the text influence the way of

---

<sup>35</sup> Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 79

<sup>36</sup> Bensmaïa, 72-73

<sup>37</sup> Travis, Molly Abel, 2010. "Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" In *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 40, No. 2, p 231-250. 231



reading, she is able to observe how the text not only says something, but also does what it says in its specific form.

In his discussion of Tahar Djaout's *L'invention du desert*, Réda Bensmaïa acknowledges how the current notion of allegory limits our possibilities to interpret texts from former colonies as works of art: 'It seems obvious that only by reducing the notion of allegory to one politico-ideological overcoding or another can *L'invention du desert* be made to fit the mold we applied to it.'<sup>38</sup> To Bensmaïa it is clear that we need a broader definition of allegory to do justice to such complex texts. Not only the literal meaning but also the figural meaning forms an important part of this form of allegory. Unfortunately the two, which can be in contrast with one another, can hardly be distinguished from each other nor can there be determined which one prevails over the other. He therefore suggests a new form of allegorical reading:

The multiplicity of the lines of flight [í ] demand a radically new position from the reader. We must still read, and read with caution, but with the clear stipulation that henceforth, òto readö no longer consists merely of searching for a signified hidden behind the words or fragments of narratives that have come from nowhere. Rather, to read is to undertake a voyage more like that of Tarkovsky's *Stalker* than like that of a tourist, even a tourist who appreciates Francophone literature.<sup>39</sup>

In Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, there are two men guided to the Zone by a third man. It is said that in the Zone all one's desires will become true. The men undertake the long and dangerous journey but never enter the room. According to Bensmaïa we should read accordingly: not with the goal of gaining the essential meaning from the text, but accepting that we will not enter the Zone but seeing the value of the journey in itself. From this point of view, his definition of allegory gains an extra dimension:

The meaning [of allegory] has now been disseminated in the trails and footpaths of a written crossing that knows no more frontiers. And in this sense, what characterizes the work of third-world writers is not so much the political-allegorical dimension of what they write. Rather, this work is better characterized by their renewed challenge of anything that tends to reduce the history of the third world and consequently the history of their home countries to a kind of picture postcard, a case or a simple moment in the master text of Western's reason history.<sup>40</sup>

To diminish the risk of a reading preoccupied with socio-political allegory and open the possibility of a combined interpretation such as Travis's, Derek Attridge suggests a literal reading of all texts:

---

<sup>38</sup> Bensmaïa, 72

<sup>39</sup> Bensmaïa, 76-77

<sup>40</sup> Bensmaïa, 79

I want to suggest that all engagements with literary works [í ] benefit from what I have been calling a literal reading: a reading that defers the many interpretive moves that we are accustomed to making in our dealings with literature, whether historical, biographical, psychological, moral, or political. [í ] I would label all these modes of interpretation [í ] allegorical, in that they take the literal meaning of the text to be a pathway to some other, more important, meaning. When carried out with subtlety and responsibility, such accounts can inform and enrich the experience of the text, but if they displace the literal reading they do damage to the work as a work of literature.<sup>41</sup>

Thus this literal reading should not be dismissed perse, but it should keep away from readings that do not do justice to the text by reading from the outside in, rather than from the inside out. What Attridge wants us to focus on in such a literal reading besides the allegorical, is the literariness of texts.

---

<sup>41</sup> Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 60

## 5. Literariness

As we have seen in the earlier chapters, many literary critics tend to look mainly at the allegorical part of a text in their interpretations of texts and of texts emanating from (post-)colonial society specifically. In these kind of analyses, many times the socio-political methods and ideologies that might be found in the text, become much more important than the textual characteristics the text offers in itself. By starting from this socio-political point of view for the interpretation, the focus is immediately on contextual signs and not first on the text with its own specific medium, form and use of language. It is precisely the form of a text that captures the specificity of literature like Rosemarie Buikema puts it: 'Form is what defines a work of art; form constitutes its singularity par excellence, which is why it will always withdraw from being appropriated by sheer identity politics.'<sup>42</sup> What Buikema means is that this singularity of literature can be found in the text itself and its form and not by looking at the context of the text. This literariness is described by Buikema as:

I would say that literariness is generally manifested where an awareness or consciousness of the real is engendered by language. [í ] This term, the real [í ] refers to that which produces an effect, but which is not embedded in the symbolic system. [í ] the real refers both to the deficit of language and to the surplus, i.e. excess of the medium.<sup>43</sup>

It is clear that to say something about literature that does credit to the literariness of the text is quite difficult. What becomes clear in the definition given, is that it occurs in the event of reading. That means that it comes into being in the encounter between text and reader; in the reading activity of an individual. Consequently, the experience of reading and of the literariness of a work of art, is very much influenced by the time, place and space of reading and the reader. This is what we saw previously defined as the poetical allegory by Derek Attridge. This makes it rather complex to precisely point out what the literariness of a work consists of: 'The literary work is secret because it is singular: it cannot be exhaustively analysed in terms of general codes and conventions, no matter how relentless the analyser.'<sup>44</sup>

Still we keep trying to analyse texts in the field of comparative literature. What we do as critics is therefore often focussed on the contextual side of literature. The process and activity of reading seems to be very different from what we do when we analyse a text (in the academic field). The distinction between the two can be obscure because in both cases we use the allegorical. In order for us to be able to talk about literature we need the vocabulary of reality to concretize our ideas. This discrepancy is caused by the trouble we find in trying to translate the literariness into an interpretation:

---

<sup>42</sup> Buikema, 313

<sup>43</sup> Buikema, 314

<sup>44</sup> Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility*, 46

There exists a significant gap between, on the one hand, what we do and what we enjoy and even what we learn when we read works of literature with the fullest engagement, and, on the other, what we feel is appropriate to say as commentators (casual or academic), or even what we are *able* to say in the vocabulary available to us.<sup>45</sup>

The contextual side of literature is quite an important factor in the academic field as it is: the drive of the comparatist is to remain committed [í ] to recovering that dynamic event of negotiation: how literatures and all their elements come into being out of a process of exchange.<sup>46</sup> The socio-political circumstances from which literary texts emanate and in which they are perceived have a large impact on the experience of the text. Therefore it is useful to examine in what way we can talk about literature that does credit to the literariness and to the allegorical relation to reality represented at the same time.

By no means would I want to advocate a total dismissal of allegorical reading or postcolonial studies specifically. Still, it seems to be important to handle these methods critically and with care for the object we are dealing with: the text. Applying those theories on work of literature too enthusiastically, can do harm to the literariness of literature.

To say something about literature without solely focussing on the context, does credit to the specific characteristics that make the difference between a plain text and a work of literature:

Those works that continue to feed our thoughts, conversations and emotions belong to great art [í ], these works of art do not only reveal something about the time and place in which they are functioning, but their singularity also has the potential to appeal over and over again to successive generations.<sup>47</sup>

It is clear that to say something about literature that does credit to the literariness of the text is extremely difficult but the universalisable Buikema points out here can be an important sign. Every text that we call a work of literature, can be disconnected from its specific time, space and place of setting and can be read not only as a representation of this context, but also as a representation of universal thoughts and issues. These works in a way use the allegorical context as a stage for their performance.

What I would like to propose, is that the allegorical part of literature as such, should be seen as (a part of) the medium of the work of art. It is a tool that enables a work of literature to function as art. As a part of the construction of the text as a whole it makes it possible for a reader or a viewer to

---

<sup>45</sup> Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 60-61

<sup>46</sup> Greene, Roland, 2006. "Not Works but Networks: Colonial Worlds in Comparative Literature" In *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, p. 212-223. 215

<sup>47</sup> Buikema, 309

encounter the work of art in an experience of singularity. I specifically say ‘as such’ because we need the allegorical to read the text and we cannot interpret and talk about literature without turning to the allegorical in a way: ‘Aesthetic experience is no longer exclusively related to work-immanent aspects, but linked to material, political and historical circumstances as well.’<sup>48</sup> The ‘as well’ is essential here and unfortunately forgotten quite often. We need to realise that we need both the aesthetic as the political to form a valid interpretation that incorporates every aspect of the work of literature. Therefore, Derek Attridge states that for interpretation, we need a step between the text and the allegorical, that does not disregard the specificity of the text and leads us to the appropriate connection to reality:

What is needed, therefore, to complement the instrumentalist achievements of recent criticism and to build on the lasting, if partial, insights of the aesthetic tradition is a mode of attention to the specificity and singularity of literary writing as it manifests itself through the deployment of form, [í ] as well as to the unpredictability of literary accomplishment that seems connected with that deployment.<sup>49</sup>

The stepping stones for this thorough analysis of texts we find, in my opinion, in the study of narratology. Rosemarie Buikema already suggests something similar in her article on Coetzee and Van Niekerk: ‘I would like to reassess the fruitfulness of the work-immanent approach and the method of meticulous textual analysis involved in it in order to attune and enrich the intertextual approach and avoid the risks inherent to identity politics in the interpretation of art.’<sup>50</sup> In the next chapter I will give two examples of reading inside-out. The analysis starts at the text itself and from that point can possibly work its way to the context of the text.

---

<sup>48</sup> Buikema, 312

<sup>49</sup> Attridge, *Singularity*, 13

<sup>50</sup> Buikema, 313

## 6. Reading Inside-Out

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the allegorical in its poetical form is an undeniable part of literature. Besides this, there are the medium, form and language that together with the allegorical constitute the total of a work of literature. To interpret a literary text we therefore should take all these elements into consideration. When we apply this method on the earlier discussed novels by Coetzee, *Foe* and *Disgrace*, we will see how a very important claim on one of the main characters has a great influence on the interpretation of the text. In contrast to the readings outside-in I previously discussed I will now give two examples of reading inside-out. I will start my analysis at the text itself and not only look at the actual content of the text but also at the different aspects of form and in what way the different elements work together or contradict each other.

The interpretation of Friday as mutilated and without a tongue is for most critics no matter to examine meticulously: 'Friday's tongue has been cut out by slave traders or by Cruso; we do not know by whom.'<sup>51</sup> The tonguelessness of Friday is a fundamental part of the interpretation of his character. In my opinion it definitely should be thoroughly investigated for two reasons. First the story told in Coetzee's *Foe* is brought to us by Susan Barton. The second reason to treat Friday's tonguelessness should be mistrusted, and closely related to the first reason, is the information Susan has herself about it and therefore can give to us.

The first reason for mistrusting Friday's tonguelessness is the position Susan Barton takes in narrating the story. In *Foe* the story is told through the eyes of Susan Barton. This element of the form of the text has its consequences for the way we should look at the information given to us. The position of Susan Barton as the narrator and focalisator of the narrative and story, means we as a reader are depending on the information she gives to us. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains, this should be reason for the reader to at least be suspicious about the value of the information given to us: 'The main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme'<sup>52</sup>. We cannot determine whether what Susan Barton tells us is true within the boundaries of the text because we have no means to verify her statements.

The second reason for looking closely into Friday's tonguelessness is given in the information Susan Barton does give us. After a few days on the island, Susan asks Cruso why he did not learn how to speak English. Cruso replies: 'He has no tongue,' he said. 'That is why he does not speak. They cut out his tongue.'<sup>53</sup> This is the first time she is informed about Friday's tonguelessness. Cruso tries

---

<sup>51</sup> Scott Bishop, G., 1990. 'Commentaries: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*: A Culmination and a Solution to a Problem of White Identity. In *World Literature Today*, Vol. 64, p. 54-57

<sup>52</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, 101

<sup>53</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 23

to show Barton by making Friday open his mouth but it is too dark for her to see. When Cruso makes Friday come even closer she even stops looking: 'I drew away, and Cruso released Friday's hair.'<sup>54</sup> Susan thus is told by Cruso that Friday has no tongue. Earlier on in the text, Susan tells how she recounts her life before her shipwrecking on the island to Cruso. After that she would have liked to tell about Cruso's story but in the time they spend together on the island, he never tells her the same story twice. She therefore concludes: 'the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what fancy.'<sup>55</sup> In this statement Susan Barton declares Cruso himself as an unreliable storyteller who cannot be trusted to tell the truth. In the stories he tells her about his own life, she decides not to believe him. On the tonguelessness of Friday however, she does take his word for it since she never actually saw it for herself. In this practise of close reading we thus find two reasons for not treating Friday's tonguelessness as a given fact: Susan Barton has not observed the absence of his tongue herself and in this case she chooses to believe a man she herself determines as untrustworthy.

In this interpretation of the case of Friday's tonguelessness, we see that by using narratology and close reading we come to a totally different conclusion than most critics do. We cannot possibly take for granted that Friday has no tongue because the text itself resists this assumption by its enigmatic character. A lot of critics fall into the trap of mixing up writer, narrator and storyteller. Taking into account the form and medium of the text we have to consider the possibility that Friday indeed has a tongue.

When the possibility is opened that Friday does have a tongue, this triggers the critic into at least thinking about the possibilities this would have for another interpretation of *Foe*: 'the possibility that Friday may have a tongue and that his refusal to communicate in the language of his oppressors is an act of dissent.'<sup>56</sup> We can no longer simply assume that Friday has no tongue and therefore consider him automatically as suppressed and a victim. We can even put forward the option that Friday does not speak by choice. As Dragunoiu points out, the opening of this possibility can create the critical attention the text deserves and be the beginning of a thorough reading and plausible interpretations. This can be the outset of a much more nuanced interpretation of the power relations represented in the novel and might be a starting point of a fruitful discussion of the political allegory that is represented, offering no simple answers but questions that maybe can help understanding the complex situation in reality a bit better.

---

<sup>54</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>55</sup> Coetzee, *Foe*, 11-12

<sup>56</sup> Dragunoiu, Dana, 2001. 'Existential Doubt and Political Responsibility in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*' In *Critique*, Vol. 42, No. 3, p. 309-326. 321

As discussed earlier, the reactions to one of Coetzee's other novels, *Disgrace*, were very intensive and even came from the political angle of society. These reactions were based on interpretations that isolated the rape and gang rape from the whole of the narrative. Those critics only look at the way in which the blacks are pictured as violent, dishonest and coward people in their group attack on a white woman and an elderly man:

The ANC's argument is built on the idea that Coetzee's novel reflects society, that the views of the white characters in *Disgrace* may be equated with those of white South Africans in general. Yet the corollary of this reading would mean that the black rapists in *Disgrace* are representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ANC would like to refute.<sup>57</sup>

Of course the attack on Lucy and her father at the farm is brutal and cannot become something else in what sort of interpretation one comes up with but when we take into account the whole text and other events represented, a different perspective can be shown.

The reason for David Lurie to leave Cape Town and stay with his daughter at the East Cape for a while, is his affair with one of his students Melanie Isaacs. Although it is not explicit, it is clear from the description of Melanie that she is not white: "She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes."<sup>58</sup> After their first being together he knows he is crossing a line in what is an appropriate relation between a student and a professor but he does not stop: "That is where he ought to end it. But he does not."<sup>59</sup> A following day Lurie takes Melanie out to lunch and afterwards to his house where he makes love to her. Still this is not enough for him and a few days later he shows up at her flat unexpected and again throws himself upon her:

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. Little shivers of cold run through her; as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him.

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away.<sup>60</sup>

The sexual intercourse between David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs clearly was not desired by Melanie but only by Lurie. Therefore the definition of the encounters should not be an affair but rape. The rape

---

<sup>57</sup> Graham, Lucy Valerie, 2003. "Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." In *Journal of South African Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 433-444. 435

<sup>58</sup> Coetzee, J.M., 1999. *Disgrace*. London: Penguin Books. 11

<sup>59</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 18

<sup>60</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 25



of a black student by a white professor. By many critics the encounter between Lurie and Melanie is not recognized as rape but defined as an 'affair' or 'a brief liaison'<sup>61</sup>.

Thus the rape of Lucy is not the only one represented in *Disgrace*. In both cases the violator(s) can overwhelm their victim by their superiority in power. The rapists of Lucy overpower her by their number; there are three men attacking her. David Lurie overpowers Melanie with his social power; she is a student in his class and less than half his age so he is her superior not physically but socially and institutionally. Another striking resemblance between the two assaults is that the victims remain silent to the reader. Lucy refuses to tell her story although her father tries to get her to talk about it. Melanie files a complaint against Lurie at the board of the university but we do not get information about her account of the events.

Besides the mentioned similarities between the two rapes there are two significant differences: the way the women act afterwards and the perception of the rapes by the reader. Both women choose an entirely different approach after the events. Lucy Lurie refuses to talk about the rape. She files charges against the men for the break in, theft and assault of her father but leaves the part of her harassment out. Her father tries relentlessly but does not get an account of the events from her. She will only try to explain to him why she does not want to talk about it:

The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.

'This place being what?'

'This place being South Africa.'<sup>62</sup>

What Lucy means exactly with 'this place being South Africa' remains unclear because she cannot get David Lurie to understand what she means and while he is the focaliser of the narrative, we as a reader can hardly look beyond that.

Melanie Isaacs on the other hand, files a complaint against David Lurie. He is to appear before a 'disciplinary board on a charge of sexual harassment.'<sup>63</sup> In contrast to the way Lucy sees her assault as a private matter and goes out of her way to keep it like that, Melanie thus chooses for the opposite. The filing of the complaint makes her assault by Lurie a public matter. When Lurie appears before the board, Melanie is not there and vice versa. The matter is discussed with others without the two of them being there at the same time. Lurie is even asked by the board to give a public statement that he acted wrongly but there is no mentioning of him apologizing to Melanie Isaacs personally in the hearing.

---

<sup>61</sup> Graham, 440

<sup>62</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 112

<sup>63</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 46

The second main difference between the two rapes is the perception of the reader. As mentioned earlier, many critics fail to see the assault of Melanie as rape but define it as an affair in most cases. After close reading the passage in which Lurie describes his sexual encounter with Melanie one can no longer disregard the fact that Melanie is just as much raped as Lucy is. In his account of the events he does not label himself as a rapist. What he does describe is how it is obvious to him that Melanie does not choose to have sex with him but surrenders herself to him. When one realises that this is Lurie's version of the story it is not unimaginable that he somewhat down plays his actions while Melanie might have experienced it much more violent. The difference in the perception of the rape of Lucy and Melanie is caused by the form of the text:

Although narrative perspective in *Disgrace* allows for critical distance from David Lurie, who is the focaliser of the story, the majority of reviewers seem to read in sympathy with Lurie when he glosses his sexual encounter with Melanie as 'not rape, not quite that'<sup>64</sup>

Because of the position of the one showing us the story, we tend to interpret events differently. The position of David Lurie and our knowledge of his thoughts about his encounter with Melanie lures us into thinking it is not rape.

Remarkably enough, these two differences result in a dubious perception of the rapes in criticism: the rape of the woman who wants to keep her assault private, Lucy, is very much criticized and discussed, while the rape of the woman who makes it a public affair, Melanie, is hardly even recognized as rape. Acknowledging this ambiguity in the relation between the text and the interpretations we have to accept that the form of the text has to be seen as a defining part of the perception of the story. The literal content of the text is in this case contradicted by the form and the perception of the text. While in a textual analysis of the text there turn out to be two rapes committed, due to the position of the focaliser the reader interprets and judges the two cases dissimilar. In isolating an event represented in the text and using that for criticism, we do not do justice to the text as a whole. The case of *Disgrace* shows us that similar represented events in one text can be perceived totally different due to the form of the text itself. When the text is read like this it becomes clear that our own point of view or that of the source of our knowledge can have a great influence on our judgment.

Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* was published in 1999, a few years after the start of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). The committee had the difficult task to help the society of South Africa deal with what happened during the apartheid regime. In that period practically everyone in South Africa was involved in violence with people from different social communities. Very often the course and accumulation of events made the distinction between violator and victim almost impossible

---

<sup>64</sup> Graham, 440

to make. In the process of finding truth the TRC and national and international society tried to unravel the horrific stories told during the hearings the committee held. To restore justice it was attempted to determine who had been perpetrator and who had been the victim. That would make it possible for the ones guilty to be judged and lead the way to reconciliation. In order to be able to work towards a new nation for the future the past had to be dealt with. The idea of judgement and the interpretation of stories told therefore was a serious theme in contemporary society. This topic of judgement was also of great significance in *Disgrace*. When we take into consideration this context in reality of the TRC Coetzee's novel might very well be reacting to that. What the novel does not do is provide answers how to deal with the difficult task of judgement. What it does on the other hand is make apparent that judgement can be influenced by our own position and by that of the one providing us with information. If anything the text thus made us more aware of the obstacles that can be in the way of finding truth and how careful we must be in our judgement.

## 7. Conclusion

In the previous chapters we have seen how an analysis of a literary text that is too much occupied with the socio-political character of the work can be ground for an interpretation that does not give credit to all the different parts a text contains. Specifically in the case of literature emanating from South African society, there is a great risk of treating the work as nothing more than a direct representation of reality. The assumed similarities between text and society can be a trap for critics who are eager to see literature as an answer to contemporary socio-political circumstances. Such an interpretation that starts at the context of the text is what I called reading outside-in.

Although the allegorical is a very important part of literature, we should make a difference between the poetical and political allegory to do justice to the text. It is exactly that moment in a work of literature that resists a superficial allegorical or predetermined political reading which makes the work ungraspable; that is what we call the literariness or singularity. This moment of resistance is created by the coexistence of form, medium and language of the text. In considering these elements together with the allegorical in interpreting literature, we treat the text as a whole, regarding all its different aspects. To do so we should start our analysis at the heart of our object of study: the text and its formal aspects. This is what I call reading inside-out. From there we can look at the different characteristics and interpret the reading experience the text offers to us. Using the different techniques offered by the wide studies in comparative literature we can see what the work has to offer.

To show why I think it is important to start the interpretation of a work of literature at the core I have given two examples of reading inside-out. The novel *Foe* is elaborately analysed. A large part of its attractive power is caused by the enigmatic figure of Friday and his assumed tonguelessness. In many cases postcolonial theory proved to be a fruitful source for interpreting the way in which Friday was robbed of his tongue and the consequences this holds for his opportunities of an own identity. Close reading however shows that Susan Barton is the one telling the reader the story about herself and Friday. Due to this position of focalisation the information about Friday is dubious. That means there is a possibility that Friday indeed has a tongue and therefore actively chooses not to communicate. This sheds a new light on the analysis of this character and of the text as a whole. Instead of a passive mutilated former slave Friday might be open for a totally different interpretation.

Again in the case of *Disgrace* the position of the focalisor has a great influence on the perception of the text. The event of the assault and rape of Lucy and David Lurie has been reason for widespread discussion in South African society on the way in which both whites and non-whites as well as male and female were ostensibly stigmatized in the text. In these discussions a single part of the text was isolated from the whole of the work. When analysing the text thoroughly it becomes clear that the rape of Lucy is not the only sexual assault. Melanie Isaacs is also assaulted but she is harassed by the white professor David Lurie. Lurie being the focalisor and narrator of the text we receive the

information about the rape of Melanie in a totally different form than about that of Lucy. In the last case the reader is made part of his anger and frustration about the harm done to his daughter while in the case of student Melanie Lurie down plays his role. The reader's perception of the two events that show similarities is therefore influenced by the form of the text. In acknowledging the fact that this point of view might blur our judgement the reader finds himself confronted with the idea that this is as common in literature as it is in reality.

The examples of *Foe* and *Disgrace* show us how a reading that finds its starting point outside the text can easily seduce the critic. Conclusions drawn might be reasonable but risk losing ground in the text. In those cases the text becomes the motivation for the interpretation rather than the object of meticulous study. When the goal is to analyse a text for its own sake the form and medium cannot be disregarded. After doing so it can be very plausible to interpret a work of literature in the context of its time and place of writing. Reality is an important factor in literature in the form of allegory. In reading inside-out instead of outside-in literature can offer a valuable contribution to discussing society doing justice to it in all its complexity.

## 8. Bibliography

- Attridge, 2004. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Attridge, Derek, 2004. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Attridge, Derek, 2006. *Reading and Responsibility*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Barnard, Rita, 2003. 'J.M. Coetzee's "Disgrace" and the South African Pastoral' In *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 199-224.
- Barry, Peter, 2002. *Beginning Theory: an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bensmaïa, Reda, 2003. *Experimental Nations or, the Invention of the Maghreb*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Buikema, Rosemarie, 2009. 'Crossing the Borders of Identity Politics. *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee and *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk' In *European Journal of Women's Studies*. Vol. 16 (4), p. 309-323.
- Cavallaro, Dani, 2001. *Critical and Cultural Theory*. London: the Athlone Press.
- Coetzee, J.M., 1986. *Foe*. London: Penguin Books.
- Coetzee, J.M., 1999. *Disgrace*. London: Penguin Books.
- Dragunoiu, Dana, 2001. 'Existential Doubt and Political Responsibility in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*' In *Critique*, Vol. 42, No. 3, p. 309-326.
- Graham, Lucy Valerie, 2003. 'Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*' In *Journal of South African Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 433-444.
- Greene, Roland, 2006. 'Not Works but Networks: Colonial Worlds in Comparative Literature' In *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, p. 212-223.
- Leusmann, Harald, 2004. 'J.M. Coetzee's Cultural Critique' In *World Literature Today*, Vol. 78, No. 3/4, p. 60-63.
- Macaskill, Brian and Jeanne Colleran, 1992. 'Reading History, Writing Hersey: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*' In *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Autumn 1992, p. 432-457.
- MacLeod, Lewis, 2006. 'Do we of necessity become puppets in a story?' or narrating the world: on speech, silence and discourse in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*' In *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Spring 2006, p. 1-18.
- Post, Robert M., 1989. 'The noise of Freedom: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*' In *Critique*, Spring 1989, p.143-154.

- Rimmon-Kenan, Schlomith, [1983] 2002. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rorty, Richard, 2006. 'Looking back at 'Literary Theory'' In *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Roy, Sohinee, 2012. 'Speaking with a Forked Tongue: *Disgrace* and the Irony of Reconciliation in Postapartheid South Africa' In *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4, p. 699-722.
- Scott Bishop, G., 1990. 'Commentaries: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*: A Culmination and a Solution to a Problem of White Identity. In *World Literature Today*, Vol. 64, p. 54-57.
- Travis, Molly Abel, 2010. 'Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*' In *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 40, No. 2, p 231-250.