
*Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality* is a compilation of a series of published papers emerging from a study of the *Life and Times of Michael K, Foe, Age of Iron, The Master of St. Petersburg, Disgrace, and Slow Man*. Mike Marais, a scholar of South African literature, draws on the ethical philosophies of Derrida, Adorno and Levinas in his interpretative journey through J.M. Coetzee’s novels. Marais argues that the recurring themes which link these novels is informed by Coetzee’s ‘sense of responsibility for what is not yet present in history’ (xv), of the writer, writing what s/he hears, as ‘a secretary of the invisible’ as Elizabeth Costello refers to herself in another Coetzee novel of the same name (xi). This argument assumes the concept of ‘invisibility or otherness’ (xi). Marais disagrees with the view of the Coetzee critic Derek Attridge that ‘the other is not transcendent’ (xi), and declares ‘The writer, who is in history, must follow the invisible rather than the visible. Yet s/he can only do so by writing from his or her position within history and in the terms of history’ (xiii).

The record of this interpretative journey makes fascinating and challenging reading.

Marais writes that Coetzee’s belief is that ‘the writer must write’ (xiv) and identifies the metaphor of the quest for the lost child that endeavours ‘to render visible the invisible’ destroys the invisible. He identifies the salience of the damaged child and the theme of betrayal as additional recurring themes in Coetzee’s writing.

The first paper in this collection sets out the theme of hospitality in Coetzee’s early fiction. Marais refers to *Dusklands* and Coetzee’s preoccupation with community as an extension of hospitality and ‘how the individual, who is part of a community, responds to the stranger as a stranger: i.e. without simply positioning this outsider in opposition to the “we” in which s/he is located.’ *(1-2)*  *Dusklands* and Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* deal with the individual’s response to the stranger as a stranger, an enemy transformed into a guest in the community thereby reducing threat of his or her otherness. Marais suggests ‘most of the activities in these texts from imperial invasion to genocide – are forms of waiting for a guest who does not exist and whose arrival is thus endlessly deferred’ (15). Those unfamiliar with this view of history should read Cavafy’s poem of the same title.

Throughout his papers Marais draws upon countless extracts from Coetzee’s novels, meticulously interpreting the actions and words of the characters and identifying parallel themes across the novels. Some of his interpretations are presented in pretentious vocabulary, such as auratic, alterity, adumbrates, prosopoeia, aporetic, that may cloud rather than clarify his interpretations for some, non-scholastic, readers.

The interface of reader and writer in Coetzee’s writing is analysed by Marais. In the *Life and Times of Michael K*, he argues that the concept of house in Coetzee’s writing signifies ownership, mastery – possession of the land. In the same paper he suggests that ‘One of the consequences of Coetzee’s treatment of writing and reading as interrelated activities is a blurring of the distinction between writer-figure and reader-figure in the birth scenes’ (53).

In his discussion of *Foe* Marais observes that Coetzee depends on the fact that the other cannot be controlled in his bid to expose the reader to it. That is, he hopes that his inability to instantiate it will enable the other to invade his text. By implication, he tries to put to use the other that may inhabit the novel as a result of his loss of control over it. He seeks to expose the reader who visits his novel to its uninvited visitors; to visit on his reader the work’s uninvited visitors. In this way, to use the text’s metaphoric vocabulary, this writer tries to pass to the reader the burden of giving birth to the unborn child, the child that cannot be born. (92)

Marias concludes his paper on *Life and Times of Michael K* with the observation that Coetzee views ‘artwork (as) both within things and outside them’ (63). In *Foe* the castaway condition, as in earlier novels, ‘serves as a metaphor for the subject’s separation from the world by language and history’ (67).

*Age of Iron* more closely addresses the question of apartheid in South Africa according to Marais, and he argues that Coetzee’s approach to his writing is that the novels should intervene in history by changing rather than reproducing its deformed relationships. Marais cites the unconscious change that the character, Mrs Curren, a victim of colonialism, searching for the lost child (herself?), undergoes through learning to love Vercueil and John, relationships originally shaped by apartheid. Marais argues that through these characters Coetzee ‘suggests that what is absent from the South Africa depicted … is an ethic of generous hospitality’ (102).

In his analysis of *The Master of St Petersburg*, Marais returns to the theme of hospitality and the child. The main character, Dostoyevsky, visits the room previously occupied by his dead son Pavel. He senses that in Matryona, the landlady’s daughter, Pavel still lives. Marais draws upon religious interpretations to develop his argument that Dostoevsky must transcend history and become a different person, a stranger to himself. Like Mrs Curren, he needs to learn to love someone whom he hates (in his case Nechaev, who he suspects murdered Pavel) and to love himself, which he can only achieve through writing.

Throughout the preparation of this review the film images of *Disgrace*, particularly the isolation of the house in which Lurie’s daughter lived; her gang rape; her apparent acceptance of the inevitability of her violation; her rejection of her father, himself a violator, and the gradual appropriation of some of her land by relatives of her black rapists haunted me. In a sense my original reading of the novel followed by the viewing of the film then the reading of these papers enhanced my appreciation of the complexity of Coetzee’s writing. Lurie’s daughter is the lost child that he couldn’t save because of their time in history.

The papers therefore encourage a return to the original texts with added curiosity. However in acknowledging this response I do question whether Marais has over-interpreted the novels. How necessary is it to prove or disprove an interpretative stance at the level of minutiae of character analysis and comparative analysis that Marais undertakes in his papers? How conscious was Coetzee of these purported underlying themes in his writing? Does he agree with the analysis? Does it matter if he disagrees?

In his discussion of *Slow Man* Marais reiterates his view that Coetzee ‘uses the
metaphor of following in his portrayal of the writer as a being who is acted upon simultaneously by the forces of history and the invisible (201). In her analysis of the power of narrative in Coetzee’s writing Gillian Dooley quotes from a 1985 interview of Sévry with Coetzee on the ambiguities in his novels, especially *Waiting for the Barbarians* in which he says that he finds no rupture between his life as an academic and his life as writer adding that:

I believe very strongly in the critical activity of the literary critic – and I hope that I bring across in my fiction writing some of that same concern with the importance of criticism which is to me of taking nothing for granted. Everything is capable of being questioned.¹

*Secretary of the Invisible* is certainly an impressive contribution to the dialectic between writer, reader and scholar.

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