

TOPOGRAPHIES OF BLANKNESS IN J.M. COETZEE'S FICTION¹

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Abstract: This article proposes a topographical overview of J. M. Coetzee's fiction, taking as a departure point the narrative and ideological potential of physical space in his novels (Spivak 1991; Marais 1996; Ashcroft 1998). The topographies of Coetzee's novels follow a recurrent spatial pattern: They are all heterotopias, defined by opposition to somewhere else and codified in the political language of limits, frontiers and boundaries. I would like to examine the persistence of an imagery of blankness, emptiness, barrenness and ghostliness, suggesting that the epistemological instability of such rhetorical articulations may work as an element of resistance to binary ideological constructions.

Key words: Landscape, topography, heterotopia, blankness.

Resumen: Este artículo propone un recorrido topográfico por la narrativa de J. M. Coetzee, tomando como punto de partida el potencial narrativo e ideológico del espacio físico en sus novelas (Spivak 1991; Marais 1996; Ashcroft 1998). Las topografías de las novelas de Coetzee siguen un patrón especial recurrente: Todas ellas son heterotopías, definidas por oposición a otro lugar y codificadas en el lenguaje político de los límites y las fronteras. Me gustaría examinar la persistencia de imágenes del vacío, para sugerir que la inestabilidad epistemológica de tales articulaciones retóricas puede funcionar como elemento de resistencia frente a construcciones ideológicas binarias.

Palabras clave: Paisaje, topografía, heterotopía, vacío.

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Dusklands* (1974), J.M. Coetzee's first published work of fiction, we are introduced into a multi-layered structure which frames the narrative of one Jacobus Coetzee, eighteenth-century Dutch explorer and adventurer. Jacobus Coetzee has explored "the naked plains of the interior" (1982: 109), and he is described in the "Afterword" as a topographer as well as a settler: "In his way Coetzee rode like a god through a world only partly named, differentiating and bringing into existence" (1982: 116). Earlier in the text the character describes his task in terms of transforming the wilderness into a readable landscape: "Our commerce with the wild is a tireless enterprise of turning it into orchard and farm. When we cannot fence it and count it we reduce it to numbers by other means" (1982: 85). As Benita

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Parry has claimed, “the terrain mapped by ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ constitutes an ideological cartography, the naming of an eighteenth-century explorer and proto-colonialist of rivers and mountains” (Parry 1996: 58). He is not the only topographer in Coetzee's fiction. The Magistrate, protagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), in charge of a distant outpost in an unnamed Empire, bears the task of tracing maps of the area of which he is responsible. Tracing maps, creating topographies of the areas they inhabit seems to be a recurrent activity for Coetzee's characters. Moreover, the importance of physical space in the narrative of J.M. Coetzee has been repeatedly emphasized by critics such as Barnard (1994: 33), Spivak (1991: 161), Marais (1996: 68-69) and Ashcroft (1998: 109) as a determinant feature in terms of narrative and ideological potential.

This article takes as its departure point the question asked by J. Hillis Miller at the beginning of his book *Topographies*: “What is the function of landscape or cityscape descriptions in novels and poems?” (1995: 6). A topographical overview of the settings in which Coetzee's novels take place will be the first step in the attempt to answer that question. As many critics have noted, Coetzee's novels tend to be set in unspecified locations, a fact that seems to invite allegorical readings (Attridge 2004: 40-41; Rich 1982: 71). The terms in which those unspecified locations are described, however, are persistently formulated in specific rhetorical constructions that I would like to bring to light.

Three of Coetzee's novels take place in a farm in rural areas of South Africa: *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983) and *Disgrace* (1999). The expression “in the heart of the country” serves not only as title for one of them, but is also used in *Life and Times of Michael K.* to locate spatially the setting in which the narrative takes place. Magda, the narrator and protagonist of *In the Heart of the Country* refers to the surroundings of her house as “the desert” or “this barbarous frontier” (1977: 150). The desert is also the preferred location for the second story in *Dusklands*, and also for *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This novel, moreover, is a border story, set in one of the outposts along the frontier of the Empire, which is referred to in the novel as “the limits of the Empire” (1980: 77), “the fringes of the town” (41), “this farthest outpost of the Empire” (114), “remote outposts like this” (135). The expression “the back of beyond” (Coetzee 1980: 125; 1994: 53) is used both in *Waiting to the Barbarians* and *The Master of Petersburg* to refer to the location for the events in the novels. *Foe* (1986) has as its initial location a deserted island, Magda describes her home in *In the Heart of the Country* as “this island out of space, out of time” (1977: 123) and Michael K. keeps looking for “one of those islands without an owner” (1983: 84). *The Master of Petersburg*, finally, takes place mostly in hidden rooms and corridors in the “underground” (1994: 180-181).

In a 2004 piece entitled “How I learned about America –and Africa– in Texas”, Coetzee reflected on the importance of the South African landscape for his worldview: “What I missed seemed to be a certain emptiness, empty earth and empty sky, to which South Africa had accustomed me” (2004: 7). In this article, I intend to examine the persistence of an imagery of blankness, emptiness, barrenness and ghostliness in the representation of physical space in Coetzee's fiction. I will pay special attention to the dialectical relationships associated to this rhetorical articulation of landscape, and to the way in which, in Coetzee's fiction, the epistemological instability of such rhetoric may work as an element of resistance to binary ideological constructions.

2. HETEROTOPIAS

It is not strange that Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson have written: “Coetzee has become South African literature’s ‘elsewhere’” (1996: 4), for all his novels take place, precisely, “elsewhere”. “Under”, “back of beyond”, “in the heart of”, “out there”, “at the fringes of”, “the limits of”... The topographies of Coetzee’s novels, various as they are, seem to project a recurring spatial pattern: They are all heterotopias.

As heterotopias, they must be defined in opposition to somewhere else. The discourse of limits, frontiers and boundaries that is so frequent in Coetzee’s novels is by definition associated to a state of legality. Space tends to be defined in legal terms in the novels. The frontier in which the Imperial outpost is located in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is described as a place in which “the laws are suspended” (1980: 131), and the farm in which Michael K. hides for a time is described as “a pocket outside time, Cape Town and the war” (1983: 82). The various topographies presented in Coetzee’s novels tend to produce spatially organized structures in which some spaces are associated to law and some others to lawlessness.

In *In the Heart of the Country*, the narrator-protagonist, Magda, says: “There is no one to see us. There has never been anyone to see what goes on here. We are outside the law, therefore live only by the law we recognize in ourselves, going by our inner voice” (1977: 98). “Here”, in the novel, is the farm in which the narrator lives, located, as it has already been noted, “in the heart of the country”. The passage opens the field for discussion on topics such as natural law or the panoptical organization of civil order, but it is the phrase “we are outside the law” which I would like to concentrate on for the moment. The opposition between being “outside” or “inside” the law suggests as spatial dimension for it, which is determined here, as in most of Coetzee’s novels, to the physical organization of space.

Some of the novels present a radial structure with a center/metropolis from which power gets debilitated as it approaches the margins, allowing a dialectics between the country and the city in which a relaxation of legality is experienced in remote areas of the state, the empire, etc. This is the idea of law and authority present in *Foe*, *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, closely associated to a conception of power developed in some European countries during the eighteenth century. In the last one, for instance, the rhetoric of proximity to a center is constant: “One of this days it will be forced to give up the defence of remote outposts like this one to concentrate its resources on the protection of the heartland” (1980: 135).

Decentralized structures in which the “core” seems emptier than any other area are also frequent in Coetzee’s novels. The title *In the Heart of the Country* suggests an inversion between the relationships between countryside and cities as it has been just pointed at. This kind of structure, nevertheless, is not exclusively associated to the items “country” and “city”; it can be said to operate in urban environments as well, reproducing a kind of “normalized lawlessness” that has been present in the English novel since Daniel Defoe and that was reinterpreted at different stages by Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene or Thomas Pynchon among many others. The first story in *Dusklands*, the initial part of *Life and Times of Michael K.* and *The Master of Petersburg* share this conception of decentered authority. Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, dreams of this kind of decentered structure that must exist in the city: “I ask myself: But am I doing justice to the city? Is it possible to conceive

a city above whose rooftops drift the wisps of a thousand private fires, from whose streets rises the susurrus of a thousand patterning damned voices?" (1977: 14).

This particular conception of authority expressed in spatial terms contributes to a specific kind of topographical organization in most of Coetzee's novels, built around the logics of interiority and exteriority. The rhetoric of limits is highly operative in this context. Physical limits enclosing ground areas and leaving few spaces between property is what determine the narrative structure in *Life and Times of Michael K*, which can be said to be a novel about limits: "every mile or two there was a fence to remind him that he was a trespasser as well as a runaway" (1983: 133). Frontiers, limits (natural ones as rivers or deserts, or arbitrary limits as the "city limit"), fences and wires are constant in Coetzee's fiction, and characters are often portrayed on the verge of crossing some of these limits: the Professor in *Disgrace* planning to get out of the city, the Magistrate looking at the desert, the frontier post itself being a mark for a limit between conquered land and unconquered desert, Magda's ever postponed trip to the city to arrange her father's papers, Michael K. and his mother planning to leave the city and move in to the countryside, Susan Barton and Friday considering the possibility of leaving the city of London in search of Foe, or even Cruso's rejection of the possibility to leave his island.

3. BLANKNESS

The topography of Coetzee's novels is strongly codified in an imagery of blankness, emptiness, barrenness, void, ghostliness. Lance Olsen has written about "the absence at the centre of Coetzee's language" (1985: 48-49). Emptiness carries with it the imagery of the deserted island: "The landscape was so empty that it was not hard to believe at times that this was the first foot ever to tread a particular inch of earth" (Coetzee 1983: 133). Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* describes herself as a castaway (1977: 143). Landscapes are always deserted, even if they are not in the desert: "A cloud of smoke hangs over the city. Ash falls from the sky; in places the very snow is grey" (1994: 234). The Magistrate's dreams talk repeatedly of blankness (1980: 40, 50, 51, 78, 95), and in *Life and Times of Michael K*. the narrator writes: "from horizon to horizon the landscape was empty" (1983: 63).

These images of blankness, moreover, are associated to the state of lawlessness mentioned before: "Life in the desert teaches nothing, if not that all things are permissible" (1977: 42). In these landscapes, the concepts of law and authority seem to dissolve into abstractions without referent, participating of the blankness of the desert itself. Michael K.'s encounter with a soldier in one of these landscapes expresses that dissolution of authority: "In a minute or two the soldier had receded into the mist" (1983: 51). In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the strategy is also one of evaporation: "They led us into the desert and then they vanished" (1980: 161).

Images of blankness are contrasted to images of law and its "normal" workings: "To lend the proceedings an air of *legality* in an otherwise *empty* courtroom" (Coetzee 1980: 103; emphasis added). In connection to *Foe*, Gayatri Spivak has written that "Coetzee's book seems interested in space rather than time, as it stages the difficulties of a timekeeping investigation before a space that will not yield its inscription" (Spivak 1991: 161). Spaces that do yield the inscription of "timekeeping investigations" are precisely the ones I have

been talking about. Timekeeping, as Martin Heidegger notes in *Being and Time* (1927), is a way of imposing an external law, what he calls “public time”. The idea is echoed in Michael K.’s desire to find a “pocket outside time” (Coetzee 1983: 82). The use of the word “inscription” is not innocent on Spivak’s part, as it relates directly to the anthropological discourses of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss, as deconstructed by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1967).

Law is presented in the discourse of such characters as the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an inscription on a blank landscape, reproducing Levi-Strauss’s view that the imposition of writing, of law, of foreign authority, forces the corruption of a people, the barbarians, otherwise pacific in their state of a-legal primitiveness: “Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization, and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration” (Coetzee 1980: 41).³ In the same way, Jacobus Coetzee, tracer of maps, reduces the wilderness to “orchard and farm”.

The aforementioned opposition between uncharted and civilized spaces has been re-read by some critics as a re-enactment of a master-slave dialectics operating in Coetzee’s narrative, reshaped in terms of wilderness vs. civilization. Derek Attridge states that “figures of alterity recur in these novels, usually as subordinate third-world individuals or groups perceived from the point of view of a dominant, first-world culture” (1998: 204).

However, the difficulty to adjust the master-slave dialectics to the situations narrated by Coetzee’s novels is made explicit in any attempt to establish the limits between the groups of the oppressors and the oppressed in each particular case. Power relationships between characters are initially sanctioned by the workings of law and the State, but once they have been established all trace of authority disappears, so that the frailty of those relationships is revealed and can easily be inverted. Authority has undoubtedly dictated the initial situation of master and slave, but it is afterwards forgotten in the administration of law. Very often, the introduction of narrative turns and new characters complicates initial relationships, as in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”, in *Dusklands*, in which the narrator and protagonist goes from dominator-explorer to humiliated victim to vengeful dominator again.

Magda’s and Lucy Lurie’s rapes in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Disgrace* respectively can also be read as extreme reversals in power relationships. Both women are masters or owners at the beginning of the narratives and their position is threatened by their isolation and distance to a source of authority, once the authority they might themselves have gradually extinguishes. They are both raped by their servants—in *Disgrace*, by a servant’s relative—or rather by those who were first their servants. In both cases, the characters reject the possibility of denouncing the facts to authority, an act that would imply a long journey into the city where authority lies and could be applied.

Another example of the instability of political relations in Coetzee’s topographies is the appearance of the Visagies’ boy in *Life and Times of Michael K*. The protagonist,

³ Jacques Derrida reads “The Writing Lesson” in Claude Levi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* in similar terms as those used by the magistrate: “Only a micro-society of non-violence and freedom, all the member of which can by rights remain within range of an immediate and transparent, a ‘crystalline’ address, fully self-present in its living speech, only such a community can suffer, as the surprise of an aggression coming *from without*, the insinuation of writing” (Derrida 1976: 119).

reaching one of his brief periods of happiness during the novel, shows his exultation at the thought that “he, alone and unknown, was making this deserted farm bloom” (Coetzee 1983: 82).⁴ Immediately after that, the Visagies' boy, a deserter from the army who returns to the family household, appears to take possession of the farm, implicitly re-establishing the master-slave relationship with Michael, even if his explicit addresses to Michael K. seem to propose an egalitarian relationship: “Michael, I am speaking to you as one human being to another” (1983: 88).

The impossibility of such dialectics as posited by critics around Coetzee's work, however, has been exposed by Menàn du Plessis in a review of *Waiting for the Barbarians*: “All of Coetzee's novels to date are to some extent a working out of these different versions of the dialectic” (Du Plessis 1998: 121), and by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson in their introduction to the collection of essays *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*: “Spurning the almost endless series of binary opposites that are so characteristic of South African life, cultural or otherwise, J.M. Coetzee has simply refused to be tied to the terms of the debate” (Huggan & Watson 1996: 4).

The complexity of the binary logics operating in the Magistrate's discourse, for instance, precludes any attempt to reduce it to a single organizing dialectics, as he shifts the referents of the terms “barbarian” and “civilized” at different points in the novel, thus defeating every previous opposition. At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate claims, “we behave to each other like civilized people” (Coetzee 1980: 25), a casual remark which nevertheless participates of the logics that will be put at stake in the course of the events. “Civilized” is therefore initially associated to virtue, while “barbarian” is associated to evil in the discourses of the empire, a situation that will be gradually reversed as the Magistrate starts to talk about “barbarian virtues” (1980: 41). He will end up by reversing completely that logic when he states that “there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian” (1980: 114) and talks about the “new barbarians” (1980: 85). The complexity of the Magistrate's ethical discourse may be summarized in his question: “Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way?” (1980: 56).

4. CONCLUSION

Michael Marais has noted in connection to *Foe* that “imperialism [is] a form of metaphoric authorship: Crusoe rewrites the alien terrain of the island and, in so doing, restructures this space of otherness in line with the familiar landscape of England” (1996: 68). This seems almost like a paraphrase of the passage in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” quoted at the beginning of this article. Marais insists that “this confrontation of the acts of writing and imperialism is not merely confined to *Foe*; it pervades Coetzee's *oeuvre*” (1996: 68). Tracing a map or exploring new territory, according to this view, can be seen as acts of inscription on the landscape that otherwise would remain blank. In the “Afterword” to the second section of *Dusklands*, Jacobus Coetzee is said to have “cut this double swathe

⁴ It may be noted that Michael's gardening and agricultural activities are just another form of inscription on the land. Once established in the farm, he even claims at one point: “How easier would it all be if there was a fence around the dam” (Coetzee 1983: 161), thus reproducing the legal proceeding of fencing private property as a means of protection against intruders.

(forward journey, return journey) through the partially unknown between the Piquetberg and the Orange River” (Coetzee 1982: 116). In his introduction to *Topographies*, J. Hillis Miller notes that, etymologically, the word “topography” means “the writing of a place” (Miller 1995: 3), allowing the semantic ambiguity of the phrase to remain unsolved. Language, says Tzvetan Todorov in *The Conquest of America* (1984), is “companion of empire” (in Marais 1996: 69), and Derrida quotes the following passage from Claude Levi-Strauss as *exergue* to “The Violence of the Letter: From Levi-Strauss to Rousseau”: “It [writing] seems to favour rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind” (1976: 101).⁵

The risk of a topographical reading of Coetzee's fiction is to accommodate easily into a binary interpretative mechanism according to which the conflicts in Coetzee's novels may be read as clashes between wilderness and civilization and thus dissolved into the violence of the letter on a blank landscape, or on a blank, inarticulate people. In this sense, it may be useful to recall Teresa Dovey's warning against the interpretation of Coetzee's novels in terms of “whether they are on the side of the oppressor or of the oppressed” (Dovey 1996: 18). Along the same lines, authors such as Tony Morphet have advocated a “position of no position” for Coetzee's fiction regarding ideological issues (Morphet 2004: 16).

When a “figure in the landscape”⁶ is introduced, binary interpretations fold back on themselves producing further complications. The spatial divisions between an outside-inside logic for the organization of territories are further complicated when the blankness of the landscapes inhabited by characters are contrasted with the character's own interiority described in those very same terms of barrenness, ghostliness, blankness: “plodding chase across empty country after the rumour of a ghost” (1994: 53), “the trace of the breath of the shadow of the ghost of him” (1994: 141), “a gap, a hole, a darkness” (1983: 150), “a zero, a null, a vacuum” (1977: 2), “a ghost or a vapour” (1977: 19), “a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso” (1986: 51). Coetzee's fiction can be read as an exploration of the possibility to merge with the landscape by claiming the same blankness attributed to it. The logics of exteriority and interiority –of proximity and remoteness to sources of power– are often displaced and challenged in characters' descriptions of themselves as ghosts in the middle of a barren landscape in which they try to dissolve.⁷

The analogy Magda traces in *In the Heart of the Country*, “why can we not accept that our lives are vacant, as vacant as the dessert we live in?” (1977: 64), presents itself not as a statement of resignation, but as the utopian dream shared by some of Coetzee's characters. Magda herself will see her topographical invisibility threatened by the arrival of some neighbors near the end of the novel (1977: 125-133). The figure of the neighbor is recurrently viewed as a threat in *Disgrace*, *Life and Times of Michael K.*, *The Master of Petersburg* or *Foe*: “He followed the perimeter fence all the way around the farm without meeting any living sign of neighbours” (1983: 79). A neighbor, after all, is a remainder of an existing legality, of property and proximity and the negation of Magda's idea that “there is no one to see us”. A neighbor represents, in this sense, a threat to the blankness of the landscape itself.

⁵ From Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, New York, 1961: 292.

⁶ Thomas Hardy, as quoted by J. Hillis Miller, 1995: 4.

⁷ Michael Marais has claimed that Michael K. does actually manage to fuse with the landscape: “He has become one with the earth” (Marais 1996: 77).

If Coetzee's novels bring about the question of whether blankness is possible, then one may venture that the novels themselves suggest a negative answer, for writing on the landscape, taking the form of Michael's seminal footprint on some areas (just as the one found by Robinson Crusoe in his island) or the Magistrate's ruins, posit the impossibility to circumscribe "the violence of the letter" to the terms of the dialectic formulated by master-slave dialectics. Even if, as Michael Marais has suggested, traces of the empire seem to gradually disappear from the landscape, in the island settlement in *Foe* or the abandoned farms in *Life and Times of Michael K.* (Marais 1996: 78), the ruins themselves, as *Waiting for the Barbarians* suggests, will always leave the trace of writing itself.

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