

The Silence of the Suffering Body

Counter-discursive practices in J.M. Coetzee's
Waiting for the Barbarians and *Age of Iron*.

By Ellinor Bent Dalbye

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*All love letters are
Ridiculous.
They wouldn't be love letters if they weren't
- Fernando Pessoa*

Synopsis

In my thesis have done a comparative reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* and asked the following question: Do the novels facilitate a deconstruction of dominant discourse through the trope of the suffering body, and can this deconstructive practice be considered counter-discursive?

J.M. Coetzee has stated: "The standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain that it feels. [...] it is not that one *grants* authority to the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power." Using this as my departure point I have examined and argued for how the suffering body functions as a deconstructive trope in both novels, and how J.M. Coetzee's use of this trope solves central and crucial problems related to language and the power of discourse.

My main theoretical premise is two-tired. First, I have appropriated Derrida and Foucault's argument for the binary structure of language, and the discourse-dependent creation of the meaning of signs. Language and its meaning is arbitrary. However, a sign's present referent is usually not left to chance but determined by power structures with a vested interest in creating a controlled and dominant discourse. In Coetzee's novels this insight leads to an acute self-questioning for both narrators: As it is impossible to place oneself *outside* the reaches of a dominant discourse, how can one speak against with any kind of authority, or to continue to speak at all? Second, I have employed Elaine Scarry's convincing work *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* and her assertion that pain brings an end to language, and instead acts as non-language that communicates an experience that cannot be re-represented in words. Pain's presence is undeniable, but pain cannot be turned into language or narrative, and so pain avoids appropriation into discourse. In both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* bodily pain creates moments of certainty in a narrative landscape that becomes ever more ambiguous and unreadable.

It is in the convergence of these two lines of reasoning that I with this thesis claim the following: In the two novels the trope of the suffering body deconstructs the dominant discourse present in the narrative. It achieves this by acting as point of certainty that continues to challenge the contentions and necessary binary structures of the discourse through its silent and undeniable presence. Further, one can argue, as these novels do, that it is impossible to find a space outside discourse where one can create a narrative that acts as a counter-discourse because language, any language, will reproduce the same authority-robbing ambiguities of meaning that would make such a counter-discourse possible in the first place. The narrators can point out the fault-lines in the structure of the dominant discourse's totalizing claim, but only by simultaneously revealing the weakness in their own narrative authority. However, I claim that the trope of the suffering body acts as a counter-discourse regardless of these issues because its efforts rest not on language, but on silence. It is a presence that deconstructs the dominant discourse by creating a narrative of non-language that resists the problematical appropriation into the discourse it is rejecting. Moreover, the trope of the suffering body and its critical potential works in the same way regardless of the novel's form, which is why I claim that the allegorical *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the realistic *Age of Iron* are essentially part of the same critical project. There is no language outside language, only the body and its suffering.

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1 Introduction

“The standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not ‘that which is not,’ and the proof that it *is* is the pain that it feels. [...] it is not that one *grants* authority to the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power.”¹ These words by J.M. Coetzee were uttered in response to a question concerning the importance of the body in his fiction. His comment does not simply concern the body as such, however, but *the body in pain*.

Representations of pain are arguably a central, but also curiously overlooked, part of J.M. Coetzee’s authorship, whether it is witnessed, experienced, inflicted, self-inflicted or judged to be pre-ordained. This thesis will argue that the ways in which Coetzee’s fictions explore the experience of pain and its deconstructive properties form part of a wider attempt to create a literary counter-discourse that works against the authority of a dominant discourse. I will further argue that in their counter-discursive efforts his narratives not only create a different site from which to speak – the body – but also a different language (or non-language) – the experience of pain with which to speak. In short I will ask: Do the novels in question facilitate a deconstruction of dominant discourse through the trope of the suffering body, and can this deconstructive practice be considered counter-discursive?

1.1 The Works and their Author

In order to discuss this problem I have chosen J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron*. J.M. Coetzee is an author of international acclaim, an acclaim that culminated with the awarding of the Noble Prize for literature in 2003, and of widespread scholarly interest and debate. Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940, Coetzee published his first novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, in 1977, for which he was awarded the South African CNA Prize. Coetzee’s works of fiction have gone on to win a number of prestigious prizes, he is the only author who has been awarded the Booker Prize twice. In addition, he is a respected and renowned scholar, who has worked for many years as a Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town. He writes from within a South African context, but from the marginal and problematic position of the white South African. Although Coetzee has an Afrikaner background, he was not included within the narrow definition of the *Afrikanervolk* during the apartheid regime, and has always written in English. He has been criticized for being too aesthetic, for not openly and politically challenging the apartheid regime in his

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point - Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 248.

novels. He has, however, frequently also been read as one of the foremost members of the critical tradition in South African writing, a tradition that includes authors such as Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink and Nadine Gordimer. And he is, regardless, perhaps first and foremost a *South African* writer, his novels shaped and originating from the political conditions of his homeland.² The debate concerning his authorship has also run along the (sometimes) perceived opposition between “western” modes of writing and criticism on the one hand, and post-colonialism on the other, both between those who want to claim him as their own, and between those, like Sue Kossew, who believe both readings are equally valid:

Thus, Coetzee’s intertextuality can be seen not merely as part of a postmodernist playfulness but as having important post-colonial implications. He is, through the intertextual nature of his fiction, calling attention to the act of writing itself – his own included – and the process by which the politics of representation operate.³

A more extended discussion of the relevant criticism of Coetzee’s will follow later in this chapter.

First published in 1980, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the story of an old magistrate who resides over an insignificant frontier town. When the Empire, represented by Colonel Joll, prepares for a final strike against the perceived barbarian threat the magistrate finds the beliefs that have carried him through life severely challenged. He witnesses others suffer torture at the hands of the Empire in the name of Truth, an Empire he himself is a representative of, and is finally forced to undergo the experience it himself, an ordeal which leaves him humbled and with in an intense awareness of his own frail body and acute lack of knowledge. The novel is conspicuously vague and unspecified when it comes to time and place, and most of the main characters, including the magistrate, remain nameless throughout. Conversely, *Age of Iron*, published in 1990, is firmly located both temporally and spatially. The text ends with the date 1986-89, a period when South Africa experienced what Susan VanZanten Gallagher terms “unparalleled violence”.⁴ The story is narrated by Elizabeth Curren, an elderly resident of Cape Town who has just learned that she has terminal cancer, and is styled in the form of a letter to her estranged daughter in America. The story begins on the day she receives the news of her illness, but it is also the day Mr. Vercueil, a homeless

² For a summary of the reception and debate concerning Coetzee’s works see Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson’s introduction to *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (Houndmills: Macmillian Press Ltd., 1996) 1-10.

³ Sue Kossew, introduction to *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Sue Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 10.

⁴ Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa - J.M. Coetzee’s Fiction in Context* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 194.

man, decides to take up residence in her yard. Through Mr. Vercueil, and through her housekeeper's son Bheki, as well as through her own illness, Mrs. Curren is gradually forced to confront the reality of apartheid, and also to question her own role and responsibility in relation to it. What is striking about the two novels is how similar they are, both structurally and thematically. Since the story in both novels is told in the first person singular, the narrator has complete authority over his or her narrative, an authority that is significantly contrasted by the growing lack of authority they both command over their own lives. Both stories begin with the arrival of a stranger (Colonel Joll in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Mr. Vercueil in *Age of Iron*), whose presence will prove pivotal for the protagonists' development. Mrs. Curren and the magistrate are both in the later stages of their lives, and, until the arrival which marks the beginning of the story, both have felt fairly secure in their own convictions; content to live out the remainder of their days in much the same way that they have lived so far. They are both intellectuals, people of the mind who are comfortable using their reasoning and knowledge to understand themselves and the world around them. However, reality as they know it seems to disintegrate, they appear less and less capable of dealing with what confronts them. Over the course of the novels both narrators experience that their bodies become a central issue, and by experiencing it in pain they are forced to re-evaluate their own assumptions. Both narrators, on several occasions, also experience seeing the pain of others, a pain that is inflicted callously and often meaninglessly by representatives of the authoritative power, representatives who claim to protect the nation, to do what they do for the good of all.

However, the two novels also differ in a crucial way. Whereas *Waiting for the Barbarians* may be read as an allegory of South Africa, as many critics have done,⁵ *Age of Iron* is unquestionably a novel about South Africa: it is a novel which contains, for Coetzee, unusually realistic depictions of what was (and is) a very real historical situation. It is the combination of these two features – the undeniable and numerous similarities, and the crucial difference between the possibly allegorical⁶ and the realistic – that induces me to read both novels within the framework of the problem sketched out above. I believe such a reading will be advantageous because the idea of the body, its physicality and its ability to feel pain is strikingly present in both novels. There are numerous instances when issues concerning the

⁵ A good example of this is David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee - South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁶ I use the term 'possibly allegorical' because the tendency to allegorize Coetzee's novels is a contested one, for instance in Derek Attridge's book *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading – Literature in the Event*, and I believe it would be overly rash to label *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an allegorical novel at this early stage.

human body and its experiences are brought to the front of the narrative, as when the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* undergoes torture for the first time:

In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. Little of what I call suffering is even pain. [...] When Warrant Officer Mandel and his man first brought me back here and lit the lamp and closed the door, I wondered how much pain a plump comfortable old man would be able to endure in the name of his eccentric notions of how the Empire should conduct itself. But my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain certain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, [...]. They did not come to force the story out of me of what I had said to the barbarians and what the barbarians had said to me. [...] They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal.⁷

Or when Mrs. Curren comes to the full realization of the nature of her disease:

Grief past weeping. I am hollow, I am a shell. To each of us fate sends the right disease. Mine is a disease that eats me out from inside. Were I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the flood of light. [...] Gnawing at my bones now that there is no flesh left. Gnawing in the socket of my hip, gnawing my backbone, beginning to gnaw at my knees. The cats, if the truth be told, have never really loved me. Only this creature is faithful to the end. My pet, my pain.⁸

In addition, as the two novels, at least on the surface, have such dissimilar forms and structures, it is relevant, and, in my belief, important to establish whether or not the two novels employ similar textual strategies in order to achieve a deconstructive goal. Hence the choice of a comparative rather than a singular reading, a choice which conveniently also allows me a greater amount of textual source in my attempt to reach a conclusion about Coetzee's novels critical impact.

1.2 Theoretical background

I will employ a number of terms – narrative, discourse, deconstruction, counter-discourse, post-colonial, other – which warrant a more precise definition. By discussing these terms I will also present the theoretical sources in which these terms are central and which form the

⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Vintage, 2000), 126. All further references are to this edition and placed within parentheses in the text.

⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 112. All further references are to this edition and placed within parentheses in the text.

theoretical basis for this thesis. I would like to begin with Gérard Genette, whose definition of ‘narrative’ in *Narrative Discourse* I find highly useful:

I propose [...] to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content [...], to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, the statement, discourse or narrative text itself, and to use the word *narrating* for the producing narrative action, and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place.⁹

Appropriating Genette’s concepts, I will use the term ‘story’ for the narrative content, and the term ‘narrative’ for the text itself.

‘Post-colonial’ is a term whose meaning and use is the subject of widespread disagreement. Personally, I find that the definition put forth by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* is sufficiently wide to be inclusive and narrow enough to be useful. Griffiths and Tiffin warn against “restricting the meaning of the term to ‘after-colonialism’ or after-independence”.¹⁰ Furthermore, they stress that the term “addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact”¹¹ as well as arguing for post-colonialism as “a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction.”¹² I approve and will make use of this definition of the term throughout the thesis.

A term that appears frequently within post-colonial theory, and which will be relevant for this thesis, is the figure or concept of the other. This is generally understood as the opposite to *the self*, the one that cannot be known, but nevertheless is crucial in the defining of subject identity as a contrasting binary entity. Crucially, the other is created *out of* the self, and thus not seen as inhabiting an independent existence. For post-colonial critics this asymmetrical binary has often been the main point of criticism of colonialist literature in which the “native inhabitants” are mere props or sketches used to accentuate or define the main, white character.¹³ Within post-colonial theory and criticism Said’s *Orientalism* has proven central with its argument that the West has defined and relates to the “Orient” as an identity-creating other, thereby refusing the other, i.e. the rest of the world, an autonomous identity. The following quote sums up the basic structure of his approach.

⁹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 27.

¹⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, general introduction to *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See for instance Abdul JanMohamed’s criticism of Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* in ‘The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature’, *Critical Inquiry*, (vol. 12, No 1, Autumn 1985).

Yet what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West. [...] Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental and his world.¹⁴

'Deconstruction' is both a critical device and significant trend within literary criticism. Jacques Derrida's article 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences' is a key deconstructionist text. Here Derrida, using the texts of Claude Lévi-Strauss, charts the necessary oppositionality that can be found in all uses of signs, and argues that this oppositionality is inherent, created, and upheld by the discourse of human sciences. But he also stresses that

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history: we can pronounce not a single deconstructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulates of precisely what it seeks to contest.¹⁵

In other words: there is no language *outside* language, an attempt to deconstruct a discourse, to challenge and reveal the relationship between the constituting signs, will only result in the creation of another discourse, a discourse which out of necessity follows "the postulates", or rules, of that which it attempts to challenge. However:

The quality and fecundity of a discourse are perhaps measured by the critical rigor with which this relation to the history of metaphysics and to the inherent concepts is thought. Here is a question both of a critical relation to the language of the social sciences and a critical responsibility to the discourse itself. It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of the heritage itself.¹⁶

Derrida argues that while there may not be any discourse that freely and autonomously can challenge or deconstruct a present discourse in our use of language, it is possible to demonstrate "a critical responsibility" in which "the status of discourse", and the meaning it creates, become the subject of critical scrutiny. Furthermore, I will argue that Coetzee uses the trope of pain, the earlier quoted "authority of the suffering body" to explore of the instability of language and its critical possibilities. Therefore, I will use Derrida's approach to language

¹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 40.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280-281.

¹⁶ Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences', 282.

as a basic premise for my reading, but I will also discuss how the novels establish an active response to this approach.

When it comes to the term ‘discourse’, which Genette in the more narrow meaning of a ‘stretch of language’,¹⁷ I will employ the wider meaning created and constituted by Michel Foucault, and lucidly summed up by Edward Said (who also employs this definition):

texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence and weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it.¹⁸

Foucault’s notion of discourse suggests a body of knowledge – a collection of different kinds of texts – instead of thinking of discourse primarily as verbal text, as does Genette. I will thus approach ‘discourse’ as a collection of texts whose collectively produce a tradition of knowledge. Even more important is how this idea of discourse works:

[...] both ‘the world’ and our consciousness of it are effects of the kinds of representations we can make of it. But, at the same time, discourse is not just a form of representation, it is a *material condition* (or a set of conditions) which enables and constrains the socially productive ‘imagination’.¹⁹

In other words, discourse determines the referent of the sign: the possibilities of signification within any given structure.

Further, I have used the term ‘dominant discourse’ to characterise discourses such as the construction of apartheid in *Age of Iron*. This kind of discourse attempts to move into invisibility even as it works to control the relations of power and claims a totality in its signifying structure.

It follows that I will not use the term “counter-discourse” as a deconstructive discourse in the Derrida-ian sense, something that he convincingly argues is impossible. Rather, I will draw on the usage of the term within the realm of post-colonial theory, more specifically as it is sketched out by Bill Ashcroft in his book *Post-Colonial Transformation*. Here he argues that the

¹⁷ The narrow meaning of ‘discourse’ is stated in the usually highly useful *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), but which in the case of the entry on ‘Discourse’ concludes, rather discouragingly, that discourse “may be any number of things”.

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 94.

¹⁹ Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject* (London: UCL Press, 1993), 34.

reassertion of the margins of language use over the dominance of a standard code, a centre, is the most exiting conclusion of the theory of the ‘creole continuum’. But it is also instrumental in *conceiving the discourse of the post-colonial as rooted in conflict and struggle, as ‘counter-discourse’, since the perpetual confrontation with a ‘standard code’ is what constructs the language.* This does not mean the replacement of one canon for another, or the reconstruction of the centre which is being subverted. Such a reorientation emphasizes the fact that the code is theoretically abstracted for the activity, and it reinstalls the priority of the practical or constitutive semiology of the message. This observation reveals that language has its only practical existence in the *parole* within which the usage of members, rather than a supervenient system or *a priori* referentiality, determinates meanings. (my italics)²⁰

This line of reasoning is clearly reminiscent of Derrida’s, to the extent that ‘to deconstruct’ and ‘to create a counter-discourse’ may in some cases be seen as interchangeable. Ashcroft defines counter-discourse as an active resistance to a dominant, and perhaps oppressive, central discourse. I would additionally claim that for a textual resistance to be defined as counter-discourse it must expose the presence of the dominant discourse within its narrative framework. By revealing the non-identification between the signs of the discourse and its references of power, the text can destabilise the dominant discourse’s structural basis and thus its claims to totality. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*’ discourse of Empire the sign of peace and stability refers to a signified torture and violence. In *Age of Iron*’s discourse of apartheid the sign of security and necessity refers to a signifier of dead school children. Through this discursive linkage the dominant discourse – that of Empire and that of apartheid, respectively – justifies its power while simultaneously denying its existence. In this thesis I will examine whether the trope of the suffering body can be said to create a counter-discourse that actively challenges this sign-referent relationship.

In order to delineate how representations of pain function within a text, as well as discursively, I will predominantly draw on Elaine Scarry’s study *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* and her main argument that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sound and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”²¹ Furthermore, Scarry emphasizes

the utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not simply one its incidental or accidental attributes but essential to what it is. [...] for physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for*

²⁰ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 65.

²¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resist objectification in language.²²

I find that Scarry's notion of pain can be seen as a sort of anti-language, an experience which replaces language with something else, can helpfully be linked to Derrida's examination of deconstruction, as well as to Bill Ashcroft's stress on language's counter-discursive ability, and thus a more solid theoretical basis for my reading of the suffering body in Coetzee's text.

A similar line of thought is observable in Jean Améry's *At the Minds Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*. It is arguably relevant to include this work as it supplements Scarry's view by adding that of the witness and victim. Of his experience of torture Améry writes: "The pain was what it was. Beyond that there was nothing to say."²³ Yet Améry provides a complete essay on his experience of torture, a potent contradiction that I will go on to demonstrate can be traced in Coetzee's treatment of the experience of pain as well.

In addition, I will also refer to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. This seminal study provides a useful and thorough discussion of how acts of state-condoned torture and violence, resulting in the display of the tortured body, are a ceremony by which the power of the state becomes manifest.²⁴ Foucault's insight is, I posit, highly relevant to my discussion of how authoritative power is depicted in Coetzee's two novels. Foucault also examines how the act of torture is irrevocably linked to the idea of an unassailable and definite truth:

To a certain extent, it [the confession] transcended, all other evidence; an element in the calculation of truth, it was also the act by which the accused accepted the charge and recognized the truth. [...] One may see the functioning of judicial torture, or interrogation under torture, as a torture of truth.²⁵

Moreover, the tortured body also becomes a physical and undeniable proof, not only of the tortured's guilt but of his sentence and of the justice of the state: "His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that has hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to legible for all."²⁶ Thus *Discipline*

²² Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 5.

²³ Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 33.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 48-49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43. The similarity between this theoretical observation and Franz Kafka's quite literal interpretation of it in the short-story 'In the Penal Colony' is striking, and Kafka's short-story functions as one of *Waiting for the Barbarians* many intertexts.

and Punish makes the argument that the tortured body acts discursively both as a complex symbol of power and as a undeniable truth, an observation that, I will contend, echoes throughout *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron*.

Finally, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* concentrates mainly on how we view others in pain. I believe this is a highly relevant perspective as both the magistrate and Mrs. Curren experience coming face-to-face with the suffering of another and, perhaps more importantly in this context, with the suffering of *an other*. The experience serves as a catalyst for a crucial process of self-examination, which is connected with the metaphor of blindness versus sight, as in *Age of Iron*:

Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, five bodies were neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. [...] I was shaking: shivers ran up and down my body, my hands trembled. I thought of the boy's open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again. (102)

But Sontag problematises the position of the spectator: "In each instance, the gruesome invites utter to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look."²⁷ This is a problem which both novel's consider as the act of witnessing, on the part of both narrators, is not enough to redeem them.

Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* is also relevant to this thesis. It is potentially useful not only because Mrs. Curren suffers from cancer, one of two main diseases discussed in Sontag's book, but also because Sontag explores how cancer functions as a highly intricate yet powerful metaphor within present day cultural discourse, an intricacy I will discuss further in the third chapter.

One last specification is in order. When speaking of the suffering body and pain, I am speaking of the body as a textual construction, not of the actual physical entity, in concordance with my choice of a reading that stems largely from an interest in not *what* language says, but *how* it says what we think that it says. "Pain" too, refers to the pains narrative representation and not a physical sensation. However, I aim to demonstrate that the in-articulation of physical pain that Scarry argues for can be re-traced in how the body in pain acts as a trope in the narrative. In order to do so I will assume a conflation between pain as physical experience and pain as it is treated textually, a connection between the physical experience and its textual ramifications, something which I believe is implied in the previous

²⁷ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 38.

theoretical overview. Consequently, I will argue that the suffering body forms a trope with unique and highly interesting properties that form the core of this thesis' focus, as well as, as I hope to demonstrate, the centre of the two novels' counter-discursive effort.

Having established an overview of the general theoretical background for this thesis, in addition to giving key definitions, I will now proceed to explain my methodological approach in some detail, as well as to give further reason for my choices when it comes to relevant secondary sources.

1.3 Method

As already outlined, the main focus of this thesis will be the trope of the suffering body. This entails a close reading of the representations of pain in each of the novels. It also suggests my intent to widen the scope of the specific in order to show how these representations work within the narrative. Are they contradictory, dismantling and challenging assumptions put forth in other parts of the text? Or are they supportive, guiding the reader toward a final interpretation of the narrative? It is also important to view this trope in connection with other themes and motifs in the novel, of which the most central in both novels, concerns history and the idea of Truth.

As already indicated, for my approach to language in the two novels I will adopt Derrida's assertion that the relationship between sign and referent is arbitrary, and that meaning arises mainly from a construction of binaries whose premise is established through discourse. Additionally, I will in my readings employ Roland Barthes and his book *S/Z* in which he makes the case for the plural text. Here he states:

the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. The interpretation demanded by a specific text, in its plurality, is in no way liberal: it is not a question of conceding some meanings, of magnanimously acknowledging that each one has its share of the truth; it is a question, against all in-difference, of asserting the very existence of plurality, which is not that of the true, the probable, or even the possible.²⁸

I take this passage to mean that the reading and interpretation of texts, based on a recognition of the infinity of language, must be reading of plurality, of uncertainty and contradiction. This does not mean that everything is equally valid, but that a reading should, as far as it is possible, map out the complexity of the text, and out of this critical venture assert a tentative

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 6.

meaning of this complexity. This approach will apply as the main methodological premise for both my readings.

It is worth mentioning here that in her book *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, the first full length study to be published on Coetzee, Theresa Dovey expresses a goal similar to the one I have stated above. She wants to “not so much to name and make explicit the ambiguity of the text, but to understand the necessity and the rhetorical functioning of textual ambiguity.”²⁹ Additionally, Dovey chooses to describe the deconstructive project of Coetzee’s oeuvre as “Derridean”.³⁰ However, that being said, Dovey’s discussion focuses on his first four novels’ deconstruction, and subsequent reconstruction, of the sub-genres of South African writing. To achieve this, Dovey employs Lacanian theory in an effort to define Coetzee’s novels as “(Lacanian) psychoanalytic criticism-as-fiction”,³¹ and her project thus diverges from mine to such an extent that I do not believe there is any risk of a problematical overlap in our readings.

Furthermore, my methodological premise and the nature of the problem under consideration, necessitates a text-centred approach. My approach will rely mainly on close-readings in an effort to map out the hidden linguistic structure of the text, as well as serving as a strategy to determine how the trope of the suffering body and its representation reverberates with the other elements of the narrative. Regarding the novels’ formal and thematic features as closely linked and equally important, I will place equal emphasis on both in the course of my readings, as a way of insisting “on how each moment of writing engages form.”³²

My readings will also be supported by a selection from the plethora of articles and volumes previously published on Coetzee’s works. However, it would be relevant at this point to include a brief discussion on the nature of this criticism. Unsurprisingly, the main body of criticism which raises the issue of historical/political relevance and aesthetic autonomy are from the first half of the 1990s. This was a time when the future of South Africa hung in the balance, and history seemed ready to step in and examine the atrocities committed by the apartheid regime. Significantly, one of the most recent books on Coetzee, David Attridge’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, rejects a political, even allegorical, reading of Coetzee’s works, and argues that the novels should be read “literally”,

²⁹ Teresa Dovey, *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (Johannesburg: AD. Donker Ltd., 1988), 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

³² Stefan Helgesson, *Writing in Crisis: Ethics and History in Gordimer, Ndebele and Coetzee* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004), 5.

as text itself.³³ In the latest collection of criticism, published in 1998, critics like Bill Ashcroft and Judie Newman are concerned with *Waiting for the Barbarians*' subversive potential, but from a linguistic and universalised standpoint, their focus being the consequences of the novel's ironic/allegorical and intertextual capacities, respectively.³⁴ While one must assume that an author cannot avoid being part of history, nor, it seems, can the critic.

Therefore, I choose to begin with the texts themselves and follow where they lead, if anywhere. For it seems unfair to thrust a mode of interpretation down on Coetzee's works when the one thing that almost all of his critics *do* seem to consider as one of the strengths of his authorship is his fiction's evasiveness and ambiguity, its continuous resistance to an absolute and final reading.

Similarly, to start out from a debate on the responsibilities of the writer when confronted with an unjust political situation, and then look at how Coetzee responds to these issues through his fiction is to confine the reading of the texts to the framework of a pre-text, thus limiting the reading to an already given set of assumptions. Such an act would be unfair and reductive not only to the fiction, but to the act of reading itself. While agreeing with the necessary wordliness of any text (no textual production takes place in a historical and cultural vacuum), I also firmly believe that, at least in the case of Coetzee's writings, the most interesting and compelling textual acts of criticism can be performed when the focal point of the reading is the text, not the context. As I have already touched upon in relation to Derrida, there is no true vantage point outside the text from where one might comfortably and objectively look in, just as there is no language outside language that can be said to wholly avoid the implications of an unstable language to which Derrida alerts us. The critic's view of a text's context, the way it is mediated to us through language, has been shaped by the text itself, as this context has already been communicated to us through the construction of its fictional narrative. As Stefan Helgesson has written when justifying *his* emphasis on the text, rather than on the context:

My first loyalty is therefore to the text, irrespective of how it may contradict what a writer says about his or her work. This does not unequivocally sever the ties between writer and writing, and thus disable the writer's agency, but the relationship between writer and written text is not one of unmediated authority. Thus, whereas the writer may mobilise writing as a mode of agency that symbolically challenges, negates or

³³ David Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

³⁴ Sue Kossew, ed., *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998).

deconstructs history, a chosen text may, conversely, indicate how the act of writing is pressured, conditioned and enabled by an ongoing historical process.³⁵

The writer's subject-position may legitimately be included in our consideration of the text, without reducing it to these factors and causes. My theoretical and interpretive support will therefore not be derived from those critics who insist on the rather circular argument that knowledge of South African history gives us knowledge of Coetzee's novel's and knowledge of Coetzee's novels gives us knowledge of South African history, but rather from the critics who, while acknowledging the novels' historical context, conduct a more textually oriented reading.

1.4 The Problem at Hand

At the very beginning of this introduction I asked the question: do *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* facilitate a deconstruction of dominant discourse through the trope of the suffering body, and can this deconstructive practice be considered counter discursive? While I may not yet be any closer to an adequate answer, I have in the above passages tried to form a basis from which it may be possible to begin discussing the issue. Before commencing this task, however, I will briefly elaborate on the problem at hand.

The idea that a text, even a fictional text, might work counter-discursively is not my own. It forms a central part of what post-colonial literature is perceived to be all about. The already quoted Bill Ashcroft states that post-colonial discourse is in its very nature counter-discursive.³⁶ However, as I have already mentioned, Derrida has convincingly argued that *all* texts have deconstructive properties; that all texts work against language in some way, but that, also, all texts might be said to form the basis of their own deconstruction. It is between these two towering figures of theory in their respective fields that I will attempt to wedge a space, however small, by claiming that in both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* it is possible to identify the trope of the suffering body as the main site of the texts' deconstructive properties, thus constituting the point where deconstruction and counter-discourse originates in the narrative. Aiding me in this endeavour are Elaine Scarry and Jean Améry whose insights on pain as actively resistant, even destructive, to language I have already included. To reiterate: the bodily experience of pain eradicates language and leaves only the body. With the deconstruction of language the body takes the place of the mind, but

³⁵ Helgesson, *Writing in Crisis*, 21-22.

³⁶ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 65.

the body, when seen as the opposite of language, and its experience of pain, reconstitutes a system of signs that creates another way to speak. Thus the suffering body may partly solve the problem expounded by Derrida, because while a text as a construction of language may be said to always also hold the seeds of its own deconstruction, the silence of the body in pain does not.

Both Foucault and Sontag and Coetzee himself, I might add, argue convincingly that the force of the body in pain is undeniable: the contorted face, the twitching body, the bloody wound, are all unassailable confirmations that an event has taken place, proof of its reality. It is also an extremely forceful symbol of power, both to those who experience it and to those who witness its results.

Seen thus, pain is perhaps a language emanating from the body, carrying the same weight and authority as the body itself, even to those who experience it. For as both the narrators of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* learn in the most painful way, it is only after the magistrate has been tortured and Mrs. Curren has received the news of her death that they can begin to truly reassess their presumptions about the world they inhabit and have been part of upholding. Their altered bodies marginalise them, and thus aligning them closer with the subjugated other. The suffering body creates its own narrative which overrides and rewrites the dominant discourse. If language equals thought and action equals body, action becomes possible when the experience of body removes the possibility of language. Both protagonists take action upon their own bodies, ultimately the only space available to them. But in a typically Coetzeean fashion this action does not extend outside this limited space. Although both protagonists envision that their action-on-body will have further-reaching consequences than the subjective, this does not happen. The magistrate never has his trial, his moment of opportunity to speak out against the unjust, and Mrs. Curren never finds the courage to blaze down the boardwalk, to exemplify to all the shame they share.

To conclude: language can be viewed as deconstructive in its own right, and fictional language can be viewed as counter-discursive to a given authoritative discourse. In addition, pain can be viewed as resistant and destructive to language itself, the one bodily experience “without referential content”,³⁷ and yet the suffering body can also be seen as a symbol of power and of the Truth of the state. Which leads us back to the initial problem: how does the trope of the suffering body function within a given fictional text and can we read this function as part of a wider resistance to the dominant discourse – i.e. as counter-discourse?

³⁷ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 5.

I grant that this problem is somewhat wide in its scope and thus might place a strain on what I can realistically hope to achieve within the limits of this thesis. While I am mainly interested in the trope of the suffering body, the structure of Coetzee's novels is such that any one element contains within it a number of complex and interrelated issues. To choose only one would be reductive, to not say impossible, and would inevitably marginalise that characteristic interconnectedness which is a key aspect of Coetzee's texts. The task of this thesis will therefore be to provide a response to, and discuss, these questions by addressing what I perceive to be the main issues pertaining to the problem outlined above.

1.5 Outline of following chapters

The following chapters of this thesis will be structured as follows: I will do a reading of the two novels separately and then bring the two readings together in a fourth chapter, before the final conclusion. The next chapter will concern itself with *Waiting for the Barbarians*, as it precedes *Age of Iron* both chronologically and, in many ways, thematically. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, fear of the waiting's end is always present: what will happen once the barbarian hordes are at the gate? The barbarians and their assured arrival become an entity to define oneself against. When the dreaded barbarian invaders never materialize, and the magistrate, and Empire, are left with a questioning of their own identity that is impossible to silence. In *Age of Iron* the situation is inverted: the violent uprising against the apartheid regime has already begun; children are being shot by armed officers designated to keep the peace and homes are being burnt in the interest of national security.

The Empire/State's response to the perceived or real threat to its existence will naturally be a topic for the two following chapters. In addition I will examine the following issues with regard to both novels: how is the body and its experience of pain represented? How do the narrators describe the witnessing of other people's pain and their own reaction to it? And how do the representations of the suffering body function within the text itself, both on the 'story' level and on the 'narrative' level? It will also be relevant to further broaden my scope and attempt to answer the following questions: how do these representations affect the ideas of language and truth in both novels? Do they in any way challenge or subvert the dominant discourse within the narrative?

In the final chapter I will compare the readings of the two novels, discussing narrative similarities as well as possible differences, and their implications for the reading of Coetzee's texts. I intend to discuss whether the trope of the suffering body in the novels forms the basis

of a counter-discursive practice. In addition, I will also examine some of the critical implications of my readings, and consider whether it can be placed in relation to the reception of Coetzee's novels, and the field of post-colonial criticism. Since I have chosen to place the main body of my comparative discussion in the conclusion, this chapter will necessarily be somewhat longer than what is usual for a thesis conclusion.

2 *Waiting for the Barbarians*

This chapter will read the suffering body in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as the central site of the novel's deconstruction of language. In order to do so I will first trace how the human body acts as a central motif in the novel. I will center my discussion on how the suffering body can be said to exist in the narrative in a dichotomous relationship to language. The body in pain frequently acts as an instance of certainty not only on the level of the story, but also within the narrative itself, and, through its silence, it comprises a space in which a different kind of narrative might be acted out.

Second, I will discuss the idea of truth, both how it is presented in the novel and how these contesting truths claim the same narrative space. The concept of truth is central in the novel, as it constitutes both the spoken goal of Colonel Joll's acts of torture, as well as forming the implicit object of the magistrate's relationship with the girl. There are numerous truths attached to any event or re-telling of an event in the narrative, some in plain view, others more hidden. Their parallel presence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* raises significant questions about the value and possibility of certainty and the absolute.

Third, I will demonstrate how the motif of the body and the idea of truth form a basis for an exploration of the importance of language in the novel. The body and the idea of truth are tied together, as language is used to interrogate, in the case of the body, and to create, in the case of truth. In this section I will also examine how language gains power when it is used as part of torture, and also consider how language is used by Empire to create reality through a discourse of binaries. The act of reading also comes in to question in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as language, both that produced by reading, and that by writing, experiences a severe challenge to its authority.

Finally, I will bring these three areas together in a discussion of the nature and consequences of pain and how its trope affects not only the above-mentioned issues, but also how it comes to affect how *Waiting for the Barbarians* might be read. Pain eradicates language, but also constitutes a silent and deconstructive sub-narrative in the novel.

However, I am obligated to clarify one issue before I begin. As mentioned in the Introduction *Waiting for the Barbarians* has frequently been read as an allegorical novel, either as an allegory of apartheid - the historical context for its publication - or as a more universalized allegory of the ideology and brutality of colonialism. Indeed, Abdul JanMohamed's main reservation about *Waiting for the Barbarians* is that, because of its allegorical form, the novel "epitomizes the dehistoricizing, desocializing tendency of

colonialist fiction.”³⁸ I also noted that, among others, Derek Attridge, has taken the position that “Before relying too heavily on allegorization as a primary mode of interpretation, therefore, we need to ask how allegory is thematized in the fiction, and whether his staging of allegory as an *issue* provides any guidance in talking about Coetzee’s *use* of allegory [...]”,³⁹ thus making this a contended assumption. Despite this, I will not specifically discuss this issue of allegory in the following chapter. In common with Attridge I maintain, as is probably fairly clear by now, that language and its impossibilities constitute the main theme of this novel, and I therefore second his dissent from a simple allegorical reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In addition, I think that the critical focus of this reading will not necessarily warrant such a discussion, and that an attempt to expand my reading to include such a focus will prove redundant. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I also hope that the interpretive results of my choice of theoretical framework and approach will serve to demonstrate that the discussion on the allegorical is superfluous.

2.1 The Body

J.M. Coetzee has said of his own work that there is “Not grace, then, but at least the body”; as “the body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt”; a doubt created by “the endlessly sceptical processes of textualisation”.⁴⁰ This observation seems to suggest that the body, or, perhaps more accurately, the textual representation of the body, resists the ambiguity inherent in language. In alleging this Coetzee also establishes a dichotomy between body and language, alleging that, paradoxically, the textual representation of the body has in it an ability to work against the qualities of the very text it is a part of. It would seem to follow that that the dichotomy body/language is aligned with another set of oppositions: that of certainty versus doubt; so that, in a sense, body *is* certainty, while language is nothing but doubt.

It is possible to rediscover this construction at the very beginning of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In the opening pages of the novel we learn that Colonel Joll, the representative of the Third Bureau of Empire’s Civil Guard, has questioned one of two prisoners, an old man. The following report is issued to the magistrate in his capacity as the administrative head of the outpost:

³⁸ JanMohamed, ‘The Economy of Manichean Allegory’, 73.

³⁹ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 33, original italics.

⁴⁰ Coetzee, ‘Autobiography and Confession’, 248.

‘During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner’s testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful.’ (6)

When the guard from the outpost who witnessed the questioning is asked to give a statement by the magistrate he repeats the written report almost *in verbatim*: “The prisoner became uncontrollable and attacked the visiting officer. I was called in to help subdue him. By the time I came in the struggle had ended. The prisoner was unconscious and bleeding from the nose” (6). The same night the magistrate goes to see the old man’s grandson, who is still held prisoner. The man’s corpse has been sown inside a shroud, and the boy is being made to sleep in the same room. As the magistrate tears open the shroud he sees: “The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket a bloody hole” (7).

The broken body, torn and mute, immediately deconstructs two central constructions of Empire’s discourse in the narrative. First, it defines the words “questioning” “interrogation” and “investigation” in a decidedly unequivocal manner, and in a manner that is in direct opposition to the meaning intended by Empire. This way of naming Colonel Joll’s acts of torture is used throughout the novel, but the action behind them, the “banshee beneath the stone” (9), remains exposed from the very beginning through this image of the violated body. Second, it acutely demonstrates the discrepancy between the narrative told in the language of the Empire by its representative, and the narrative told by the body of its victim. The image of the body is undeniable in its authority, and its presence becomes inescapable for the magistrate who, once he has seen it, cannot close his eyes to it again, however much he may wish to do so. When the boy, also tortured, confesses to thievery and plans of an armed uprising, the dichotomy between body and language has already been firmly established. For the narrative demonstrates that there is no relationship between what the boy has said and what has happened, and also, for the Empire, it does not matter. The suffering body actualizes the arbitrary relationship between sign and referent, its presence inserting itself in this space of disjunction and altering the intended referent set into play by Empire’s discourse.

Two more bodies are central to the narrative and to the development and deepening of this structure. The first belongs to the ‘barbarian’ girl whom the magistrate takes care of after she has been left behind because she is blind and lame. Her injuries have been sustained during “questioning”, and from the moment they meet her scars and wounds appear endlessly fascinating to the magistrate. Of their relationship Rosemary Jolly has written:

The magistrate's fascination for the "barbarian girl" stems from her body as the site of torture, rather than any desire for the "girl" herself. He worships the surface of her body, the skin, the site of interaction between torturer and tortured. [...] He treats her body as a text that, if he pays it enough attention – if he "reads" it "properly" – will alert him to the truth behind the scene of torture.⁴¹

His fascination with her body is not sexual, but rather scholarly. Mirroring his activities as an amateur archaeologist and his attempt to unravel the mystery of the poplar slips he has excavated, the magistrate strives to read the girl's body. Her body presents itself as a site of signs, one that may possibly disclose a narrative, the source, the magistrate recognizes, of his growing obsession: "It is becoming more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body is deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (33). But the girl remains a mystery. However often he strokes his hands over her broken ankles and peers into her half-blind eyes her story remains hidden from him, as if her experiences cannot be re-created in language. "With a rush of feeling I reach out to touch her hair, her face. There is no answering life. It is like caressing an urn or a ball, something which is all surface" (52). While the body represents a certainty, a witness to its own experience, the experience continues to avoid articulation.

Finally, he decides to take the girl back to her people. During the journey they consummate their relationship for the first and last time, but the event leaves the magistrate feeling even more bewildered than before:

I am with her not for whatever raptures she may promise or yield but for other reasons, which remain as obscure to me as ever. Except that it has not escaped me that in the bed in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her, the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes, are easily forgotten. Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself; or is it the case (I am not stupid, let me say these things) that it is the marks on her which drew me to her but which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough? Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? [...] 'Or perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put?' My lips move, silently composing and recomposing the words. 'Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through.' (70)

The magistrate realises, at least partly, what has created his fascination for her body: the possibility to read her, to gain access to the experiences she has lived through, and to understand not only the other – the barbarian for whom they are all waiting for – but also the

⁴¹ Rosemary Jane Jolly, *Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M Coetzee* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996), 127.

nature of torture and pain. However, in this moment he also edges closer to a related insight: that these experiences cannot be articulated, that the very nature of language would make them false and, more crucially, that they can only be lived to be understood.

As the magistrate parts with the girl and returns to the outpost this lesson will soon be confirmed as the narrative centres on a fourth body, his own. As soon as he arrives the magistrate is taken prisoner for “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (85), another scrap of language Empire uses at its convenience. At first he feels elated that he has taken a position of opposition. But as the days drag on in solitude the outside world becomes fainter and the rudimentary needs of his body ever more real:

The flow of events in the outside world, the moral dimension of my plight, if that is what it is, a plight, even the prospect of defending myself in court, have lost all interest to under the pressure of appetite and physical functions and the boredom of living one hour after another. I have caught a cold; my whole being is reoccupied in sniffing and sneezing, in the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well. (93)

Moreover, since the magistrate is also the narrator of the story, as the pain and degradations increase his body seems to grow in size and force until it occupies almost all available space within the narrative itself. As the outer world diminishes what is left is the body, its need for food and drink, to be whole, to live.

It cost me agonies of shame the first time I had to come out of my den and stand naked before these idlers or jerk my body about for their amusement. Now I am past shame. My mind is turned wholly to the menace of the moment when my knees turn to water or my heart grips me like a crab, [...]. (128)

The need to hide one’s nakedness has to give way to the force of a pair of aching knees and a failing heart and even the most basic human emotions seem to grow light under the weight of the suffering body.

When the magistrate survives his incarceration and is set free, the narrative doubles back on itself and provides the answer to the magistrate musings on whether some signs cannot be articulated, only experienced. When the girl was still with him the magistrate became aware of a scar close to her eye: “In notice in the corer of one eye a greyish puckering as though a caterpillar lay there with its head under her eyelid, grazing. ‘What is this?’ I ask, tracing the caterpillar with my fingernail. ‘That is where they touched me,’ she says, and pushed my hand away” (33). Then the body of the magistrate becomes touched as well: “The wound on my cheek, never washed or dressed, is swollen and inflamed. A crust *like a fat*

caterpillar has formed on it. My left eye is a mere slit, [...]” (126 – my italics). The caterpillar-like sign on his own face is one that he cannot see, only feel, and once the wound is felt he no longer needs to question it. The wound also aligns him with the girl in that he now must undergo the same types of looks and examinations he gave her: “I touch the thickened nose, the ugly scar under my eye by which, I am beginning to learn, people are surreptitiously fascinated” (140). Their altered bodies marginalise them both, placing them apart from those who watch by articulating a narrative that cannot be told any other way than the physical.

What unites these bodies is that they are all bodies that have undergone torture. Thus it is perhaps not simply the body that resists articulation, but the tortured body, the body which has experienced pain. In their torturing they have been inscribed, physically, with the signs of Empire’s narrative. Foucault has written the following of the tortured prisoner in his book *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison*: “His body, displayed, exhibited in procession, tortured, served as the public support of a procedure that had hitherto remained hidden in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all.”⁴² Furthermore:

The body, several times tortured, provides the synthesis of the reality of the deeds and the truth of the investigation, of the documents of the case and the statements of the criminal, of the crime and the punishment. [...] It belongs, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested.⁴³

Judie Newman observes a similar occurrence in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: “At the risk of stating the obvious, the nexus at which the parallel between body and body politic becomes most apparent is the moment of judicial torture, which expresses the power of the body politic on the human body, [...]”⁴⁴ However, the tortured body in *Waiting for the Barbarians* with its scars-as-signs moves beyond what Foucault and Newman have observed and comes to inhabit a tripartite function. First, the power of the state becomes manifest in the body of those who have felt its physical consequences. It becomes a forceful reminder to all those who see it of what happens when the law of Empire is breached. It acts as a symbol of that power, more effective than any display of arms would ever be.

Second, it displays the otherness of the body of the one that has experienced torture, an otherness which is both mysterious and fascinating. We note the magistrate’s inability to

⁴² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁴ Judie Newman, ‘Intertextuality, Power and Danger: *Waiting for the Barbarians as a Dirty Story*’, in *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Sue Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 135.

turn away once he had seen the wounds on the old man and then on the boy; his fascination with the girl's scars, endlessly touching them and questioning her about their origins. And then there is his own body, hurt and damaged for the amusement of others, then healed, but scarred, drawing the curious stares of those around him. Their bodies set them apart from those who watch, turned into something worth watching, creating "a curiosity so intense that their bodies are drained by it and only their eyes live, organs of a new and ravaging appetite" (115).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the tortured body creates a narrative of Empire. This is a process, according to Scarry, which constitutes the very act of torture; torture being a process where the torturer's administration of pain brings on the prisoner's loss of world, voice and self.⁴⁵ The signs that constitute this narrative of power are carved into the body and override the narrative of self that was present while the self still held ownership of its own body. In the previously quoted extract the magistrate wonders: "is it she I want or the traces of the history her body bears?" (70). To which the answer should probably be that neither is available to him. The narrative of the girl has been overwritten by the narrative of Empire through the act of torture, but the signs created by this act are unreadable because they resist articulation until his own body has been inscribed with the same signs. "Qualities of feeling [...] mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself."⁴⁶ That is the paradox, and perhaps the truth, of the tortured body: it creates a tale, a certainty, that cannot be told, nor read, only experienced.

2.2 The Truth

However, is it possible to speak of any one truth in connection with *Waiting for the Barbarians*? The idea of "truth" necessitates further discussion because, as the novel unfurls, it becomes clear that the "truth" is not the simple thing it initially appears to be. At the beginning of his narrative the magistrate says to the sick boy and his grandfather of Colonel Joll: "His work is to find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth" (3). The magistrate believes that the "truth" is simply "what happened", and that it can easily be told, even under the special circumstances that a questioning by Colonel Joll entails, and then believed. The statement also establishes a connection between truth and torture, as the phrase

⁴⁵ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 36.

⁴⁶ Améry, *At the Minds Limits*, 33.

“That is all he does”, probably meant by the magistrate to put the prisoners more at ease, can also be understood as a reference to the singularity of Joll’s pursuit, and the length he is willing to go to in order to obtain the truth he seeks. This second interpretation gains strength when the magistrate, as Colonel Joll begins his interrogations of the fisherfolk, says of him: “In his quest for the truth he is tireless” (23). Nevertheless, the magistrate’s simpler views of the truth are repeated when he goes to see the boy after his grandfather has been beaten to death and tells him: “Listen, you must tell the officer the truth. That is all he wants to hear from you – the truth. Once he is sure you are telling the truth he will not hurt you. But you must tell him everything you know. You must answer every question truthfully” (7). The magistrate believes, or at least pretends to believe, perhaps even to himself, that the truth will protect the boy from pain. But, as Rosemary Jolly has noted: “This ‘truth’ [Colonel Joll’s] is, of course, ‘fixed’. Whereas the magistrate assumes, naively, that the old man and ailing boy may prove to be innocent, or at least pays lip service to this notion, for Joll, ‘the [only] truth’ lies in proof of their guilt; what remains is merely for them to be proved guilty.”⁴⁷ When the magistrate learns that the boy has made a confession he is surprised and outraged:

‘Listen,’ I say. ‘They tell me you have made a confession. They say you have admitted that you and the old man and other men from your clan have stolen sheep and horses. You have said that the men from your clan are arming themselves, that in the spring you are all going to join in a great war on the Empire. Are you telling the truth? Do you understand what this confession of yours will mean?’ (11)

But the boy has done little besides following the magistrate’s advice; he has told Joll the truth of the Empire, for within the torture chamber, as discussed earlier, the only truth is the truth of the torturer.

The belief that the truth can protect you from pain also resounds strangely with the insight the magistrate has gained from an earlier conversation with Joll:

When I see Colonel Joll again, when he has the leisure, I bring the conversation around to torture. ‘What if your prisoner is telling the truth,’ I ask, ‘yet finds that he is not believed? Is that not a terrible position? Imagine, to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator! How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?’

‘There is a certain tone,’ Joll says. ‘A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone.’

‘The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth?’

⁴⁷ Jolly, *Colonialization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing*, 125.

This is the most intimate moment we have yet had, which he brushes off with a little wave of the hand. ‘No, you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a special situation now. I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.’

Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll, [...]. (5)

It seems that the magistrate’s insight into the nature of truth only extends to include his perceptions of Colonel Joll, he has yet to address his own conceptions of truth. The observation that for the torturer “pain is truth” is a confirmation that only words uttered in intense pain can be true, for only pain is true. Moreover, Colonel Joll’s statements about how you “get the truth” echoes Foucault’s descriptions of judicial torture: “[...] one may see the functioning of judicial torture, or interrogation based on torture, as the torture of truth.”⁴⁸ In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, as in eighteenth-century France, the application of pain creates truth by extracting a confession, a confession which is in concordance with the already assumed guilt of the prisoner. The confession given under “pressure”, as Joll calls it, is always true, and contains the truth of the prisoner’s guilt as well as the truth of the power of those who conduct the investigations: “Within the crime reconstructed by writing, the criminal who confessed came to play the role of living truth.”⁴⁹ As Joll believes that the truth will reveal itself after enough pressure, there seems to be only two options: either you speak the truth of Empire, or you do not speak again.

The magistrate’s final conversation with the girl before she leaves him is reminiscent of the one he had with the boy:

‘Speak to them’ I tell her. ‘Tell them why we are here. Tell them your story. Tell them the truth.’

She looks sideways at me and gives a little smile. ‘You really want me to tell them the truth?’

‘Tell them the truth. What else is there to tell?’ (77)

The girl’s reaction to the magistrate’s admonishment suggests that she has learnt something about the nature of truth that the magistrate has not. However, the lesson does not leave the magistrate waiting. After he has been imprisoned for a while, but before he is tortured, he has a revelation:

⁴⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 40.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

No matter if I told the my interrogators the truth, recounted every word I uttered on my visit to the barbarians, no matter even if they were tempted to believe me, they would press on with their grim business, for it is an article of faith with them that the last truth is only told in the last extremity. I am running away from pain and death. (105)

He realises, as the girl already had, that “the truth” is not the simple idea he perceived to be. It can be manipulated, even changed: torturing becomes questioning, a murder becomes a scuffle with an unfortunate outcome, and a sick boy becomes the enemy. In addition, a textual connection is yet again made between truth and the experience of pain, and it is the experience of pain and torture which compels the magistrate to make a final conclusion about the concept of truth: “For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow” (148).

How, then, can we understand the idea of truth in *Waiting for the Barbarians*? As the above-quoted passage shows, Joll, the magistrate believes, is the truth of Empire – the brutal and violent rule with which it meets those who oppose it. The truth of Empire is the torturer, one who will infuse in his subjects his own truth by the application of torture, his own narrative, so that he can hear it recited back to him as the confessing prisoners own, thus turning him into the embodiment of truth, the truth of the power of Empire.

For Joll, as the magistrate realizes early on, pain is truth, for only pain creates truth. His views are confirmed in the interrogation of his prisoner who will yield up what Joll sees as truth only after he has been tortured. However, in the narrative, the magistrate’ story directly challenges Joll’s views. He learns that his truth and Joll’s truth are two very different things; he learns that his own truth, as was the case with the truth of the prisoners who were tortured before him, is worthless in the face of the truth of the torturer and that it cannot protect him from pain. Furthermore, he learns that only pain remains true, for as the experience of pain reduces the outside world to shadows, and as previous notions of truth and justice are emptied of meaning, the pain remains certain and unchallengeable: it is “incontestably real”.⁵⁰

Moreover, the truth of Empire is also its dependence on the enemy it has created, on the binary of empire/barbarian, what Abdul JanMohamed describes as: “the Manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of

⁵⁰ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 27.

the native.” An axis which in turn “provides the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: the manichean allegory [...]”⁵¹ Bill Ashcroft has discussed the creation and upholding of this binary in his article ‘Irony, Allegory and Empire: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *In the Heart of the Country*’: “For the outpost, and by extension the Empire, falls prey to its own xenophobia, life becomes apathetic, paranoid, until with the decimation of the expeditionary force in the desert, simply *from its failure to contact the barbarians*, the outpost virtually disintegrates.”⁵² An Empire which “must construct itself in terms of its enemies”,⁵³ must create its enemy. It must inscribe its narrative of opposition on the very bodies of its other in order to survive. “Coetzee’s Empire depends upon the operation of the imperialist manichean opposition, whereby it can identify itself as just(ified) by identifying the “barbarians” as the enemy.”⁵⁴ However, on the larger scale of the narrative “the novel dismantles the binary – “civilized/barbarian” – by showing the construction of the barbarians as an elaborate and absurd fiction.”⁵⁵ Empire uses torture to create the truth of its enemies, a truth it is dependent on for its survival, but a created truth nonetheless. The construction of the discourse of Empire depends on the presence of a definitive set of binary meanings. The narrative challenges these absolute meanings through its validation of a myriad of narratives that each may be seen as truth.

The truth then, if one can call it that, is that in its construction and subsequent deconstruction of the various “truths” outlined above, *Waiting for the Barbarians* challenges the very concept of truth, that there is one narrative which may have precedence and authority over all others. The truth is that there is no Truth. Furthermore, the novel also points to the fact that claims of a singular Truth tend to be made by those empowered to do so, and that this claim is most often carried out through the manipulation of language. Both the meaning of Truth and its supposed referent are determined by the discourse of Empire, who in turn is wholly dependent on presenting this sign-referent relationship as definite and pre-existing to its materialisation through torture. Empire’s belief in the truth requires an absolute and

⁵¹ JanMohamed, ‘The Economy of Manichean Allegory’, 63. Even though JanMohammed’s article is highly critical of *Waiting for the Barbarians* I am making use of his definition and arguments for the manichean opposition at this point of the argument. I hope to show towards the end of my thesis that *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* not only thematize and criticize this type of binary construction, but that they do it in a way that renders JanMohameds objections invalid.

⁵² Bill Ashcroft, ‘Irony, Allegory and Empire’, in *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Sue Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 105.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Jolly, *Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing*, 124.

⁵⁵ Ashcroft, ‘Irony, Allegory and Empire’, 107.

singular relationship between the sign and its referent. By complicating the idea of Truth the novel reveals the constructive nature of such claim, and the type of discourse that supports it.

2.3 Language as Torture

From the first pages of the novel and throughout there is an alignment between acts of language and acts of torture, as if they were one and the same. Colonel Joll decides that he “ought to *question*” (4 my italics) the young boy and his grandfather when he learns of their presence at the outpost. After he has finished torturing the first group of “barbarian” prisoners, he states to the magistrate that he has “completed his inquiries” (25). The magistrate, in turn, adopts Joll’s choice of vocabulary. He interviews the men who were on duty “while the prisoners were being questioned” (37) and learns that the soldiers “were not permitted to enter the room where the interrogations took place” (37). Although both the magistrate and Colonel’s choice of terms in a sense distort what goes on in the torture chamber, the soldier’s response to the magistrate’s questions reveals the close relationship between language and violence:

‘That man [the girl’s father] was questioned longer than anyone else. I saw him sitting by himself in a corner, after he had been in the first time, holding his head. [...].’
‘What happened to his daughter?’
‘She was also questioned but not so long.’ [...] ‘Sometimes there was screaming, I think they beat her, but I was not there.’ (39)

The presentation of torture as a search for information, for “truth”, provides the Empire with an implicit assessment that there is such a truth, as discussed above. It also provides Empire with a convenient linguistic motive for torture, as the purpose of an interrogation is logically the need for answers to certain questions. It “credits the torturer, providing him with a justification, his cruelty with an explanation”⁵⁶ as it creates attaches great importance to the answer, for why would Empire go to such lengths to ask a question, if the answer did not matter? Furthermore, “The question and answer also objectify the fact that while the prisoner has almost no voice [...] the torturer and the regime have doubled their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words.”⁵⁷ The idea of questioning becomes a way of strengthening Empire’s own narrative, a way of making the one questioned/tortured respond in accordance with the authoritative voice of the torturer.

⁵⁶ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

Additionally, as the above-quoted passage reveals the true meaning of words like “questioning”, it creates a darker underflow to later scenes of questions and answering. It also becomes the first instance where words are revealed to have plural and sometimes contradictory meanings, an act which exposes the fluidity in the relationship between sign and signifier, and such instances recur throughout the novel.

The close ties between acts of language and acts of torture are further developed as the magistrate takes on the role of questioner in his relation to the girl. He examines and cares for her body, as opposed to hurting it, but he is also continually asking her questions about her experiences in the torture chamber. Yet although it becomes a site at which the magistrate attempts to learn the truth *about* torture, rather than the truth *through* torture, their relationship gradually develops a sinister undertone:

‘And you,’ I say. ‘Do you do whatever you want?’ [...] ‘Are you here in bed with me because it is what you want?’

She lies naked, her oiled skin glowing a vegetal gold in the firelight. [...] My hand stirs, strokes her, fits itself into the contour of her breast.

She does not answer my words but I plunge on, embracing her tightly, speaking thick and muffled into her ear: ‘Come, tell me why you are here.’

‘Because there is nowhere else to go.’ (43)

Linked to his fascination and preoccupation for her body, and the previous revelations about the meaning of “questioning”, their asymmetrical relationship, the girl is destitute and alone, he is the official of the town, creates a context through which the magistrate’s complicity with the Empire is established: “The girl lies in my bed, but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally tie her up and beat her, it would be no less intimate” (46). This move parallels the alignment between language and torture as the magistrate – a man of words, not of violence – gradually takes on the role of the torturer.

The narrative sets up a structure that displays language as a tool that is used as a means to an end. Distorting the infliction of pain that lurks beneath the word “questioning”, language also provides an implied justification for Empire’s acts of violence. Additionally, while Joll uses language in torture to create the truth of Empire and its enemies, and the magistrate uses it to reach a truth about himself. And both questioner and torturer use the girl’s body in the process; “making her body into a sign that will develop into the figure of

truth” and turning “the ‘girl’ into an other, whose person, outside that of figuring, is irrelevant to them.”⁵⁸

This act of substituting “questioning” for torture becomes an apt and forceful way of implementing the power of language, both as an integral part of torture and as way of identifying the magistrate’s role in his own narrative. It also intimately connects the abuse of language with the abuse of the body. As Elaine Scarry has observed: “The question, whatever its content, is an act of wounding; the answer, whatever its content, is a scream.”⁵⁹

2.3.1 The Authority of Naming

At the beginning of this chapter I pointed out the jarring discrepancy between the report issued by Colonel Joll about the death of the old man and the body itself – a bloody and undeniable proof that he had been beaten to death. However, even at this early juncture, one realises that while this may make a difference to the magistrate and his actions later on, to the Empire it does not matter. The voice of one of its own officers, an authoritative narrative set down on paper in the form of an officially sealed report, becomes what has happened, it becomes the truth. The themes of this passage, as well as the magistrate’s reaction as one of disbelief are repeated some pages later when the first prisoners, the result of Colonel Joll’s expeditionary campaign, are brought back to the outpost: “‘The man is ridiculous!’ I shout. [...] ‘Did no one tell him these are fishing people? It is a waste of time bringing them here! You are supposed to help him track down thieves, bandits, invaders of the Empire! Do these people look like a danger to the Empire?’” (18). The magistrate is outraged that the “fishing people” could be mistaken for a threat to the Empire, but once the report has been written and the seal of the Bureau has been stamped on it, the fishing people have officially *become* the enemy. The absolutist discourse of Empire cannot be challenged by a single opposing voice. The magistrate later asks one of his own lieutenants who accompanied Joll and returned with the prisoners why he did not tell the Colonel the difference between the fishing people and the barbarians. The lieutenant explains that Joll had responded to his objections by stating that “‘Prisoners are prisoners’” (23), and that he had not felt that it was his place to argue against a superior officer. In the definition lies the difference, and in naming lies the power of appropriation into the discourse of Empire. For “the ritual of naming is essentially an

⁵⁸ Jolly, *Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing*, 128.

⁵⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 46.

extension of allegorical consciousness in that it ‘reads’ the territory [or body] of the ‘other’ by reference to an anterior set of signs already situated in cultural thematics [...].”⁶⁰

Bill Ashcroft has argued that “The pointlessness and absurdity of the Colonel’s torture is balanced by the very logic of power, its [Empire’s] need to inscribe itself in the bodies of its nominated barbarians.”⁶¹ An illustrative example of this important point is provided in the passage in which the magistrate has temporarily escaped from his prison and witnesses the triumphant return of Colonel Joll. In tow he has (as he must have) twelve “barbarian” prisoners, proof that “the barbarians are real” (113). The prisoners, who are thread together like beads on a wire that runs through holes in their cheeks and hands, are made to kneel strung together on the ground in front of an eagerly awaiting crowd. Then “The Colonel steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust onto his naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. I read the words upside down: ENEMY ... ENEMY ... ENEMY” (115). The crowd’s game is to beat the men’s backs with staves until the words are washed away with blood. Thus the Empire literally inscribes its narrative, with blunt letters and blood, on the body of the other, simultaneously creating and naming him. “For clearly the Colonel is in the business of creating the enemy, of delineating that opposition which *must* exist, in order that the Empire might define itself by its geographical and racial others.”⁶² Moreover, the Colonel’s display is Empire’s opportunity to demonstrate its power over the enemy it has created, for what good is an enemy if one cannot prove one’s own strength by subjugating him? The public display of torture and execution is a ceremony “by which power is manifested”,⁶³ both to the subjects of Empire and those to who supposedly oppose it.

When Colonel Joll takes out a hammer with which the prisoners are to be beaten, the magistrate can no longer stand back and watch and decides: “I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save my self. Let it at the very least be said, [...] that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian” (114). Having already re-named himself and in the process inverting the term “barbarian” from meaning ‘them’ to meaning ‘us’, he now attempts to name the prisoners in an act of defiance against the appropriative discourse of Empire. He steps out in front of the crowd: “Look at

⁶⁰ Stephen Slemon, ‘Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (23, No. 1, winter 1988), 161.

⁶¹ Ashcroft, ‘Irony, Allegory and Empire’, 105.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 47.

these men!' I recommence. '*Men!*'" (114) To challenge Empire's signifying power by providing a different name is dangerous and he is quickly beaten into silence.

It seems fitting that, after the power of naming has been made so brutally clear, both to the magistrate and within the framework of the narrative, the magistrate's next conversation with Colonel Joll is about definitions:

'But let me ask you: do you believe that that is how your fellow-citizens see you after the ridiculous spectacle you created on the square the other day? Believe me, to people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman. [...]'

'You want to go down in history a martyr. I suspect. But who is going to put you in the history books? These border troubles are of no significance. [...].

'There were no border troubles before you came,' I say.

'That is nonsense,' he says. 'You are simply ignorant of the facts. You are living in a world of the past. You think we are dealing with small groups of peaceful nomads. In fact we are dealing a well organized enemy. If you had travelled with the expeditionary force you would have seen that for yourself.'

'Those pitiable prisoners you brought in – are *they* the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? *You* are the enemy, Colonel!' I can restrain myself no longer. I pound the desk with my fist. '*You* are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given them all the martyrs they need – starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!'

'Nonsense, there will be no history, the affair is too trivial.' (124-125)

The dialogue contains a juxtaposition of names and definitions each defined by its binary, and each attributed to either man along the lines of an oppositional divide: the magistrate thinks of himself, at least according to Joll, as "the One Just Man, a martyr", but Joll defines him as "a clown, a madman". The magistrate believes they are nothing but "peaceful nomads"; the Colonel calls them "a well organized enemy". Although, paradoxically, he is the one who chooses to use the term "border troubles", while the magistrate terms it "a war". The magistrate evokes "History", while Joll insist on an "affair" "too trivial" for history. Also, significantly, Joll uses an inclusive "we" who is "dealing" with an outside threat, but the magistrate immediately distances himself by using an accusatory "*you*", committing "your filthy barbarities". And with the text already bursting at the seams with various and contradictory meanings, the magistrate finally names Joll himself, not as a Colonel, an officer of the Bureau, an investigator (all terms employed earlier in the narrative), but as an "obscene torturer" who deserves "to hang!" (125). How someone, or something, is named, becomes crucial as it determines which role one is given within the discourse of Empire. As Barbara Eckstein observes: "I can say that politics is the use of language, with or without violence, to produce power. As politics is usually practiced, language is used to produce the power of

what asserts itself as not-other over what is asserted as other.”⁶⁴ However, as this dialogue shows, no definition is strong enough to completely resist the presence of a contradictory term. Although Empire is powerful enough to support its language with the threat and application of violence, as indeed it does, the magistrate’s ever-growing insight into the power of Empire’s narrative means that *his* narrative continues to challenge its authority over language. Significantly, the magistrate himself never names the other, resorting to descriptions like “the boy” and “the girl”. While the Empire appropriates through naming, the magistrate attempts to remove himself from this appropriative act by not naming at all. Wading in the lake, released, he was no longer defined as a prisoner, thus he “must be a free man” (137), he reaches his final realisation about the nature of Empire:

By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation. A mad vision yet a virulent one: I, wading in the ooze, am no less infected with it than the fateful Colonel Joll [...]. (146)

What the magistrate has learnt is that it is no one’s privilege to locate oneself outside language, or outside discourse, and that “the question is ultimately not about the laws of history, but who controls the signs of power.”⁶⁵ If one controls language, one controls the world as it is determined for us through discourse, for what is Empire but a “vision” constructed on “images of disaster”?

2.3.2 The Problem of Reading

As mentioned previously, one of the magistrate’s pastimes is to excavate the ruins which lie half-buried just outside the town. In the ruins he has found “a cache of wooden slips on which are painted characters in a script I have not seen the like of” (15). He has spent countless hours trying, in various ways, to discover their meaning (17), but their secret continue to elude him. And just as he cannot read these ancient signs, the resistance of signs to his attempts at interpreting them is a strikingly recurrent image in the novel, and constitutes one of its main motifs.

The second set of signs the magistrate attempts to read are those on the girl’s body. He has an almost desperate need to decipher and understand “the marks on this girl’s body” (33),

⁶⁴ Barbara J. Eckstein, *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain: Reading Politics as Paradox* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 8.

⁶⁵ Attwell, *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, 86.

but not in order to understand her, but so to understand the act of torture. She is to him a bodily proof of this brutal act – an act otherwise hidden in the narrative behind a maze of dubious aphorisms. It is an act which he has not witnessed, only heard and seen the results of, and to which he is irresistibly drawn. He needs “to possess the truth behind torture, by ‘reading’ the ‘script’ that Joll has ‘written’ on her body.”⁶⁶ He even goes to see the room where she was tortured, convinced that the presence of such pain must have left an imprint:

I kneel down to examine the floor. It is clean, it is swept daily, it is like the floor of any other room. Above the fireplace on the wall and ceiling there is soot. There is also a mark the size of my hand where the soot has been rubbed into the wall. Otherwise the walls are blank. What signs can I be looking for? (38)

But as the wall remains stubbornly blank, so does the girl, at least to the magistrate’s perception: “But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was?” (46). She remains inaccessible and unreadable to him, impenetrable like a page of unknown writing that will not yield up its meaning. “He cannot read her, and she cannot put her pain into words he understands.”⁶⁷

One morning the magistrate goes hunting and comes upon a waterbuck, a ram, but he is unable to shoot it. Struggling to understand what it is “that has robbed the hunt of its savour” (42), he senses

at the edge of my consciousness [...] that this has become no longer a morning’s hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim; that for the duration of this frozen moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things. (42-43)

That either he must fail or the ram must die is a clear reflection of his own growing ambivalence toward the conflict between the Empire to which he himself belongs and the “enemy barbarians”: either the Empire fails or it wins and the barbarians die.⁶⁸ However, it is arguably the struggle to read and understand the signs placed in front of him that becomes the

⁶⁶ Jolly, *Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing*, 127.

⁶⁷ Barbara Eckstein, ‘The Body, the Word, and the State: J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, (Vol. 22, No. 2, Winter 1989), 187.

⁶⁸ This set of oppositions (and the ambivalence surrounding it) where either one part must fail or the other must die is repeated as the magistrate is dragged away after his attempt to mount a defence for Colonel Joll’s twelve tortured prisoners. He thinks: “Easier to lay my head on the block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped? The old magistrate [...] is not without his own twinges of doubt” (118).

cause of his inability to act. The scene seems to suggest that it is futile to try and read in any unequivocal way. It leads only to indecision and uncertainty, and, ultimately, to the failure which the magistrate feared: the ram senses him and escapes. Furthermore, when the magistrate relays the story of the hunt to the girl she responds: ““You should not go hunting if you do not enjoy it.”” To which he thinks: “That is not the meaning of the story, but what is the use of arguing? I am like an incompetent schoolmaster, [...]” (44). The discrepancy between the magistrate’s perception of what has taken place and the girl’s interpretation of his story confirms the problem of reading within the narrative. The exchange also alludes to the ever-present possibility of several readings of the same signs, as well as underlining the continued distance between the magistrate and the girl. How can he ever hope to understand the experiences she has had? On one of the last night he spends with her he once again unsuccessfully struggles to make sense of their relationship and his fascination for her (quoted earlier), but his final thoughts are anything but illuminating: “I stare at the last proposition without detecting any answering movement in myself toward assent or dissent. The words grow more and more opaque before me; soon they have lost all meaning” (70). Typically, his reflections are turned inward, and as the words lose their meaning language once again proves an inadequate path to understanding anything with certainty.

After the magistrate has been imprisoned and beaten for his intervention into Empire’s ritual act of naming, he is brought before the Colonel and asked to tell him meaning of the slips that the representatives of the Bureau have discovered in his room. Joll appears convinced that they are messages between the magistrate and the barbarian insurgents, proof of his treason. The magistrate reflects to himself:

I do not even know whether to read from right to left or from left to right. In the long evenings I spent pouring over my collection I isolated over four hundred different characters in the script, perhaps as many as four hundred and fifty. I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does the circle merely stand for ‘circle’, a triangle for ‘triangle’, a wave for ‘wave’? [...] Or are my four hundred characters nothing but scribal embellishments for an underlying repertory of twenty or thirty whose primitive forms I am too stupid to see? (121)

Nevertheless, the magistrate obediently starts “reading” the slips, telling the Colonel a story of brutality and violence, a story which is highly reminiscent Joll’s own actions at the outpost. But, as he picks up a random slip, he also tells him:

‘[...] It is the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read *justice*. [...] ‘It is the same with the rest of these slips.’ I plunge my good hand into the chest and stir. ‘They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. [...]. (122)

The whole scene is a testament to instability and mutability of the meaning of signs, illustrating how one single sign holds within it the possibility of numerous meanings, and suggesting that which one of these meanings we perceive is only determined by how we chose to read. As Sue Kossew points out: “His [the magistrate’s] reading stresses the unreliability of interpretive acts of reading. [...] The potentially different readings, each dependent on the degree of blindness or insight the reader/listener, raise the question of signification in narrative [...].”⁶⁹ To this point I add that the scene also shows the magistrate’s surrender of his previous need for certainty and his realisation and acceptance of the ambiguity of language. And furthermore: that the only story available to him is his own. He cannot assume a representational position of the story of the other, any more than he was able to tell the girl’s story. However, while it is impossible for him to tell Joll the meaning of the “barbarian” slips, he can invest them with his own meaning, an act which allows him a way of expressing “his critical attitude to Joll’s regime in a way he would never dare to do directly.”⁷⁰

The insight the magistrate displays in this scene returns to him after he is released and Joll and the army have fled. As he sits down to write the story of the outpost he finds that he is unable to, that he can no longer assume the role of the story-teller: “I have lived through an eventful year, yet understand no more of it than a babe in arms. Of all the people of this town I am the least fitted to write a memorial. Better the blacksmith with his cries of rage and woe” (169). The recognition of himself in the image of an infant is crucial since an infant is someone who is *without language*; even the blacksmith who only has “cries” is more able to write than he is. He no longer sees himself as a narrator who has the ability to speak with any certainty, to be the interpreter of events, let alone be in a position to speak for others, and he subsequently decides to bury the slips. His experiences have wrested from him any belief in the authority of language. Significantly, his final reflection on this subject is significantly a refusal to read, a rejecting of the position of narrator, and an admittance of his own shortcomings: ““There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it”” (170).

⁶⁹ Sue Kossew, *Pen and Power A Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 94.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

The narrative in its construction thus challenges language's ability to convey meaning, to provide a reading that can be formed into a believable narrative. As Teresa Dovey has observed, "The novel traces his failed attempts to posit a meaning for both the script and the girl's suffering; it traces, in other words, a crisis of interpretation."⁷¹ Language does not bring certainty, but becomes rather the source of uncertainty, as the instability of language is gradually revealed.

2.4 Pain

At the nexus of this instability we find the suffering body. While the previous passages have been instances of contesting narratives and meanings, the one thing that in the novel eradicates language completely is pain, as pain becomes the point where language ends and the body begins.

The magistrate's fascination with the experience of pain is coupled in the narrative with his need to see and to witness, as if seeing will make him believe in the reality of what goes on around him. He thinks to himself of the purposed threat to the Empire: "Show me a barbarian army and I will believe" (9). The sentiment is echoed later as he reflects whether he might have turned away from the consequence of Joll's interrogations: "But alas, I did not ride away: for a while I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary where the tools are kept, then in the night I took a lantern and went to see for myself" (9-10). This recurrent image of seeing thematises the magistrate's role in relation to those who become Empire's victims. Once he has seen the wounds caused he acts sympathetic, calling for a doctor in the case of the boy and giving food, shelter and employment in case of the girl. Of this reaction Susan Sontag has observed: "So far as we feel sympathy [when witnessing suffering], we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence, as well as our impotence."⁷² The magistrate seems to feel that witnessing the pain, and then taking action to alleviate it, somehow distances him from Joll, or as he states: "I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (48). However, despite his efforts the magistrate feels increasingly ambiguous about his own position as witness and narrator; the barbarian army does not appear, and his doubts grow. Finally, he decides that it is not enough simply to witness and then try to make amends.

⁷¹ Teresa Dovey, 'Waiting for the Barbarians: Allegory of Allegories', in *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), 140.

⁷² Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 91.

Deciding to return the girl to her home, the magistrate takes a quite literal step from the comforts of his magistrate lodgings to the starkness of a prison cell. This spatial movement prompts a crucial change in the magistrate's position: from that of the witness who ignorantly observes to that of the witness who experiences – and finally understands. The cell is significantly also the torture chamber previously used by Joll, and again the magistrate tries to will the truth of pain into an graspable and explainable existence through an act of seeing: “I stare all day at the empty walls, unable to believe that the imprint of all the pain and degradation they have enclosed will not materialize under an intent enough gaze; [...]” (87). Within the narrative's structure, however, mere imprisonment is not enough: if the magistrate wants to understand pain he must know pain, and as he steps out in front of the crowd to speak in defence of Joll's prisoners the novel reaches a climax:

I hear the blow coming and turn to meet it. It catches me full across the face. ‘I am blind!’ I think, staggering back into the blackness that instantly falls. I swallow blood; something blooms across my face, starting as rosy warmth, turning to fiery agony. I hide my face in my hands and stamp around in a circle trying not to shout, trying not to fall.

What I wanted to say next I cannot remember. (117)

The pain instantly removes the magistrate from the role of the observing witness. It blinds him and his mind is overtaken by the sensations of his body, losing both his ability to see and his ability to speak. While Scarry has argued that it is the sensation of pain which resists articulation,⁷³ in *Waiting for the Barbarians* a further development of this thematic aspect gradually emerges. Not only does the experience of pain resist articulation, pain also inserts itself between the world and the possibility of its representation in language. For this is not the first time language has failed the magistrate. In his very first conversation with the girl he experiences his voice as strange and disassociated from himself: “‘Show me your feet,’ I say in this new thick voice that seems to be mine. ‘Show me what they have done to your feet’” (29). As their relationship grows pain's resistance to language repeatedly reappears into the magistrate's conversations with the girl, creating an impassable void. The magistrate asks the girl about the damage done to her eyes: “‘Did they do it to you?’ ‘Yes’ ‘What did they do?’ She shrugs and is silent” (31). Later he continues his questioning:

I touch my lips to her forehead. ‘What did they do to you?’ I murmur. My tongue is slow, I sway on my feet with exhaustion. ‘Why don't you want to tell me?’

⁷³ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 5.

She shakes her head. On the edge of oblivion it comes back to me that my fingers, running over her buttocks, have felt a phantom criss-cross of ridges under the skin. ‘Nothing is worse than what we can imagine,’ I mumble. She gives no sign that she has even heard me. I slump on the couch, drawing her down beside me, yawning. ‘Tell me,’ I want to say, ‘don’t make a mystery of it, pain is only pain; but words elude me. My arms fold around her, my lips are at the hollow of her ear, I struggle to speak; the blackness falls. (34 – my italics)

Structurally, then, the dialogue returns again and again to the impasse where language becomes inadequate and silence asserts itself. Furthermore, the passage quoted above is followed by a two-line blank space on the page, as if the narrative itself were at a loss for words and needed to a moment to reassert itself before being able to continue.⁷⁴ The pattern where a conversation about pain results in a break in the text is repeated in the scene in which the girl finally tells the magistrate the details of what happened to her in the torture chamber. Despite her story he still feels the need to probe on: “‘What do you feel towards the men who did this?’ She lies thinking for a long time. Then she says, ‘I am tired of talking’” (44). In both these examples there is a gap in the narrative’s temporal development and the story is another when it continues. It is as if the presence of pain creates a breakdown in the narrative which cannot be bridged, and which in turn forces it to continue along another line. Pain claims the world, and the word, rendering only silence and the body. Pain’s resistance to language is thus present in the novel both on the story level and on the level of narration, linking the two into a convincing structure.

Returning to the point immediately after the magistrate was beaten for the first time, we find that he no longer has the need to stare at the wall to understand the nature of pain: “‘Though the throbbing is still there I find I can endure it if I remain still. Indeed, it has lost its strangeness. Soon, perhaps, it will be as much part of me as breathing” (119). “‘To have pain is to have *certainty*, to hear about pain is to have *doubt*”,⁷⁵ and once the magistrate has felt the pain caused by violence, his doubts and wonderings about the experience fade before a body that reasserts itself as an undeniable reality. His body with its pain becomes an absolute entity that he cannot reason or argue away from; it asserts itself as its own certain experiencing witness. With his pain also follows a further insight into the slippage between signs and their representations until language is felt as something disassociated from the world: “‘Thinking of him [Mandel, his torturer], I have said the words *torture ... torturer* to myself, but they are

⁷⁴ David Attridge comments on the use of textual blanks in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but only as something that has so far “been ignored”, and thus very briefly. Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 48.

⁷⁵ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 13.

strange words, and the more I repeat them the more strange they grow till they lie like stones on my tongue” (129).

The magistrate’s torture culminates in a public mock execution where he is first hung from the neck, then from his arms “like a great old moth with its wings pinched together” (133). The passage’s structure marks it as a pivotal moment in the novel. As the magistrate gradually loses consciousness the first time, he has a vision of the girl and her father. He thinks to himself: “At any moment now he will speak: I must listen carefully to capture every syllable, so that later, repeating them to myself, poring over them, I can discover the answer to a question which for the moment has flown like a bird from my recollection” (131). However, the old man remains silent, and the magistrate never hears the answer he has been waiting for. Pain does not lead to any truth articulated in language, only to an absence of language, to silence, and a disappearance of the world, or as the magistrate thinks as he is put down: “I go blank” (132). But his torment is not over and when he is hauled back up again by his arms he can remain silent no longer: “I bellow again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright. [...] ‘He is calling his barbarian friends,’ someone observes. ‘That is barbarian language you hear’” (133). In extreme pain the magistrate himself is silenced, but the suffering body begins to speak with a language of its own. Furthermore, the magistrate has significantly never learned the girl’s language, but now, in a gross parody, he howls out “the barbarian” tongue. The language of the suffering body, a language which is, perhaps more precisely, a non-language, a language which is brought into existence only when ordinary language has been eradicated by pain, deconstructs the binary between the magistrate and the other. He does not hear the answer from the old man because now he can speak it himself: his body knows the truth of pain even when he himself has lost all other awareness of the world. Now “he truly understands the relativity of the word “truth” and what it means to be colonized”,⁷⁶ because pain finally eradicates the opposition between himself and the other of Empire’s creation. The inversion of names and the meaning of categories in this scene expose the discursive framework of any mode of representation – the meaning of names, of language, only bear evidence of the presence of Empire, nothing else.

I argue that as pain counters language the trope of the suffering body acts as a moment of deconstruction: it continuously defies articulation while simultaneously, through a non-language, actively challenging the binary discourse of Empire. Since this passage also ends in

⁷⁶ Kossew, *Pen and Power*, 90.

a break in the narrative and a blank page, the silence that follows pain can yet again be rediscovered in the very structure of the novel.

When the narrative continues nobody feels the otherness of the magistrate's new position more painfully than the magistrate himself: "I creep around in my filthy smock; when a fist is raised against me I cower. I live like a starved beast at the back door, kept alive perhaps only as evidence of the animal that skulks within every barbarian-lover. I know I am not safe" (136). Judie Newman ties this otherness to the construction of the world through language and discourse when she states "the magistrate enters a state of liminality, inhabiting a space on the margins of male and female, human and animal, an area seen as prelinguistic, outside the categories of language."⁷⁷ Yet although the magistrate is now a figure perceived as being outside language, turned into an other through his experience of pain, he is still alive. To further emphasize the alignment with the girl, he now survives as a beggar, as she did, singing for his keep, telling "half-truths" to eager ears, pretending that "the voice she hears is not the voice of the man who swung from the tree shouting for mercy loud enough to wake the dead" (13). This breakdown of categories repeats and further develops the thematics of the scene in which the magistrate is tortured, emphasising the arbitrary nature of signs and their meaning.

There is a deep-set irony in that the one who has had his language destroyed now is the one who survives by telling the story of his misfortunes, and the irony is not lost on the magistrate who reflects as he talks to his old cook: "what appeal am I making to her as I ramble on about pain, loneliness? Bemused I listen to the discourse that emerges from me" (141). The disassociation from language enables the magistrate to observe himself as he speaks, to acknowledge and be amused by his own position, for he knows now that there is no *a priori* relation between language and reality. His insight concerning his relationship with the girl reflects this knowledge: "If she had told me then, if I had understood her, if I had been in a position to understand her, if I had believed her, if I had been in a position to believe her, I might have saved myself from a year of confused and futile gestures of expiation" (148). The last sentence of the passage begins with an uncertain "might", and each statement instantly challenges that made immediately prior to it, thus displaying, in a to-and-fro motion, the magistrate's hard-learned lesson about uncertainty of language. The binaries of discourse and the meaning they produce are as unstable as the see-saw movement of his thoughts, no more true than the presence of a barbarian threat.

⁷⁷ Newman, 'Intertextuality, Power and Danger', 136.

2.5 *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the Suffering Body

This reading has made an argument for the interplay of four central motifs in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: body, truth, language and pain. Examining these I have established that they are complexly interconnected as they all contribute to the novel's construction of the power and the authority of language, and then the subsequent deconstruction of this authority. However, throughout the novel there is also the body, and "the body is never that which is not",⁷⁸ but that which counters the uncertainty of language as it increasingly becomes the site in which the certainty of pain is enacted.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the suffering body is an inescapable authority that holds a deep fascination for the magistrate. This authority is based on the suffering body's remove from language to the extent that the body in pain constitutes a binary to language, a certainty to doubt, a truth to the fluidity of discourse. Furthermore, the narrative complexly suggests that the certainty of pain's non-language cannot be mediated through language, only through experience, while at the same time structurally utilizing the silence of the suffering body to make this point.

The power of the body in pain is also exhibited in the way the magistrate's body extends into a presence that forms the complete space of his existence as he experiences deliberately inflicted pain for the first time. This infliction of pain serves the purpose of inscribing the signs of power, of Empire, on the prisoner's body. Furthermore, the scarred body displays in the novel an otherness that ousts those who bear the signs as proof of their pain from the communities they have previously been a part of. Thus, paradoxically, while torturing the body creates an explicit narrative of power, it also creates an implicit narrative of non-language outside Empire's control, thus countering the discourse of power.

Even though torture's stated purpose is the search for truth, the idea of a simple and absolute truth is complicated by the array of truths that are introduced into the narrative through the magistrate's multiple stories. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Truth is presented as an act of language that either condemns or vindicates, but within the narrative the truth of Empire, the absolute and only truth, the length at which it is willing to go to produce a discourse of totality, also intricately and simultaneously subverts this very effort. The language of Empire produces a discourse resting on a series of binaries that depend on each other for meaning and purpose. In order to ensure Empire's continued existence, these

⁷⁸ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 248.

binaries must be upheld and re-inscribed through torture and violence. However, by re-framing this kind of discourse within the narrative of the magistrate, *Waiting for the Barbarians* exposes and deconstructs its necessary structures. Language is consequently presented as something arbitrary and unstable that cannot be trusted to either mediate events or to show us the “truth”.

Yet the magistrate’s own story is not unaffected by the interrogation of the stability of language on the level of the narrative. The problem of speaking, or of writing, also becomes a problem of reading, and the magistrate finds himself increasingly unable to make sense of his surroundings, or himself. He can no longer read and understand by un-problematically re-representing events and experiences in language. The reason, as highlighted by the scene where he “reads” the slips to Joll, is that the magistrate now realises fully the mutability of signs and the instability of meaning.

The deconstruction of language in the novel, coupled with pain’s resistance to language, leads me to conclude that the experience of pain constitutes the centre of the narrative. The suffering body remains the one certain point in a structure of discursive uncertainty and manipulation. Accordingly, the suffering body acts counter-discursively in the narrative as it’s non-language deconstructs the binaries of Empire and offers a space, the only space, where it is possible to know with certainty.

In the first chapter I posited that as complex works of fiction, Coetzee’s novels display Derrida’s “critical responsibility”. As my reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* has shown, the novel repeatedly makes a convincing case for the view that language cannot “be said to perform its meaning function by reflecting or referring to the world in any essential or immutable way, and thus meanings cannot remain exclusively accessible to those speakers who ‘experience their referents’ [...]”⁷⁹ Furthermore, the number of ways in which *Waiting for the Barbarians* exposes the deeply embedded problem of language’s referentiality is focused in the trope of the suffering body. A reason for this choice may be discovered in Elaine Scarry’s observation that art, and especially literature, more often than not, “falls silent before pain”⁸⁰ because “pain is nearly impossible to express, so flatly invisible, that the problem goes beyond the possibility that almost any other phenomenon will distract attention from it.”⁸¹ The choice of a central trope that is “nearly impossible to express” provides a strong argument for the novel’s structure as one that displays a continued

⁷⁹ Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 68.

⁸⁰ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 10.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

interrogation and challenge to the authority of language. In the Introduction I also suggested that Coetzee's novels point toward a different way of signifying. In the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, at least, we can now conclude that if the body is certainty and language is doubt, the body, the suffering body, is certainty precisely because it resists language. The intended inscription of the narrative of Empire on the body of the prisoner works subversively. Once the signs are inscribed a second discourse is brought into existence, a discourse that through its resistance to language continues to resist appropriation into the master discourse of Empire.

The novel places further emphasis on the problematic issues tied to the presence of a dominant discourse by incorporating within the framework of the narrative the fluidity of the sign/referent relationship. The body in pain represents a non-language that deconstructs the binary out of which Empire creates itself, for instance between the magistrate and the girl/enemy, thereby posing a direct challenge to the Empire's dominant discourse. Thus the suffering body forms the centre of *Waiting for the Barbarians*' deconstructive properties.

However, the novel's exposure of "the way in which language mediates and determines what is seen in the world"⁸² becomes deeply ironic as the novel itself is a linguistic construction, and a fictional one at that. The narrative's uncertainty and lack of authority develops both through its use of the first-person narrator, a narrator who is necessarily limited and subjective, as well as through an impossible temporal development where events are described as they unfold. To emphasise this uncertainty the novel contains several fissures and contradictions in its narrative construction that challenge any pretensions of truth-value. For instance, when the magistrate is tortured for the first time he reflects: "They did not come to force the story out of me of what I had said to the barbarians and what the barbarians had said to me. So I had no chance to throw the high-sounding words I had ready in their faces" (126). But when he tells Mai the cook of his experiences he says: "The thrive on stubborn silence: it confirms to them that every soul is a lock they must patiently pick. Bare yourself! Open your heart! So I shouted and screamed and said whatever came into my head" (141).

Both the story and the narrative emphasise the constructive and representational qualities of language, representations determined by a discourse with claims to totality, demonstrating in full the uncertain connection between language and its meaning, challenging claims to "truth". The authority of language is subsequently deconstructed and alongside it the

⁸² Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 63.

authority of the narrative. For while the idea that the world is created through language is a potent one, it is set forth within the context of a fictional narrative, a creation which is itself product of language. Any challenge to language on the story level thus inevitably becomes a challenge to the language which constitutes the narrative itself.

3 *Age of Iron*

My reading of *Age of Iron* will follow a trajectory to that of the previous chapter. First, I will examine the representation of the body, the cancerous body in particular, and discuss how it functions as a trope in the text and what consequences such a reading may have for my larger reading of the novel. I will also consider how the novel creates a binary between the idea of a 'real' versus an 'unreal' body, and how this opposition ties in with other important binaries in the narrative.

Second, I will devote a large portion of this chapter to a discussion of language, attempting to show not only how it is employed and structured in the narrative, but also how it is critically examined in the story. This part of my discussion turns on three major points, which I consider constitute central themes in the novel. These are: the act of naming, or re-naming, as a process of narrative appropriation, the problematical, perhaps impossible, act of witnessing and the witness-position, and, finally, the issue of how the continuous questioning of the authority of language implies a larger challenge of the narrative of History as it is constructed in the novel.

Third, I will attempt to bring all these issues together in the last part of this chapter. To obtain this critical objective I will examine how the trope of the suffering body functions in relation to the issues of language and narrative authority and whether or not it can, as in the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, be said to offer a significant challenge to the totalising attempts of a dominant discourse.

Before I begin, however, it is necessary to make explicit some of the implicit critical assumptions that form the basis for this chapter.

As mentioned in the Introduction *Age of Iron* can be read, and indeed often has been read, as a realistic novel. In his article 'Literature and Political Revolt in South Africa: the Cape Town Crisis of 1984-86 in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee, Richard Rive and Menan DePlessis' Paul Rich states that *Age of Iron* "was a quite a surprisingly realistic work for a writer whose previous novels had portrayed South Africa in mostly allegorical terms."⁸³ Furthermore, Dominic Head describes *Age of Iron* as "a text which cultivates a mode of

⁸³ Paul Rich, 'Literature and Political Revolt in South Africa: the Cape Town Crisis of 1984-86 in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee, Richard Rive and Menan DePlessis', *SPAN – Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, (No. 36, 1993), p. 3. (Online edition only: <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/36/Rich.html>, Accessed: 30.10.2007)

realism more than it does of indirect allegory.”⁸⁴ Thus, concurring with a number of previous critical approaches, I will treat *Age of Iron* as a realistic novel.

I will in this chapter be more explicit when it comes to the connection between the more abstract idea of a totalizing discourse and apartheid. As a realistic, or at least more realistic novel than *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Age of Iron* arguably depicts, if nothing else, a South Africa within the framework of its narrative; and this South Africa seems to be constructed out of what the novel presents as apartheid discourse. However, let me specify that when I refer to apartheid as a dominant discourse, or South Africa, I refer to apartheid and South Africa as they are constructed in the novel only, and not necessarily to their historical counterparts. While there is obviously a close link between the historical narrative we know as the history of South Africa, and the novel’s fictional narrative, I will not assume that the fictional representation of this history is necessarily identical with the historical ‘reality’, or that it could be treated as such. The most decisive reason is that I believe that the narrative of fiction and the narrative of history, must, although they arguably have many similar traits,⁸⁵ be regarded as separate entities. I will keep to this assertion even though an argument could be made for a possible overlap between them, an exchange between the historical event itself and its textual re-representation, and even if the possible separation between the two has been contested.

However, this raises the question of the novel’s, or any novel’s critical value. If a novel can be seen only as referring to itself, will it not get caught in the circular argument of its own lack of authority? It is clear that my stance on referentiality exposes some problematical issues that obviously merit a thorough discussion. I will, however, for practical purposes, postpone the main body of this discussion until the conclusion so that I can discuss the implications for both novels.

Finally, for my discussion on the nature of pain I will again principally employ Elaine Scarry’s theories on this issue. As these were presented and discussed at some length in the previous chapter, the references in this reading will be shorter and less explicit. I will also briefly discuss Jean Améry’s observations on the body and the connection between pain and death.

⁸⁴ Dominic Head, *J.M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 132.

⁸⁵ In his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* Hayden White has convincingly argued that the historical text is informed and structured by the same rhetoric devices, such as metaphor and irony, as that of literature, and that in order to expose the mechanics behind historical narrative, we must first expose its literary strategies. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974

3.1 The Body

Let me again quote Coetzee on the principle of the suffering body: “In South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of the suffering and therefore of the body.”⁸⁶ Pain, it seems, grants authority, and the body in pain is this authority manifest. And a message of inevitable pain, and eventual death, is precisely what constitutes the beginning of *Age of Iron*. Mrs. Elizabeth Curren has just come home from the doctor’s office where she has learned that she has incurable cancer. On arrival she finds that a “derelict” (3) has taken up residence in the narrow alley that runs alongside her house. The first image of Mrs. Curren’s body is given through the eyes of the man we will later come to know as Mr. Vercueil: “He did not stir, lying in his shelter, looking up, inspecting the winter stockings, the blue coat, the skirt with whose hang there has always been something wrong, the gray hair cut by a strip of scalp, old woman’s scalp, pink, babyish” (4). But this superficial view, which in actuality belongs to Mrs. Curren as the narrative is hers, is deepened by what goes on inside her body, although the outside does not yet betray her illness. Her outward respectability is contrasted with the body of Mr. Vercueil

a man I recognized from the streets: tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long curious fangs [...]. Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette’, his jaw agape. And unsavoury smell about him: urine, sweet wine, moldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean. For a while I stood staring down on him, staring and smelling. (3-4)

With his rough appearance and displeasing scent he is from the very first instance an undeniably bodily presence in the text. These characteristics mark him as someone outside society, as an other. Furthermore, the position of the other in *Age of Iron* can also be identified as the binary to the self, the opposite of Mrs. Curren’s own voice. Mr. Vercueil, as well as, for instance, Florence, John and Bheki, can be said to hold the position of the other in the narrative. However, the narrative renders a certain fluidity to Mr. Vercueil’s identity as the other: in the space of a few pages Mrs. Curren names him as “a man”, “a derelict”, “one of the homeless”, “a visitor” and “The first of the carrion birds” (3-5). Nevertheless, each of these characterizations marks him as a binary to the figure of Mrs. Curren: to her as a woman, he is the man, to her as the homeowner, he is the homeless, to her as a host, he is the visitor, ensuring his position as the other in the narrative, but as an other created out of the narrative

⁸⁶ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 248.

self: “the other does not come from some totally other place, but is a product of the identical constituting act that has produced the self/same which perceives it as other.”⁸⁷

However, Mrs. Curren’s cancer places her outside the realm of normalcy too. She has embraced the news of her death-sentence, seeing it as an emblem of her identity, her subjectivity: “The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused” (4). However, she also notices the transformative power which the fact of her death has on her doctor: “But already, behind the comradely front, I could see he was withdrawing. *Sauve qui peut*. His allegiance to the living, not the dying” (4). Through its illness, her body has relocated her to a new position, and while it may not be the same one as Mr. Vercueil’s, it is definitely outside the space she has occupied until now. The agency that her body now claims gives rise to a sense of alienation, a separation of the self from the body:

What do I care for this body that has betrayed me? I look at my hand and see only a tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things. And these legs, these clumsy ugly stilts: why should I have to carry them with me everywhere. [...] The abdomen too, with its dead gurglings, and the heart beating, beating: why? What have they to do with me? (12-13)

The self is the voice that narrates the text; the body with its cancer is the force that tries to end it. As Susan Sontag has commented: “Cancer, as a disease that can strike anywhere, is a disease of the body. Far from revealing anything spiritual, it reveals that the body is, all too woefully, just the body.”⁸⁸

This separation between body and voice is also present in the narrative in the first few encounters between Mr. Vercueil and Mrs. Curren. When they first meet she tells him he cannot stay and he gets up and leaves without a word (4). On their second meeting, when he has returned to the alley, she tells him: “‘No fires,’ I said. ‘Do you understand? I want no fires, I want no mess.’” Instead of a response the narrative instead presents a further description of his body: “A horsy, weather-beaten face with the puffiness around the eyes of an alcoholic. Strange green eyes: unhealthy” (6). She asks him “‘Do you want something to eat?’” (7) and he follows her wordlessly into the kitchen. On the third encounter Mrs. Curren has had enough of his silence, inactivity and apparent despondency, and exclaims:

“You are wasting your life,” I said. “You are not a child anymore. How can you live like this? How can you lie around and do nothing all day? I don’t understand it.”

⁸⁷ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 95.

⁸⁸ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 18.

[...]

He did something that shocked me. With a straight look, the first direct look he has given me, he spat a gob of spit, thick, yellow, streaked brown from the coffee, onto the concrete beside my foot. Then he thrust the mug at me and sauntered off. *The thing itself*, I thought shaken: the thing itself brought out between us. Spat not upon me but before me, where I could see it, inspect it, think about it. His word, his kind of word, from his own mouth, warm at the instant when it left him. A word, undeniable, from a language before language. (8)

Again his answer is voiceless, but this bodily by-product communicates in its stead. In his essay 'Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', Homi Bhabha writes of the other and language: "The silent Other of gesture and failed speech becomes what Freud calls 'the haphazard member of the herd', the Stranger, whose languageless presence evokes an archaic anxiety and aggressivity [...]." ⁸⁹ In this passage Mrs. Curren confesses to both aggressivity and anxiety, but instead of testifying to the debilitating silence which Bhabha outlines, Mr. Vercueil's refusal to speak is part of a voicelessness that has both power and authority. Against Mrs. Curren's voice of narration there is the body and its saliva that together constitute an "undeniable" word, "a language before language". The body of the other is not silent, but instead speaks with a language of its own.

3.1.1 Blood as Sign

The second instance in which the authority and weight of the body are examined in *Age of Iron*, it is not only the body of Mrs. Curren that acts as a signifier, but also the body of John. John is a friend of Bheki, who is Florence's, Mrs. Curren's housekeeper, son. Attempting to escape the violence and chaos that is taking place in the township of Guguletu the two boys have sought an uninvited refuge in Mrs. Curren's home. One day, when the two boys are out bicycling, a police van patrolling the area forces the boys to crash into a parked truck and then drives off. The incident takes place right outside Mrs. Curren's home, and she becomes a witness to the incident. Bheki escapes with only minor injuries, but John is badly hurt and ends up unconscious on the ground with an ugly gash in his forehead. The scene marks a significant movement in the narrative: an abrupt change from the abstracted other that the police are chasing to the undeniability of the physical suffering the boy experiences as he lies bleeding on the street. As they are waiting for the ambulance Mrs. Curren tries to stop the bleeding and finds herself drawn to the image of blood as a symbolic (and literal) fluid of life:

⁸⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 166.

As long as I pinched tight I could hold in most of the flow. But as soon as I relaxed blood poured again steadily. It was blood, nothing more, blood like yours and mine. Yet never before had I seen anything so scarlet and so black. [...] I stared at it fascinated, afraid, drawn into a veritable stupor of staring. Yet it was impossible, in my deepest being impossible, to give myself up to that stupor, to relax and do nothing to stop the flow. Why? I ask myself now. And I answer: Because blood is precious, more precious than gold and diamonds. Because blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together: lent, not given: held in common, in trust, to be preserved: seeming to live in us, but only seeming, for in truth we live in it. (63-64)

The flowing blood, the sign of the suffering body, pulls her in until it fills her senses completely. But it also communicates something beyond mere fascination: she acknowledges the sanctity of life, but also the crucial difference between the life she is trying to save and her own. She reflects:

The sickness that now eats me is dry, bloodless, slow and cold, sent by Saturn. There is something about it that does not bear thinking of. To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; [...]. Dry, dry: to feel them turning at night in my dry body, not stretching and kicking as a human child does but changing their angle, finding a new place to gnaw. Like insect eggs laid in the body of a host, now grown to grubs and implacably eating their host away. My eggs grown within me. *Me, mine*: words I shudder to write, yet true. (64)

In this scene, the contrasting descriptions of the two bodies – one old, one young – create a significant binary between the other and the self. She sees John as someone of wetness, of weight and of life. And as an extension of this: of the future. While her own dried-up, bloodless and decaying body is “a sign that one is beyond one’s term” (65), his body, “a body of blood” (64), represents what will continue to live. This bodily binary also lends weight to the larger political conflict that constitutes the realistic framework of the narrative as Mrs. Curren concludes: “I have lived too long. [...] This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow” (65). The body thus functions in the text as a means of not only underlining the distance between the self and the other, but also as a highly suggestive motif in relation to central notions of historical development, a point I will return to later.

The image of the white body’s parasitical dryness can be re-traced in other passages dealing with the political situation in South Africa. When Mrs. Curren in disgust watches the regime’s regular evening broadcast she sees its representatives not as human, but as locusts: “a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without ease,

devouring lives. [...] Why do I let them into the house? Because the reign of the locust family is the truth of South Africa, and the truth is what makes me sick?" (29) While making a forceful and damning criticism of the apartheid regime, it is important to note how this critique again sets up the connection between the political body politic and the body of the self, suggesting that the discourse of power dominates both the exterior and interior of its citizens. Or as Mrs. Curren says: "Power is power, after all. It invades. That is its nature. It invades one's life" (117).

It thus comes as no surprise that, given her position as white and therefore an, albeit unwilling, beneficiary of the apartheid and colonial system, her critical assessment of the situation must also turn to critical self-evaluation, as in the scene quoted above. The narrative returns to idea of her body as lifeless and empty after her visit to Guguletu and Bheki's death: "I have intimations older than any memory, unshakable, that once upon a time I was alive. Was alive and then was stolen from life. From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared and that doll is what I call I" (109). The image of a doll as a replacement for a real person has been read by Michael Marais as "ideology's role as eventual determiner of subject formation", "the de-forming, rather than formative or originative influence of the State."⁹⁰ Thus the doll's body demonstrates the difficulty of attaining a position outside the reaches of discourse, even if it is a discourse you vehemently oppose.

To return to the scene of the bicycle crash and to a further testament to the power of the real and wounded body: After John has been sent off in the ambulance Mrs. Curren turns to confront Bheki: "[...] They could have killed you, Behki. What have they got against you anyway? What have you and that friend of yours been up to?" (66). The accusatory tone of her questions makes it clear that Mrs. Curren still believes that the two boys must have done something wrong to be hunted down like this. Instead of answering Bheki just holds up his hands: "Blood continued to ooze from the raw flesh. Honorable wounds? Would these count on the roll as honorable wounds, wounds of war? Together we regarded the bleeding hands. I had the impression he was holding back tears. A child, no more than a child, playing on a bicycle" (66). The bloody hands not only put an end to her questions but also provide her with a silent answer. While the police have seen the boys as enemies of the state, dangerous, expendable, Bheki's simple gesture makes her see further, beyond the simple binary of guilty/innocent or enemy/ally. The conversion of her view of Bheki from that of a soldier to

⁹⁰ Michael Marais, "'Who Clipped the Hollyoaks?': J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and the Politics of Representation', *English in Africa* (Vol. 20, No 2, Autumn 1993), 6-7.

that of a child is paralleled in turn by a movement in her narrative from accusation to compassion.

The moment foreshadows Mrs. Curren's trip to Guguletu where she is forced to confront the reality that plays out beyond the safe haven of her suburban home. The passage proves pivotal in the narrative's development, and also includes the most crucial meeting between the voice and the body, between the narrator as witness and the suffering that goes on around her. Florence, Mrs. Curren's housekeeper, receives an ominous phone call in the middle of the night telling her that there is "trouble" (88), and that she must go and look for her son in Guguletu. Mrs. Curren offers to drive her and after several horrific incidents they arrive at a burned out school building only to find Bheki's dead body along with those of four other boys. The description of them given by Mrs. Curren is neutral, almost flat:

Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. He still wore the gray flannel trousers, white shirt, and maroon pullover for his school, but his feet were bare. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating in him for hours, on him and his comrades, not only here but wherever they had been when they met their deaths; their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth. (102)

There is an emphasis in this passage on the separate parts of Bheki's body, his feet, his eyes, his mouth, as if the completeness of his murdered body is too much to take in. However, Mrs. Curren's belated reaction is telling of the impact the murdered body has on her:

I was shaking: shivers ran up and down my body, my hands trembled. I thought of the boy's open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again. (102-103)

The body asserts itself with a force she cannot move away from or close her eyes to. But what is it that she sees now that she was blind to previously? The answer is given a few passages later:

I thought: My life might as well be waste. We shoot these people as if they are waste, but in the end it is we whose lives are not worth living. I thought of the five bodies, of their massive, solid presence in the burned-down hall. Their ghosts have not departed, I thought, and will not depart. Their ghosts are sitting tight, in possession. (104)

Two important assessments are made in this realization that reverberate throughout the novel. First, there is Mrs. Curren's alignment of herself with the 'we' of the shooters, her growing

sense of responsibility for what is happening. Just as she realises that there is no exterior to the discourse of apartheid where she might take up position, she also demonstrates a newfound insight into the structuring of a 'we' and a 'they' that this type of discourse necessitates. It is a structuring process that obliterates individual identity and considerations. Within a totalizing discourse "The essence of the whole is mirrored in the part. Your group is your destiny."⁹¹ Second, however, the presence of the suffering body also suggests the possibility of an inversion of power. The display of the bodies may be seen as a manifestation of the power of the regime in concordance with Foucault's observation that: "The public execution is to be understood not only as judicial, but also as a political ritual. It belongs, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested."⁹² However, in the narrative the bodies also act as proof against doubt, a "massive, solid presence" that counter the assumptions of regime, still speaking after they have been silenced, or as Mr. Thabane, Mrs. Curren's "guide" puts it: "Yes, they must lie here. So that everyone can see" (102). By their presences a judgement and a testimony are put forth that expose the true nature of the killings – that it is "we whose lives are not worth living", that the living should be the dead, and that the dead are still alive.

When Mrs. Curren relays her experiences to Mr. Vercueil, perhaps in an effort to make further sense of them herself, she tells him:

"I have not seen black people in their death before, Mr. Vercueil. They are dying all the time, I know, but always somewhere else. The people I have seen die have been white and have died in bed. Growing rather dry and light there, a minimum of ash to sweep up afterward. [...]"

"Whereas these people will not burn, Bheki and the other dead. It would be like trying to burn figures of pig iron or lead. They might lose their sharpness of contour, but when the flames subside they would still be there, heavy as ever." (124)

The passage indicates a re-sketching of the dichotomy between white and black bodies as dry and light and wet and heavy, respectively. But the image is also developed further. There is a suggestion that whereas the weightless bodies of white people disappear after their death, the bodies of lead do not. They continue to weigh down on the present, to exist in the suggestion of future: "They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig iron floating under the skin of the earth. The age of iron waiting to return"

⁹¹ Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33.

⁹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 47

(126). Thus these figures of the body allow the narrative to dovetail the body with history, using the body as an image upon which the historical narrative of South Africa is assessed. This suggests that the body provides a site from which one can speak of history, against the discourse of History itself.

3.2 Language and Narration

As I have suggested in the previous section, Mrs. Curren as narrator acts as a witness to the history that unfolds around her, being the voice that re-represents the events she has been thrust into. In *Age of Iron*, as in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, however, the relationship between language and what we perceive as reality, between sign and signifier, is rendered deeply problematical and volatile. In this section I will examine how the presence of language and discourse is discussed in the narrative by focusing on issues connected to naming, to language and authority and, finally, to history.

3.2.1 Names

Carrol Clarkson has pointed out that names and naming are not neutral devices in Coetzee's writing. From the very beginning they seem to entail more, to allude to power and possibility. She writes that "it is whether or not you have the power to apply the names (regardless of whether or not you are the namer or the one named) that most dramatically affects positionality on the slide-rules of distance and proximity, authority and subjection."⁹³ And further: "Being in the position of the one who chooses the names is to be in the position of power; since names speak of the relation between the namer and the named, the name for the other is also a way of positioning the self."⁹⁴ There is a profusion of names in *Age of Iron*, and Mrs. Curren is conspicuously never able to fixedly name the black or coloured people she interacts with as a narrator. Florence's husband is called William, but it is "not his true name but the name by which he is known in the world of his work" (43), no other name is ever given. Florence's two daughters go by the names Hope and Beauty, examples of, claims Graham Huggan, *Age of Iron's* "semantic entropy",⁹⁵ and on which Mrs. Curren comments: "she does not entrust me with the real name" (37). Florence's son was known as Digby, "now

⁹³ Carrol Clarkson, 'Remains of the Name', in *Literary Landscapes: From Modernism to Postcolonialism*, edited by Attie de Zange et.al. (London: Palgrave, forthcoming).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Graham Huggan, 'Evolution and Entropy in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*', in *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), 194.

he is Bheki” (36). Bheki’s comrade from Guguletu gives the name John when pressured by Mrs. Curren, a name she instantly recognizes as “a *nom de guerre* if I ever heard one” (147). The police who later shoot him call him Johannes, but this is instantly negated by Mrs. Curren who thinks to herself: “Johannes: was that his true name? Surely not” (171). Mr. Thabane is called “my cousin” by Florence (91), but he later calls her “my sister” (101). When Mrs. Curren later calls to leave a message for Florence she calls her “Mrs. Mkubuleki – no, not Mrs. Mkubuleki, Mrs. Mkubukeli?” (174), further complicating the issue of her identity. For a while Mr. Thabane’s name seems like a point of stability, but then this too is put into question as Mrs. Curren tries to solve the anagram she is sure hides behind a form of his name: “A word appeared before me: Thabanchu, Thaba Nchu. I tried to concentrate. Nine letters, anagram for what?” (173) There is, then, a clear hesitation on the narrative’s part to definitively name the other. Only in Guguletu, a place that seems on the surface only to be of chaos and anger, is the act of naming even a possibility. When Mr. Thabane calls Florence “my sister”, Mrs. Curren recognizes that she has been in error: “*My sister* he called her, not *Florence*. Perhaps I alone in all the world called her Florence. Called her by an alias. Now I was on the ground where people were revealed in their true names” (101). It is as if that only in this outside place, highly reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno*, does the act of naming have any validity. Through this constant play of signs that signify, but never fixedly or definitely, a point of plurality is being made. If it is possible to read a sketching out in the text of apartheid as a discourse of purity, with the need for a definitive separation between *us* and *them*, between the self and the other, the continuous game of naming and re-naming offers a resistance to this separation by refusing to fix the other within the rigidity that this type of discourse demands. By leaving it to the other to name, as in the case of John, or not name, as in the case of Florence and her children, an agency is restored, just as an act of appropriation is avoided, because “Forgetting meanings is not a matter for excuses, an unfortunate defect in performance; it is an affirmative value, a way of asserting the irresponsibility of the text, the pluralism of systems [...]”⁹⁶

Mr. Vercueil is the centre on which this refusal turns, and he is also, consequently, the novel’s most transient and ephemeral figure. I have already commented on the numerous and often conflicting characteristics that are attached to this “half-mythical creature” (193). These changing characteristics, which can be contributed to Mrs. Curren’s often insufficient attempts to describe him, follow a developing trajectory as their relationship changes and

⁹⁶Barthes, *S/Z*, 11.

deepens. At first he is “a ragged stranger”, “a derelict, and alcoholic, a lost soul” (14). But a few pages later, when a neighbour warns Mrs. Curren that there is a vagrant on her property, she denies this by saying: ““He is not a vagrant, he is a man who works for me”” (24). However, despite these efforts to integrate this figure into the main narrative, he remains nameless until Florence demands to know who “this man” is. Mrs Curren answers with a statement that is not really an answer: ““His name is Mr. Vercueil,” I said. ‘Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil. That’s what he says. I have never come across such a name before. I am letting him stay here for a while. He has a dog”” (37). Kay Sulk has observed that this name “brings to mind two Afrikaans terms: ‘verskuil’ meaning to conceal or to mask, and ‘verkul’ meaning ‘to cheat’”,⁹⁷ all of which allude to uncertainty and hidden meanings. Sue Kossew has further argued that this name “seems to be a way to hide his true identity”.⁹⁸ However, I would argue that beyond that, through the narrative’s creation and upholding of indefiniteness in the figure of Mr. Vercueil, he can be seen as the crux of the narrative’s attempt to not name, and thereby appropriate, the other as a figure within its own discourse. Proof of how well this works can be found, I believe, in the critical discussion of Mr. Vercueil’s skin colour.

This discussion reveals a curious and notable disagreement. Let me first give a few examples: In her essay ‘Cancerous Bodies and Apartheid in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*’ Fiona Probyn describes Mr. Vercueil as “a homeless black man”.⁹⁹ Susan VanZanten Gallahager recognizes that “Mr. Vercueil’s race is never identified”, but concludes that “we can assume he is black or coloured”,¹⁰⁰ without providing any arguments for this conclusion. Sulk, too, states that Vercueil is “presumably coloured”,¹⁰¹ whereas Graham Huggan declines to mention the issue.¹⁰² Kossew argues that “Coetzee never mentions Vercueil’s colour” and that “there are no clues at all”¹⁰³ despite, for instance, that Mrs. Curren states that he has “strange green eyes” (6), a rather unusual colour for a black man. Derek Attridge comes closest to recognizing the problem when he observes that Mr. Vercueil “even seems to have escaped the grid of racial classification”,¹⁰⁴ and continues along this line when he argues for the relationship between Mrs. Curren and Mrs. Vercueil as “a response to the other”, and as a

⁹⁷ Kay Sulk, ““Visiting Himself on Me” – the Angel, the Witness, and the Modern Subject of Enunciation in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*”, *Journal of Literary Studies* (Vol. 18, No. 3-4, Winter 2002), 318-319.

⁹⁸ Kossew, *Pen and Power*, 202.

⁹⁹ Fiona Probyn, ‘Cancerous Bodies and Apartheid in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*’, in *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Sue Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 220.

¹⁰⁰ Gallahager, *A Story of South Africa*, 196.

¹⁰¹ Sulk, ““Visiting Himself on Me””, 323.

¹⁰² Huggan, ‘Evolution and Entropy’.

¹⁰³ Kossew, *Pen and Power*, 202.

¹⁰⁴ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 95.

“heightened staging of the very issue of otherness”.¹⁰⁵ With the positioning of Mr. Vercueil as the other based on his role-function in the narrative, rather than on the colour of his skin, and by viewing him as a figure “outside any of the normal codes”¹⁰⁶ Attridge implicitly provides a possible solution to this discussion. Of his life we know almost nothing, only scraps and fragments, and Mr. Vercueil thus lacks the narrative of his life, a narrative of identity. He represents an instant of deconstruction, someone who cannot be incorporated into the master-narrative of the letter as he continues to resist Mrs. Curren’s attempt to re-create the narrative for him. By declining to answer questions, withholding his name and past, by insisting on his otherness, refusing work, stealing, he conforms to none of her expectations. These acts retain his position as a liminal figure, and by reading Mr. Vercueil’s skin colour as a contested space, as an indeterminate site of instability that resists definition (as I believe the examples above has aptly shown), it is possible to treat Mr. Vercueil as a figure of the other without making definitive claims to his race. One could perhaps even say that by providing such a definition one commits the very act of naming, and appropriation, that the narrative goes to such lengths to avoid.

3.2.2 Silencing the Witness

The transience of signification observable in the interchanging of names also infuses the novel as a whole, causing a serious questioning of the possibility of linguistic authority. A series of strong and often brutal images paint an unequivocal picture of how powerful the discourse of totality is in the South Africa of the novel. The first instance occurs when Mrs. Curren describes a television broadcast by the government which she watches with Mr. Vercueil: “Together, blow after blow, we listened. The disgrace of the life one lives under them: to open a newspaper, to switch on the television, like kneeling and being urinated on” (10). Similar wording is used in the next passage on this topic:

Sitting in a circle, debating ponderously, issuing decrees like hammer blows: death, death, death. [...] Pressing downward: their power in their weight. Huge bull testicles pressing down on their wives, their children, pressing the spark out of them. In their own hearts no spark of fire left. Sluggish hearts, heavy as blood pudding. (29)

What are the consequences of such a discourse, how does it affect the people experiencing it? Mrs. Curren’s own narrative approximates to an answer that goes to the core of the issue:

¹⁰⁵ Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 103.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

And their message stupidly unchanging, stupidly forever the same. Their feat, after years of etymological meditation on the word, to have raised stupidity to a virtue. To stupefy: to deprive of feeling; to numb, deaden; to stun with amazement. Stupor: insensibility, apathy, torpor of mind. Stupid: dulled in the faculties, indifferent, destitute of thought or feeling. From *stupere*, to be stunned, astounded. A gradient from *stupid*, to *stunned*, to *astonished*, to be turned to stone. The message: that the message never changes. A message that turns people to stone. (29)

People become like stone, unable to care, or to love. The importance that this realization holds for Mrs. Curren becomes apparent later in the novel when she writes to her daughter that she must trust Mr. Vercueil because she does not trust him (131). But it also contributes to the moment where she realises that she must love John, even though she does not even like him:

That is my first word, my first confession. I do not want to die in the state I am in, in the state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step. That I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. (136)

Her first word, her lack of love, but need to love, the other, is an attempt to save herself from the petrification caused by the discourse of apartheid. She must do what she cannot do in order to save her soul.

But the consequences are perhaps more dire, not for whom this message of stupefaction is intended, but for the removed other that it creates. This “textualization and re-invention of South African ‘reality’”¹⁰⁷ constructs what Vetlesen terms the “invisible Other”, the other who, “through mechanisms of distantation”, becomes “a morally lost other”.¹⁰⁸ Mrs. Curren responds to this distancing process by observing the following: “Of the trouble in the schools the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, the newspaper says nothing. In the world they project all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks learning about the square of the hypotenuse and the parrots of the Amazonian jungle” (39). The discourse of the state overrides reality by creating a narrative that suits its purposes better, removing from its constructed reality all that does not comply with the plot of this particular narrative. There is a sense in which “a war of words precedes a war of bodies”,¹⁰⁹ an implication that turns deeply ironic as the strike that began the unrest in townships like Guguletu was in fact a war over words: the schoolchildren protested against the extended use of Afrikaans as an educational language. But it can also be seen as a confirmation of the process of discourse in

¹⁰⁷ Marais, “Who Clipped the Hollyoaks?”, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 17.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

which “whenever ideology and reality clash, it is to the cost of the latter.”¹¹⁰ The dominant discourse with its project of totalization has the power to shape reality into complying with its chosen world-image. It also shapes people, creating enemies out of boys and blindness out of sight, “ a thickening of the membrane between the world and the self inside, a thickening become thickness” (127). To continue to see “the space behind the lie where the truth ought to be” (30) is to resist the pressure of this reality. In spite of this, aspects the narrative also reveals the weakness of language as stable signifier, and thus also of discourse, keeping open a narrow fissure in its totality where a form of resistance may insert itself.

I have already discussed the disjunction between names and the named, but there are numerous further instances where the disjunction between sign and signified becomes visible in the text. Describing the image of happy school children that the regime projects, Mrs. Curren adds: “What I know about the events in Guguletu depends solely on what Florence tells me and on what I can learn by standing on the balcony and peering northeast: namely, that Guguletu is not burning today, or, if it is burning, is burning with a low flame” (39). The narrative of the other counters the story of peace, as does the column of smoke that rises from the township. Her own trip to Guguletu, of course, serves to reveal the conflict behind the mask of calmness that the regime projects, revealing “the discursive nature of her society and identity [...]”¹¹¹ And when the police have come to arrest John, Mrs. Curren flings out: ““If you have hurt him I will never forgive you””, to which a policewoman replies: ““It’s all right, we’ll phone again for an ambulance””(156), the representative of the regime and its power trying again to conceal the true nature of the violence it is responsible for. Moments later John’s dead body, covered by a blanket, exposes the hollowness of this promise.

The passages in which the implication of the unreliability of signs and reading is made most explicit are the ones connected to Mrs. Curren’s contemplation of suicide. Her plan is to set fire to herself on Government Avenue in the middle of Cape Town. But she worries that it will not be interpreted the right way, and through a reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* she tries to explain the problem to Mr. Vercueil:

These public shows, these manifestations – this is the point of the story – how can one ever be sure what they stand for? An old woman sets herself on fire for instance. Why? Because she has been driven mad? Because she has cancer? I thought of painting a letter on the car to explain. But what? *A? B? C?* What is the right letter for my case? (114)

¹¹⁰ Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 157.

¹¹¹ Marais, ““Who Clipped the Hollyoaks?””, 7.

In the end she does not go through with it: having lost faith in the act's signifying power, her resolve falters. Later she has a dream in which the suicide is carried out (178), but it is not as she imagined it. In the dream Florence, in the figure of the goddess Aphrodite, walks by but pays no attention to the "show" that Mrs. Curren has put on. Michael Marais written of this passage: "Florence, however, refuses to acknowledge the doubting self's presence and so affirm its reality."¹¹² Additionally, as Mrs. Curren burns without pain, the suicide becomes an empty sign, and the act of attempting to signify redemption is rendered pointless by the other's lack of recognition, thus confirming her initial doubts about the act's purpose. Even as the narrator of her own death, she cannot control how the narration is read, if it is read at all. There is always a space between the sign and the signified where reading, or refusal to read, may take place. This passage, along with those previously discussed, demonstrates how "all discourses are shown to be essentially 'private', enclosing each racial and social group within a self-signifying 'body'",¹¹³ thus placing all discourses in the novel "under suspicion."¹¹⁴

The narrative's interrogation of the power of discourse through an examination of the uncertainties of signification gradually becomes a self-reflexive questioning of its *own* authority and possibility for speaking. The novel is in the form of a letter, but its "epistolary status is undermined by the absence of any of the markers of a real letter, culminating in a final sentence that is beyond all letter-writing."¹¹⁵ In addition the first-person narrator is deeply subjective. "It is Mrs. Curren's own truth about this time and place"¹¹⁶, or as Mrs. Curren writes:

Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. [...] When I write about him I write about myself. When I write about his dog I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself. (9)

The spoken language is always an act of the subject. It creates a doubleness in which, through language, the self is both created and represented. The narrative can never be dislodged from its creator, because the creator is also the subject. Language is then necessarily

¹¹² Marais, "Who Clipped the Hollyoaks?", 10.

¹¹³ Kossew, *Pen and Power*, 195.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹¹⁵ Derek Attridge, 'Literary Form and the Demands of Politics: Otherness in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*', in *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Sue Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 207.

¹¹⁶ Head, *J.M. Coetzee*, 143.

highly deliberate and self-aware, consciously fashioned out of the culture's inheritance rather than pretending immediacy and originality; as a professor of classics Mrs. Curren stands for the whole Western inheritance from Greece and Rome, its ethical and political language rendered suspect even as it forms itself into telling moral apothegms.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, the re-creation of the self in narrative form is in itself conditioned not only by the narrator, but by the narrator's perceived context: "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" (103). This intense awareness of her own position leads to an awareness of the limits of language itself, an awareness that is intimately linked to her body and its perceived lack of authority and weight: "I remember, when the boy was hurt, how abundantly he bled, how rudely. How thin, by comparison, my bleeding onto the paper here. The issue of the shrunken heart" (137). The body with its blood has the authority that language lacks, and this knowledge gradually causes a questioning of her own authority, of her ability, and right, to represent the events that unfold around her. When Mrs. Curren travels to Guguletu "the ground where people were revealed in their true names" (101) this awareness is brought to the surface. After becoming an unwilling spectator to the burning of the shanties, the witness attempts to retract from her role:

"I must go home soon," I said. It was an appeal; I could hear the unsteadiness in my voice.

"You have seen enough?" said Mr. Thabane, sounding more distant than before.

"Yes, I have seen enough. I didn't come here to see the sights. I came here to fetch Bheki." (97)

But Mr. Thabane will not let her go, will not let her turn her back on what is happening:

"It is not just terrible," he said, "it is a crime." When you see a crime being committed in front of your eyes, what do you say? Do you say 'I have seen enough, I didn't come to see the sights. I want to go home'?"

I shook my head in distress.

"No you don't," he said. "Correct. Then what do you say? What sort of crime is it that you see? What is its name?" (98)

He wants her to name the crime, to create it by re-representing it in narrative, and thus bring it into the world of discourse, against the silencing of apartheid. From the witness is demanded a testimony, words that can confirm the event. "Then let us hear what you have to say!" he

¹¹⁷ Attridge, 'Literary Form and the Demands of Politics', 207.

exclaims. “We are listening! We are waiting!” (98) But Mrs. Curren has realized the reaches of power and that “even language – the condition of possibility for literature and for protest – has been contaminated by the politics of South Africa.”¹¹⁸ Her solution is a refusal to speak, an abandoning of any pretext of narrative ability: “‘These are terrible sights,’ I repeated, faltering. ‘They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people’s words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now’” (99). Within the discourse of apartheid, as within any totalizing discourse, the witness-position becomes an impossible one, and the witness is silenced; “The word always dies where the claim of some reality is total.”¹¹⁹ The witness’ representation of an event always holds within it a remove from the event itself, and thus, in one sense, the inherently contributes to the act’s deconstruction of its own authority. Both because the witness is a survivor, someone who, like Mrs. Curren, saw what happened but did not actually experience it, thus causing a paradoxical situation where “Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness.”¹²⁰ But also because narrative representation necessitates a reading of the event, which, through the novels exposure of the problematics of language, is an act that becomes highly dubious and unreliable. Indeed, with the heightening of this issue through her experience in *Guguletu* Mrs. Curren seems to have lost faith in her own authority. She confesses to her daughter: “I may seem to understand what I say, but believe me, I do not. [...] I am feeling my way along a passage that grows darker all the time. I am feeling my way toward you; with each word I feel my way” (131). And although she might still try to feel her way toward her daughter, when it comes to speaking to, and of, the other she no longer claims a position at all. She tells Mr. Vercueil:

Yet who am I, *who am I* to have a voice at all? How can I urge them to turn their back on that call? What am I entitled to do but to sit in a corner with my mouth shut? I have no voice, I lost it long ago; perhaps I have never had one. I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence. (164)

Moreover, the act of witnessing is also crucial to the creation of History as narrative for the simple reason that someone has to see and survive the event and then shape that event into a story. However, as the narrative challenges the truth-value of language and thus exposes its abuse of power, it severely threatens the very possibility of this act, and thus the

¹¹⁸ Marais, “‘Who Clipped the Hollyoaks?’”, 12.

¹¹⁹ Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, 20.

¹²⁰ Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 34.

main condition for creating a historical narrative. This problem is traced in the text through various forms of breaks, or perhaps distancing is a better term, between the present and the future that it holds, and the past that has preceded it. This break between past and present is metaphorically represented in the separation and problems of communication between the narrator, the self, and the other. It is also noticeable in the contrast between the respective lightness and weight of the body that I have already discussed. Mrs. Curren experiences this distance one of the first nights Bheki comes back to stay:

Lying on the bed last night with a pillow under my hip, my arms pressed to my chest to keep the pain from moving, the clock showing 3:45, I thought with envy and yearning of Florence in her room, asleep, surrounded by her sleeping children, the four of the breathing in their four different measures, every breath strong and clean.

Once I had everything, I thought. Now you have everything and I have nothing. (40)

Past and present are on each side of the wall, the past knowing itself overdue, out of time, waiting for death. A sentiment that is echoed in a later reflection on her own narrative impotence: “Old men and women, trembling with just fury, taking up the pen, weapon of last resort. In my day, now over; in my life, now past” (53). However, Mrs. Curren holds on to the idea, at least for a time, that there must be a connection, a handing over, between the past and the present. Thinking, probably correctly, that the lack of such a connection will lead to violence and bloodshed, she says to Florence:

“I keep thinking of what you said the other day: that there are no more mothers and fathers. I can’t believe you meant it. Children cannot grow up without mothers and fathers.” [...] “And when they grow up one day,” I said softly, “Do you think cruelty will leave them? What kind of parents will they become who are taught that the time of parents is over?” (49)

But Florence rejects the argument, and embraces the children for their hardness and willingness to fight: “These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them” (50). There is here a definitive separation in the reading of the historical events, a separation that is situated in the word ‘iron’. To Florence it is a thing to be proud of, an emblem of how her children’s soft bodies are able to resist the hardness and brutality of apartheid. For Mrs. Curren this hardness is something to fear, the age of iron signifying “a landscape of violence” (92). As the world brutally changes and this rift become more apparent, the previously so easily taken for granted connection between words and their meaning is lost. Mrs. Curren recognizes that her world, her words, are quickly losing their authority, thus severely

debilitating her ability to reach out and speak to the other. Despite this she still makes an effort to speak to John, a futile exercise: “Around this boy I now felt the same wall of resistance. Though his eyes were open he did not see; what I said he did not hear” (79). History, as it has been created and upheld by the apartheid regime, is being rejected through a rejection of language. When Mrs. Curren makes a last-ditch attempt to get through to John she realises: “Talk, talk! Talk had weighed down the generation of his grandparents and the generation of his parents. Lies, promises, blandishments, threats: they had walked stooped under the weight of all the talk. Not he. He threw off talk. Death to talk!” (144). Why is the creation and control of a narrative of history so important within a discourse like apartheid? Because if you cannot display authority through history, justifying power and nation through a self-fulfilling narrative, the very basis of this existence comes into question. When the margins of history challenge the fixity of national and, thereby of historical, narrative

the language of national collectivity and cohesiveness is now at stake. Neither can cultural homogeneity, or the nation’s horizontal space be authoritatively represented within the familiar territory of the *public sphere*: social causality cannot be adequately understood as a deterministic or overdetermined effect of a ‘statist’ centre; [...] ¹²¹

The break in history is connected to the use of language, in the divergences of perception of different meaning between Mrs. Curren, who identifies herself as the past, and Florence and her children – the future. If the witness cannot speak and the other will not listen then there is no narrative of history, and without history the totalitarian discourse loses its power. The other refuses talk in the favour of an iron body and silence. By breaking with the discourse of history, and thereby the discourse of the regime, refusing its authority and language, the other reclaims his autonomy.

3.3 Cancer and Pain

At the centre of this interrogation of narrative and history’s authority in *Age of Iron* are the body and its pain. Let me first once again repeat Elaine Scarry’s main point, that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, [...]”¹²² A binary is constructed where pain not only is language’s negative, but also an opposite that works towards a destruction of its other. It is a binary forever poised on the brink of its own deconstruction, creating an irresolvable tension that underlies much of *Age of Iron*. Furthermore, regarding

¹²¹ Bhabha, ‘Dissemination’, 154.

¹²² Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

pain as non-language allows us to read pain as an instance that escapes the ambiguities of language that the novel so meticulously traces, thus confirming Scarry's other main point that pain is certainty even when all else is subject to doubt.¹²³

The opposition between the body with its pain and language with its uncertainty and possibilities for manipulation and abuse comes to a head with Mrs. Curren's trip to Guguletu, one of the novel's most poignant sections. After she has seen the dead bodies of Bheki and his comrades, she returns to her car and begins her long journey home. On her way she passes a group of military vehicles. She wants to speak to them, but the words fail her: "I had hoped the words I needed would just come, but they did not. I held out my hands, palms upward. I am bereft, my hands said, bereft of speech. I come to speak but have nothing to say" (105). In an act that is highly reminiscent of Bheki's showing of his bloody palms, Mrs. Curren, silenced by the suffering she has witnessed, tries to let her body speak for her, to let her hands signify what her words cannot. She reflects:

What did I want? What did the old lady want? What she wanted was to bare something to them, whatever there was that might be bared at this time, in this place. What she wanted, before they got rid of her, was to bring out a scar, a hurt, to force it upon them, to make them see it with their own eyes: a scar, any scar, the scar of all this suffering, but in the end my scar, since our own scars are the only scars we can carry with us. I even brought a hand up to the buttons of my dress. But my fingers were blue, frozen. (106)

The invisible cancer scar – the sign of her body – her protest and her pain, that remains hidden underneath her dress, is contrasted with another set of signs on the next page. After her encounter with the soldiers she is unable to find her way back home, and has to return to ask Mr. Thabane for directions: "'Get onto the tar road, turn right, follow the signs,' he said curtly. 'Yes, but which signs?' 'The signs to civilization'" (107). Within the space of a few lines, then, there are the signs of the body, and the signs of the regime. The signs of the body are sensed by Mrs. Curren as to be able to tell the truth about suffering, the truth she could not articulate when prompted by Mr. Thabane a little earlier. She refused to articulate what cannot be spoken in words, for fear that the words would not be her own, but words twisted by the discourse that lives inside her while she lives inside it (103). The signs of the regime are the signs of apartheid, of separation between the privileged civilization of the white suburbs that Mrs. Curren belongs to and the violence that is Guguletu. The signs show the path back to civilization, but their intended meaning is undermined by Mr. Thabane's ironic tone:

¹²³ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 13.

civilization is nothing more than a walled off area for the privileged created by an oppressive regime that is everything but civilized, as the “SABS Approved”¹²⁴ (103) bullets in the boys’ bodies can testify. With the signs of the regime the connection between word and meaning is interrupted by the voice of the other who exposes the lie in the supposed truth; with the silent signs of the body the truth of pain, the connection between action and wound, remains intact.

However, the binary identified by Scarry is examined not only in this passage, but throughout the narrative. Furthermore, in this scene, as in several other instances, there is a conflation between the experience of cancer and the experience of pain. In Mrs. Curren’s case the pain is a product of illness, the wound and its scar is inflicted in an attempt to remove the illness and heal the body. Indeed, Mrs. Curren’s cancer is a central motif, and it is therefore necessary to look more closely at how it works within the text itself.

First, how does Mrs. Curren view her own disease?

The sickness that now eats me is dry, bloodless, slow and cold, sent by Saturn. There is something about it that does not bear thinking of. To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to bear them, unable to sate their hunger: children growing inside me every day, not growing, but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. (64)

This image of cancer as a pregnancy is almost identical to Susan Sontag’s description of cancer as a “demonic pregnancy”, but Sontag also adds:

Metaphorically, cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space. Its principal metaphors refer to topography (cancer ‘spreads’ or ‘proliferates’ or is ‘diffused’; tumors are surgically ‘excised’), and its most dreaded consequence, short of death, is the mutilation or amputation of a part of the body.¹²⁵

Thus cancer is simultaneously viewed both as an enemy created by the body itself, and as an enemy from the outside, as an invader. It is the self turning on the self, but once brought into existence, cancer becomes something not entirely of the body, but something that, like Mrs. Curren’s “brood”, has an existence of its own. This complex motif functions along several different paths in *Age of Iron*. Dominic Head has pointed out that “there is an allegorical dimension to her [Mrs. Curren’s] complicity and demise, a suggestion that she stands for the

¹²⁴ “SABS”, South African Bureau of Standards, the official South African approval agency for all national products.

¹²⁵ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 14-15.

nation as a whole, the cancer within mirroring the metaphorical social cancer without.”¹²⁶ I agree that it is possible to argue for a view of Mrs. Curren’s bodily illness as a metaphor through which the narrative exercises its criticism of the body politic, the apartheid regime. The colonizers are the invaders who are destroying the land as they feed off it. However, this reading is complicated by the fact that the metaphor of the cancerous body may just as easily be an apt metaphor of how the apartheid state views the rebels and dissidents of its regime. Mrs. Curren even employs the term “heirs” (25) to describe those who take over the previously white farmsteads, thus echoing her use of the image of a pregnancy when she later describes her cancer. In addition, the entire rationale for apartheid was to separate the blacks from the whites in order to avoid a pollution of the race and the ultimate destruction of South African society,¹²⁷ much like as removes a tumour or a cancerous breast to preserve the health of the body.

Sue Kossew has argued that the cancer metaphor can be read as both political and personal since the “parasite-like occupation of her body by the cancer has parallels, too, in the intrusion of two marginalized people into her comfortable white suburban house, her cocoon.”¹²⁸ And Kossew concludes that “In diagnosing and naming her own disease, she is also diagnosing and naming the disease of the body politic, of the nation, [...]”¹²⁹ True enough, Mrs. Curren’s space is invaded by the various visitors she is an unwilling host to, and in that sense the cancer metaphor might be seen as a spectrum through which we might read her personal experience. Then again, her guests do not destroy her as the cancer does, nor do they cause her death. On the contrary, there are strong suggestions that the encounter between Mrs. Curren and the other in the form of Mr. Vercueil is a positive one. For David Attridge, for instance, this relationship demonstrates that “the demands of otherness” mark “an insistence that a rationalistic and instrumental view of politics is not enough for the achievement of a genuine transformation”,¹³⁰ thus arguing that the figure of the other constitutes the locus of the novel’s political criticism.

In addition, Mrs. Curren herself believes that her illness is caused by her shame, that it is an emblem of the false life she has lived. She says: “I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. This is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (145). The image of cancer as something that

¹²⁶ Head, *J.M. Coetzee*, 132.

¹²⁷ Coetzee discusses the rationale behind South African ideology in the essay ‘Apartheid Thinking’, in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹²⁸ Kossew, *Pen and Power*, 191.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹³⁰ Attridge, ‘Literary Form and the Demands of Otherness’, 208.

“eats” her is intimately linked to her assessment of her life as a “doll’s life” (109) of which she observes: “I am hollow, I am a shell. To each of us fate sends the right disease. Mine is a disease that eats me out from inside. Where I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab¹³¹ sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the flood of light” (112). In Mrs. Curren’s opinion the cancer makes real the abstraction of her emptiness and shame through its physical manifestation. Consequently she acts as an interpreter of her own illness-metaphor within the narrative, thereby adding yet another reading to the signification of her cancer.

Because of its doubleness the cancer metaphor retains an ambiguity that continually resists a pinning down of its meaning. Therefore, superimposed on all these readings is the implication that in its nature the cancer metaphor perhaps most importantly results in a dissolution of the absolute, a challenge to the possibility of a definite meaning, of itself as well as in language in general. Moreover, the tension that can be found in the dichotomy between language and pain can also be found *within* the cancer-metaphor, as cancer both acts as a complex textual construction that avoids certainty while at the same time being the source of the narrator’s pain. Its presence, including the reality of this presence, is never questioned, only its meaning. Consequently, the metaphor of cancer is the centre of both certainty and doubt in the narrative. It is therefore possible to make an argument both for a conflation of the experience of cancer and the experience of pain, and for a strong similarity in the way that these two phenomenon act textually. Arne Johan Vetlesen has pointed out the following about the nature of totalitarian discourse:

the identity issue is turned into *the* paramount *communal* issue – entailing that *there is no identity to be had for the single individual apart from that bestowed and secured by a given community*, and, in times of upheaval an conflict, endangered by some other given community. [...] Ritual is the cultural group’s attempt to re-establish firm boundaries between polarities, generally by reinforcing paranoid-schizoid distinctions. Hence *pollution* may be described as a form of paranoid-schizoid anxiety over breaching the distinction between good and bad, pure and impure. More accurately still, *pollution is* contamination of such polarities.¹³²

Vetlesen speaks here of pollution as a breach of boundaries and a challenge to fixed polarities much in the same way that cancer can be said to act in the novel. As I have already pointed out, cancer can be viewed as a contamination of traditional boundaries of inside and outside

¹³¹ *Cancer* is the latin name for crab and the use of the image of a crab is thus far from a haphazard choice by the retired classics lecturer Mrs. Curren.

¹³² Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 186.

the self. Additionally, the trope of cancer also works textually as a boundary transgressive device that dissolves distinctions and questions the dichotomies within apartheid discourse, challenging its “attempt to re-establish firm boundaries between polarities”. The authority that this lends to the body can be traced in the scene where Mrs. Curren uses her illness and the word ‘cancer’ both to distance herself from the police that have killed Bheki, as well as lending power to her voice: “*Cancer!* What a pleasure to fling the word at them! It stopped them in their tracks like a knife” (155).

This approach to the function of the cancer metaphor also allows us to appreciate how cancer’s gradual possession of Mrs. Curren’s body and the pain it causes aligns with her escalating alienation from society. This process culminates in her night as a street dweller, where she momentarily takes on the role that Mr. Vercueil hitherto has been the sole occupant of, thereby again strongly suggesting cancer’s transformative ability. In addition, it is the pain caused by cancer that mediates the first conversation between Mrs. Curren and Mr. Vercueil, breaching the gap that discourse has imposed on them: “An attack: it was just that: the pain hurling itself upon me like a dog, sinking its teeth into my back. I cried out, unable to stir. Then he, this man, appeared from somewhere and helped me into the house” (10). This sudden, and perhaps fleeting, closeness is underlined by Mrs. Curren’s use of the image of pain like a dog, which is connected not only to the fact that Mr. Vercueil has a dog, but also to her referring to him as a “dog-man” (56). Here, too, there is an allusion to the power of pain. Until this point, Mr. Vercueil been the derelict, the uninvited visitor, the parasite. But as his voice enters the narrative for the first time the host is rescued by the parasite, thus creating reversal of roles that unbalances their relationship and challenges underlying ideas of position and power.

The undeniability of the authority of pain, as opposed to the continued questioning of language that I have discussed earlier, is returned to in the narrative when Mrs. Curren realises:

There is no truth but the shock of pain that goes through me when, in an unguarded moment, a vision overtakes me of this house, empty, with sunlight pouring through the windows onto an empty bed, [...] – when the world I have passed my life in manifests itself to me and I am not of it. (26)

Pain weans us of our bodies to prepare us for death, but death and pain are two sides of the same experience, for in both there is an end to language, a “blank wall”, an absolute truth that cannot be expressed. Both Jean Améry and Elaine Scarry have commented on this

doubleness. Améry states that “Pain, we said, is the most extreme intensification of our bodily being. But maybe it is even more, that is: death.”¹³³ In addition to which Scarry points out that: “Regardless then, of the context in which it occurs, physical pain is always mimes death [...]”¹³⁴ However, there is a paradox in the narrative following the authority of pain and its resistance to language. Pain claims its authority over other events, fighting for narrative space and attention with what goes on outside the body (39), thus acting together with the growing ambiguities of language to further threaten Mrs. Curren’s ability to act as a witness. But, gradually, pain also emerges as a *way* of speaking, as a way of holding on to the othering of her position that cancer has created. When she visits John at the hospital she reflects: “What a relief it would be to give myself up to them now! Clean sheets, brisk hands on my body, a release from pain, a release into helplessness – what is it that keeps me from yielding?” (70). What keeps her from yielding is the realisation that if she gives up her body and her pain to the care of the hospital, she does not take full responsibility for a disease she believes is of her own making, and thus she also loses her ability to speak against apartheid. But the pressure of the discourse that apartheid has created is powerful:

I am trying to keep a sense of urgency. A sense of urgency is what keeps deserting me. Sitting here among all this beauty, or even sitting at home among my own things, it seems hardly possible to believe there is a zone of killing and degradation all around me. It seems like a bad dream. Something presses, nudges inside me. I try not to take notice, but it insists. I yield an inch; it presses harder. With relief I give in, and life is suddenly ordinary again. With relief I give myself back to the ordinary. I wallow in it. I lose my sense of shame, become shameless like a child. (119)

Michael Marais has further commented that

Her efforts to resist the stupefying power of this banalization of evil are metaphorically conveyed by her struggle to cope with the pain caused by her terminal condition. While this pain stands in a metaphoric relation to the actual South African reality, the medication which deadens it signifies the State’s power to repress this reality.¹³⁵

Marais reads pain as reality, while the absence of pain represents the State and a deadening of the senses. Again the suggestion is made that she must hold on to pain to see, the body in pain can be used as a vantage point from which she can write against the stupefaction of the State. Her “eyes are shut in order to see”, but “without pain, no writing, a new and terrible rule”

¹³³ Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, 33.

¹³⁴ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 31.

¹³⁵ Marais, “Who Clipped the Hollyoaks?”, 8.

(175). Thus, the paradox lies not only in the ambiguity of the cancer metaphor, but also in the ambiguous nature of pain itself. Pain resists language, thus creating a point that is both outside language and opposed to discourse, while simultaneously being the one point through which Mrs. Curren *can* speak. This tension runs through the narrative, and highlights the problems of the authoritarian voice and testimony of which Agamben has written: “The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance – that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness.”¹³⁶ Or as Mrs. Curren says, thus signifying through an act of non-signification, recognizing its impossibility: “I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence. But with this – whatever it is – the voice that is no voice, I go on. On and on” (164).

3.4 *Age of Iron* and Suffering as Criticism

In this chapter I have made an argument for a thematically productive interplay of three main motifs in *Age of Iron*: the body, language, and pain and illness, as well as for the connection between them. The body in *Age of Iron* is a highly complex figure. First, the body functions as an emblem of the other, or the position of the other. Mrs. Curren’s illness and pain, Mr. Vercueil’s ragged and almost animalistic appearance, John and Bheki’s skin colour, are all instances where the body is employed in the text as a means to signify an outside position to the dominant discourse. Second, however, there is also a significant contrast between white and black bodies that is articulated through a series of dichotomies like dry/wet, lightness/heaviness and death/life. These dichotomies underline an important structural point, because although Mrs. Curren’s illness may have forced her into a position of difference, a position that, as the novel unfolds, informs her self-discovery, it is crucially *not* the same position as the one that, for instance, Bheki and John holds. This separation is important not only in relation to, rather obviously, the discourse of apartheid as it is presented in the narrative, but also in relation to their personal relationships and possibilities of communication. Third, even as the voice is silenced, the body is given the possibility to speak. The image of John’s bleeding forehead, Bheki’s dead body, Mrs. Curren’s scar, all act within the text as an articulating presence that speaks through its presence rather than with words, both within the narrative, and in forceful opposition to the dominant discourse created within the narrative.

¹³⁶ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 39.

Furthermore, the novel also explores the ways in which language and power are intimately connected, as discourse is shown not only to have the power to shape reality, but also to make invisible or non-existent that which does not comply with this reality. Yet there is also the implication that language is fundamentally unreliable and unstable. This suggestion is located partly in the novel's play with names and naming, partly in the numerous instances where apartheid reality is challenged by events that are articulated and made real by the presence of the suffering body. However, this questioning of the truth-value of language also, one can assume by necessity, turns into a self-reflexive criticism of the authority of narrative and Mrs. Curren's right to speak. As the inherent impossibility of the witness-position is exposed, a further challenge is made to the authority of historical narrative, and there is a strong suggestion that in the struggle against colonialism the children of iron must first do away with the past in order to claim their future.

Finally, I argue that in *Age of Iron*, as in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the body in pain acts as a counter to the uncertainties of language. This trope functions more complexly in *Age of Iron*, however, as cancer, as well as pain, both form a resistance toward the signifying powers of totalizing discourse. Thus, for Mrs. Curren, pain/cancer is not only a way of realizing the truth about her own situation and complicity, but it acts in the narrative as a moment without language, of silence, that creates an active rejection of discourse; the silent and suffering body speaks with a voice that cannot be appropriated or distorted by the dominant discourse of apartheid. Through the metaphorical connection between her cancer and the events surrounding her, Mrs. Curren's body becomes perhaps the only true witness to the atrocities. Her body, through its suffering, communicates what her letter cannot. We read the text, but we may very well read her body as sign, and, accepting the premise that only pain is truth, maybe it is the only sign we should read with any pretensions of certainty. Not, as my discussion of the various critical approaches to the cancer trope has demonstrated, as a definite allegorical or metaphorical moment, but as a claim for the importance of its deconstructive function.

There are two further implications of what I have claimed so far. The first involves *Age of Iron*'s restoration of the agency of naming to the other. For the colonizer's

ritual of naming is essentially an extension of allegorical consciousness in that it 'reads' the territory of the 'other' by reference to an anterior set of signs already situated in a cultural thematics, and by this process the 'new' world is made contingent upon the old. [...] This 'code', combined with the capacity of allegorical thinking to extend it infinitely, allows the coloniser always to read the 'other' in the ideological mirror of his own metaphysical system and to rationalise real cultural difference as a

factor of the permanent hierarchical difference inscribed in the manichean master code.¹³⁷

Slemon makes the point, then, that the act of naming is a crucial component of manichean allegory that Abdul JanMohammed has argued so strongly permeates colonial literature, including Coetzee's. In the article 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', which I have mentioned in the Introduction, as well as in the previous chapter, JanMohammed argues that in colonial literature, through allegorical appropriation, the other is represented of the self and in opposition to the self in a way that defines the self while at the same time valorising "the superiority of European cultures".¹³⁸

However, accepting Slemon's premise that this appropriation mainly happens through acts of naming, it is possible to argue that *Age of Iron*, by refusing to name the other, not only restores the agency of naming to the colonized, throughout the text Florence, Bheki, and John all choose names that allow them to adapt to the situation and keep their identity hidden, but also demonstrates an acute awareness of this problematic, thus avoiding a re-creation of the colonizing allegory. As Carrol Clarkson has argued in *Remains of the Name*: "If the 'problem of names' as Eugene Dawn would have it, calls into question the procedures of representation, it also calls into question the relation between the namer and the named, the authority of the namer, the responsive range that the call of a name instantiates."¹³⁹ This leads me to my second point: *Age of Iron*'s approach to language is convergent with Derrida's description of deconstructive practices:

No longer is any truth value attributed to them [signs], there is a readiness to abandon them, if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful. In the meantime, their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces.¹⁴⁰

The novel thus makes a claim not only for language's impossibility of certainty, but, in the same movement also for language's critical possibility. The novel as fictional text may still be mainly, or only, as self-referential, but, accepting Derrida's point, this does not mean that its critical value is lost, or even diminished. If one chooses to see power as arising mainly from

¹³⁷ Stephen Slemon, 'Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, (Vol. 23, No. 1, 1988), 161-162.

¹³⁸ JanMohammed, 'The Economy of the Manichean Allegory', 65.

¹³⁹ Carrol Clarkson *Remains of the Name*.

¹⁴⁰ Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences', 284.

language and discourse, as I have done so far, the text's ability to destabilize, to challenge fixity, and to critically examine ways in which one can speak against discourse may constitute the core, not the defeat, of its critical ability, especially when this act of deconstruction is rooted in the non-language of the suffering body.

4 Conclusion

The following question has been explored in this thesis: does *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* facilitate a deconstruction of dominant discourse, and can this deconstructive practice be considered counter-discursive?

Waiting for the Barbarians and *Age of Iron* are significantly different in form and structure and on the surface they approach their main themes in a notably divergent manner. However, as I hope to have shown, a valid argument can be made for several thematic and structural similarities between the two novels, as well as for a similar approach to issues tied to language and narrative authority. Despite their apparent differences, the suffering body functions as a central trope in both novels, and the mode of this functioning causes a significant deconstruction of the certainty of language, and thus of the authority of any discourse.

One of my main contentions in this thesis involves language, or, more precisely, the nature of language – how language functions in the text. I have drawn support from Barthes and Derrida in my claim that language does not simply mirror reality or exist as an objective and neutral means of story-telling. If one accepts the premise that language is a structure of binaries whose meaning and interrelations are ever-changing, and that signs are fundamentally dislocated from their signifiers, *what* they signify becomes determined by the framework of discourse within which they operate. Understood this way, language becomes a highly volatile and complex set of structures whose inner workings may be mapped out partially, as I have done in this thesis, but which will never provide a definite and final reading. In concordance with this perspective, Coetzee's approach to the problematics of language, present in the choice of themes as well as in the construction of the narrative, becomes a matter of considerable interest.

Both narratives present language as a tool of a dominant discourse. Seen thus, language can easily be manipulated to represent a reality that only remains real through the power-interests that create and uphold it. Language represents interests, not events, and the reader is repeatedly alerted to the disjunction between sign and signifier. The novels make it clear that events are never accessible to us except when mediated through a language that is forever balancing between true and untrue, between the narrator and the narrative, between the witness and the event. A notion of instability permeates the very fabric of the novels, as it exposes the continually volatile nature of any discourse.

Furthermore, there is an inherent subjectivity in the creation of any narrative, and as the representative abilities of language are interrogated, so is the authority of the one who

speaks. This increasing self-scrutiny of the narrator's own position is paralleled by a necessary awareness of the problem of interpretation or reading. As the magistrate stares blindly at the ram or the scars on the girl's body, sensing a hidden meaning but being unable to unearth it, so Mrs. Curren recounts the story of the scarlet letter in a recognition of the frequently unbridgable gap between the presence of a structure of signs and the interpretation of that structure. There is the event, there is the story of the event, and then there is the reading of that story. Thus, instead of setting up a simple binary of sign and signifier, the two novels suggest a tripartite structure in which each new level of narrative overlaps the previous one: a structure where one must not only consider the novels re-staging and subsequent unveiling of a dominant discourse, but also what the exposed mechanics of rhetoric imply both for the position of the narrator, as well as for the novel as a tool of criticism.

Located in the centre of both novels is the trope of the suffering body. In my reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* I have argued that the suffering body functioned as a space of silence, as the point where language ended and the body began to assert its authority. With its bloody wounds and inerasable and unreadable scars, the body continues to speak through its silence, thus constituting a non-language which maintains its certainty when everything else is subject to doubt. The body functions in the text as a moment of fixity, of certainty, that continues to nudge the magistrate towards his gradual realisations. In *Age of Iron* too, the ill or suffering body functions both as testament and indubitable witness, providing an interpretation of the scene where the bodies of the wounded boys are put on display, so that everyone might see and know. Once the suffering body is encountered one sees the "banshee beneath the stone" (9), or "the space behind the lie where the truth ought to be" (30). Scars act as signs, and the body with its wounds offers up a narrative that remains untouched by "the endlessly sceptical processes of textualisation".¹⁴¹ Thus the trope of the suffering body performs a counter-discourse that, through the force of its presence, exposes and at least partially disables the dominant discourse of an oppressive regime. Moreover, the suffering body thus constitutes the crux of the two novels' critical properties: a moment of pain that continues to deconstruct the structure of the dominant discourse through a silent resistance.

The involvement of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* with the issue of language moves through a parallel motion of what I will term self- and subject-deconstruction. As I have argued, both novels problematise and relate actively to the

¹⁴¹ Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 248.

construction of language and the acts of discourse. This is achieved through several strategic choices and techniques, of which the following are particularly important.

First, there is the play with names and naming. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* there are very few names. Only the representatives of Empire have ‘real’ names like Joll and Mendel, otherwise the characters are only known as “the girl”, “the boy”, or “the old man”. Conversely, in *Age of Iron* the reader finds a number of names and variations of names, each one as valid as the next. Because of these choices, the narrative relinquishes its power to define the other. This refusal is significant and crucial since one of the main acts of the regimes’ discourse is an allegorical and real appropriation through naming. Thus, through a conscious act of non-naming, the novels avoid re-creating the manichean opposition of the colonizing allegory which JanMohammed identifies, and which he considers as fatal weakness of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Instead both novels create a narrative space in which the other might be present without being incorporated into discourse through allegorization. There is a duality in this construction in which the novels simultaneously allude to the power of names – it defines who you are and where you belong – but also to their possible indefiniteness. Within the narrative, names may be discarded, changed or kept hidden, thus restoring agency to the unnamed, and avoiding an appropriation of the other into the binaries of discourse.

Second, Coetzee’s original use of the first person narrator is thematically productive. As narrators the magistrate and Mrs. Curren alert the reader to the issues connected to this position through moments of self-scrutiny in which they undercut their own reliability as story-tellers and highlight the subjectivity and limitations of the story. This lack of credibility contains a paradox that is typical of the two texts, a statement – listen to my story – that is simultaneously negated by a counter statement – but don’t believe it, truth is an illusion and I am unable to speak for anyone.

Third, the narratives include the construction of a discourse of totality, the discourse of Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the discourse of apartheid in *Age of Iron*. Except, like in the case of the narrator position, the inclusion of this discourse is continually punctuated by challenges to the truth-value and totality of these discourses. These challenges often take the form of physical presences – bodies, scars, marks of soot on a wall, a column of smoke – that form marginal and silent narratives, but which nevertheless continue to create an opposition to the dominance of these discourses.

By including these dichotomies within the framework of the narrative, the instability of language is not only thematized but also dramatized. It creates a slippage that renders the texts volatile and indefinite. The novels continually point toward the rift between sign and

signifier, and caution against our inclination to assume an easy identification between the two. Language creates the world, re-representing it and organizing its events into a narrative structure. As a consequence, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* deconstruct *the subject of discourse* by exposing the methodologies of its construction and by challenging the belief in the absoluteness of language and the accompanying binaries that this type of discourse necessitates.

Within this act also lies the seed of the novels' *self-deconstruction*. In order to argue for a text as counter-discursive it is necessary to assume a basic principle of the novel's critical ability or potential. I have argued for this principle in light of a Foucauldian view of discourse. This position contends that what we perceive as reality is always mediated through discourse, a discourse that may be seen as a collection of texts or narratives which are created by various actors with different power-interests. However, when one chooses to view discourse, our 'reality' if you will, primarily as texts, it becomes possible to argue that these texts can be challenged and changed by the means of other texts, such as the novel. How is this achieved? Critics, in particular post-colonial critics, have argued that the assumed stable referent of the sign, for instance the historical event in the discourse of History, is the crucial point upon which the authority and credibility of this discourse rest. A novel has the potential of destabilising the authority of this discourse by insistently questioning of the sign/referent relationship, as well as through an unveiling of the rhetoric of narrative and the political, ideological and personal choices that inform this narrative.¹⁴² Thus the most valid way of arguing for a novel's critical potential and value is to see it as a text challenging another set of texts – a discourse, in which the novel contains within it the possibility of forcing into motion a re/de-construction of discourse, as well as well as creating a counter-discourse by using the same strategies.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron*, however, the narrators' discovery of the regimes' manipulation of language is coupled with an increasing realisation that there is no space available to them from which they may speak outside the discourse of the totalitarian regime. The inclusion of this element in the novels provides a link between the level of the story and the level of the narrative. Just as the magistrate and Mrs. Curren are forced by their experiences to realise the problems attached to their own positions and consequently lose faith in their own authority as narrators, so the novels' deconstruction of discourse, their subject-

¹⁴² It is worth noting here that the argumentative bases that various critics have employed to arrive at this conclusion are not identical. In his book *Postcolonial Transformation* Ashcroft provides an overview of the three main methods as they have been argued for by Paul Ricoeur, F.R. Ankersmith and Hayden White, respectively. Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 86-90.

deconstruction, result in an implied deconstruction of their own authority as a construction of language: their self-deconstruction. With the incorporation and thematizing of the ambiguity of language the text inadvertently sets up the apparatus for the deconstruction of its own authority, and the novels become caught in a circle of self-referral in which the text becomes the victim of its own convincing argument. Coupled with my theoretical position on language, the volatile and self-destructive nature of Coetzee's fiction gives rise to a complex set of issues. The novels' identification between the text it criticises and themselves as a textual construction inevitably poses the question of any novel's counter-discursive potential and possibilities. If the novels dismantle their own authority and possibility of acting as an instance of effective criticism, how can the genre of the novel continue to have any critical value?

I conclude that the trope of the suffering body is Coetzee's solution to this impasse. Effectively addressing the problematics of language's presumed arbitrary referentiality, this trope provides a sustained validation of the novel's critical impact, even when accepting the view of language that I have argued for in this thesis. Representations of pain are central in the two novels. I have contended that, because of its nature, pain constitutes an experience that resists language, and, further, that the non-language of pain facilitates a way of deconstructing and speaking against the totalism of signification that a dominant discourse creates. The presence of cancer works similarly to that of pain, but also holds within it a heightened degree of complexity. Like pain, cancer acts deconstructively, exposing the instability of signs, as it represents a certainty through its presence in the narrative and, again like pain, serves as a binary to language. However, the cancer trope is itself highly ambiguous and seems to escape any definite pinning down of its purpose in the text. A better way to ascertain how this trope functions is therefore to bring these elements together by identifying the cancer trope and its resistance to a definite articulation of its function as *its point of certainty*. Cancer, like pain, resists reading and linguistic representation and performs its counter-discursive act through its presence as non-language. Accordingly, the trope of the suffering body is the point in the narrative upon which the narratives' counter-discursive practices hinge. By using the trope of the suffering body to continue to speak against discourse through a trope of silence, rather than of language, the novels avoid re-producing the uncertainties of language and discursive practices they criticise. It is a counter-discourse of non-language, a refusal to speak on the part of both protagonists that in the end proves to be the most potent protest. Coetzee the author speaks despite the problems and uncertainties which his novels so meticulously trace and lay out for us, and the redeeming point is the use

of the trope of the suffering body, the only counter-discursive strategy available. The suffering body is certainty in the face of doubt in a space where language is dismantled into uncertainty and interchangeable meaning. It is the witness that delivers testimony where language fails to communicate, creating a silence that constitutes a counter-discourse which deconstructs the absoluteness of dominant discourse.

This assertion enables me to make two further concluding points. The first relates to post-colonial criticism. The post-colonial field's main paradigm is that the novel has the ability to engage actively and critically with the discourse that surrounds it, either re-affirming or subverting certain elements of this discourse, and thus creating a change that transgresses the limits of the text. Within this context the discourse of History has been seen especially important. The novel's critical ability to challenge and change this discourse has also been seen in this light. Stephen Slemon, a noted post-colonial scholar, has for instance argued that:

Allegorical writing, and its inherent investment in history, provides the post-colonial writer with a mean not only of presenting this proposition, but also of building it into the structuring principle of the fictional work of art. [...] In this way, post-colonial allegorical writing builds the provisional discursive nature of history into the structure and narrative mode of the text so that it becomes approachable only in an act of reading that foregrounds its secondary or conditional nature.¹⁴³

In making the case for allegory as a trope of resistance Slemon seems to argue that post-colonial writing not only speaks against History but also in its very form reveals History's rhetorical and discursive nature; it is its foremost property, as well as its purpose. *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* perform a criticism of discourse that fits rather neatly with this idea. The manner in which this is done suggests that Coetzee's engagement with language and its plurality of meanings is not simply an introvert activity – the text examining the text – but also an activity that invokes the novels' context, the discourse of History, and its political and historical basis for power.

However, the way in which Coetzee's novels dramatize the ambiguity of language exposes a fatal flaw in post-colonial criticism's line of reasoning. Challenging the very premise of literature's validity by exposing the uncertainties of language, Coetzee's novels engage directly with central issues within literary and post-colonial criticism. I have argued that *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* perform both a deconstruction of the self and a deconstruction of the object. The view of language and text as something fundamentally volatile and uncertain is a view that must, for the argument to retain its validity, include a

¹⁴³ Slemon, 'Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History', 159-160.

certain level of self-scrutiny as the difficulties of language must be true for both texts – for the novel, as well as for the discourse it challenges. Post-colonial criticism’s championing of the novel as an invaluable and central tool against the dominance of a Western discourse lacks this essential, and logical, extension of one of its main critical contentions. If the purpose of post-colonial literature is to engage with history as a dominant discourse by creating a counter-discourse in the form of a fictional narrative, Coetzee’s novels seem to suggest that for this effort to be successful a different strategy must be explored. Language alone cannot counter language; only a paradoxical presence of a trope of non-language in the narrative may create a space that proves truly counter-discursive.

This also has consequences for my second concluding point which relates to the debate concerning Coetzee’s novels as either allegorical or realistic, and which mode of writing provides the superior criticism. By identifying the novels’ counter-discursive properties as located in a specific trope, rather than in the novel’s representation of a specific reality, I have demonstrated that the novels employ almost identical textual strategies in constructing their critical thrust, and also, that what kind of novel it is is irrelevant to this construction. I have only very briefly addressed the issue of genre in my readings because the novels’ counter-discursive properties remain intact whether *Waiting for the Barbarians* is read as an allegory of South Africa or not, or whether *Age of Iron* seen as realist fiction or not. Further, this approach resolves the conflict concerning allegory. The debate concerning the form of Coetzee’s fiction, and the accompanying question of its critical relevance, has been a part of his novels’ critical reception almost since the beginning.¹⁴⁴ It continues, for instance, with David Attridge’s book *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading – Literature in the Event*, published in 2004, in which he all but rejects the previous allegorical readings of Coetzee’s novels. The problem connected to the claim that the allegorical constitutes the nexus of the novel’s critical ability is both that, in the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, its critical properties can be disregarded with the argument that the novel is not allegorical, as Attridge does, and that, as in the case of *Age of Iron*, that its realist form somehow diminishes its critical impact. So, while the allegorical may be read as the nexus of the novel’s critical ability, the counter-discursive and critical ability of these novels’ do not depend on it, any more than they do on the realistic. Based on this line of reasoning I claim that this thesis simultaneously counters both the explicit accusations that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not realistic enough, and the implicit consequences that *Age of Iron* is not allegorical enough.

¹⁴⁴ A reference for this debate was provided in the Introduction, footnote 2.

Concluding, both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron* facilitate a deconstruction of totalitarian discourse through the trope of the suffering body. By displaying a conscious self-reflexivity, and by centring their counter-discursive practice on a trope of silence, of non-language, the two novels create a counter-discourse that retains its critical validity despite the novels' simultaneous actualization of language's problem of referentiality, thus leaving us with the following insight: There is no language outside language, only the body and its suffering.

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