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Violence in J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*

When John Maxwell Coetzee arrived in Texas to take up his literature studies, the war in Vietnam was already well under way. After five years from its outburst, the military conflict was provoking protests all over America. In an extended interview with David Attwell, Coetzee talks about his reaction to this tense political situation. Like his university colleagues, he considered joining the protests against American intervention in Vietnam. His decision not to take active part in the organized manifestations stemmed from what he calls his “distaste for crowds, slogans” and his “revulsion for obeying orders” (Coetzee 1992: 337). It seems that the writer chose to stand outside of the conflict. Yet, in 1969, ten years after the eruption of the war, his first book was published. *Dusklands* is a strong critique of the American military intervention in Vietnam. What is interesting, this critique was not launched by a writer who positioned himself outside of the conflict, as might have been expected from a South African studying and teaching in the United States. Far from it, in the interview with Attwell, Coetzee admits that he found himself complicit in the ongoing war. *Dusklands* constantly evokes this sense of complicity. Eugene Dawn, one of the two main protagonists, in spite of the safe isolation on the American mainland, considers himself as an active participant in the acts of terror inflicted on the Vietnamese people. For Dawn, the military conflict does not take place on the other side of the globe, but inside himself. The intellectual is confronted with violence which does not come from outside but from within his own psyche. Why does *Dusklands* offer such a radical interiorization of violence? I believe the answer is partly to be found in the interview. In a revealing fragment, Coetzee offers his reflection on the nature of violence. Violence, as he writes, is impossible for him to “project outward” (Coetzee 1992: 337). It is always violence which is present within himself. He concludes: “I cannot but think: if all of us imagined violence as violence against ourselves, perhaps we would have peace” (Coetzee 1992: 337). J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* is a radical attempt at imagining such violence. It is radical because violence is presented as not only *against* ourselves,

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but *present within* ourselves. Violence does not arrive, it is always already there, in our mental constructions and in the language we use. Violence stems from man's inability to enter into a meaningful dialogue with others. In *Dusklands* all attempts at dialogue collapse into a monologue¹. In fact, Coetzee's novel is an extended monological confession of two people who find themselves isolated and unable to enter into mutually-satisfying relations. It is the inability to transcend one's egoistic self which causes both individual and collective violence.

With reference to the works of Emmanuel Levinas, I will try to analyze this abnormal, even pathological reaction. I would like to begin my discussion from a brief and necessarily fragmentary introduction to aspects of Levinas's philosophy.

Emmanuel Levinas and his critique of Reason

In two of his major works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Emmanuel Levinas proposes two paradigms of journey which are central to Western culture. The first one is that of Odysseus, the other is that of Abraham. The main difference between the two is that Odysseus's voyage is a journey of return; it is a coming back to one's home. By contrast, the journey on which Abraham embarks is teleological; its aim is to discover and inhabit the foreign land which has been promised to him by God. Odysseus's adventure is then a rediscovery of what is already known, whereas Abraham's journey is an encounter with the unknown. Levinas applies the former paradigm of journey – that of Odysseus – in his criticism of Western philosophy. According to Levinas, Western philosophical thought has never been an Abrahamic search for the unknowable, but a movement of constant self-affirmation. The philosopher frames this thought more radically. His main object of attack is ontological thought on which Western philosophy is said to be based. Ontological thought, as Levinas suggests, is not a coming forth towards what remains undiscovered, but a constant return to the tranquility of one's sheltered self. In *Totality and Infinity*, the philosopher writes about the self's capacity to remain unaffected by the outside world. The thinking subject maintains its liberty by suppressing what remains outside of himself. His main aim is to assert his freedom against the other who is perceived as unknowable and potentially dangerous to the ego. In a well-known fragment, Levinas states that ontology is “a reduction of the other to the same”. This happens through “[the] interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (Levinas 2008: 43). The third term mentioned

¹ Michael Vaughan writes that not only dialogue but “the concept of dialogue” is absent in Coetzee's novel.

in this fragment is Reason (written with capital 'R'), understood as a system of truths which claim to be final and universal. A correlation arises between the rational will of an individual human being and Reason. The will falls back on, or rather subjects itself to Reason. To put it differently, it wholeheartedly accepts a given set of truths as universal and necessary. It internalizes them to such an extent that it is no longer capable of approaching them critically. The philosopher who falls prey to this tendency, no longer looks for truths in the outside world, but instead turns to himself. As John Caputo frames it, "the philosopher is the truth and he speaks the truth by turning within himself" (Dudiak 2001: 16). It is the abdication of the rational will to Reason which, as Jeffrey Dudiak points out, enables the individual to wield power over alterity. Perceiving itself as the embodiment of Truth, the thinking subject legitimizes its own violence with respect to the other. The violence is primarily that of inclusion into the Rational order. The philosopher imposes his own set of internalized principles on the other person. In this way, the other ceases to be threatening and becomes knowable. The philosopher exploits the reality by bringing it into line with his own reasoning. An act of thinking becomes an act of power. To use Levinas's language, "I think" amounts to "I can". The granting of primacy to the impersonal Reason results in domination and tyranny.

As becomes evident, the abdication of the will to Reason leaves no place for the dialogue with the other. If there is dialogue, it is mostly conducted not with the outside world, but with an impersonal set of principles which lie within the subject. Reason speaks not to the other, but to itself. It "conducts a monologue" (Levinas 2008: 72). By referring to Reason, the thinking subject reaffirms itself, but at the same time cuts itself away from the other. The isolation is a source of power (the individual no longer has to rely on exteriority to confirm his own existence), but this self-enclosure also becomes a confinement. As Levinas points out, the cogito is unable to transcend its isolation. It is locked in an endless discourse with itself. It uses violence as a way out of this situation. The mechanism then works as follows: in order to defend oneself from the threatening other, the thinking subject resorts to an impersonal set of principles. This protection, however, turns into a confinement which cannot be escaped otherwise than through violence. Violence then may be read as a radical expression of the self's isolation from the outside world. This state of isolation and the resultant violence is forcefully conveyed in J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*. I will now turn to the discussion of the novel.

The breakdown of reason

Dusklands is composed of two novellas, “The Vietnam Project” and “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”. The texts may be read separately, but they both take as the main object of their critique the mechanisms of imperialism, the American imperialism in Vietnam in the case of the former, and the Boer imperialism in South Africa in the latter case.

Eugene Dawn, the narrator and protagonist of the first novella, is an American intellectual working in military propaganda. The reader learns about Dawn’s academic research and his private life from his confessional monologue. The scientist works on a project called with strong but implicit irony “New Life for Vietnam”. In short, he is expected to draw up a plan of psychological warfare which would be capable of breaking the morale of the Vietnamese soldiers. Dawn is strongly committed to his project which he writes under the supervision of his boss, Coetzee (no first name is given). His research about the creation and application of myths in warfare is significant not only because it is innovative, but also because it is highly effective. Dawn wholeheartedly believes that his ideas are capable of helping the American army win over the Vietnamese. He considers himself a crucial part of the military apparatus operating in Vietnam. This is clear from his report which is narrated in the first person plural: “There is only one problem in Vietnam and that is the problem of victory. The problem of victory is technical. We must believe this” (Coetzee 2004: 28). Dawn believes that winning the war is only a matter of combining physical force with clever psychological propaganda. His whole report is focused on how to use myths operating in Vietnamese society in such a way that they will work for the victory of the American army. The myth which Dawn concentrates on is that of the vengeful father. According to the propagandist, American army could appropriate and subvert this myth to break the morale of the Vietnamese soldiers. The army (to whom he refers as ‘we’) should present itself as a powerful father who is capable of ruthlessly punishing his children (the Vietnamese). Only this myth is capable of counteracting the myth of a band of brothers who, with the help of their mother (symbolized by earth), are planning to attack and overthrow the father. The report uses dense scientific language which is criticized by his supervisor as inaccessible for people outside the academia. Towards the end of the report, however, the rationality of Dawn’s scientific discourse breaks and turns into a parody of itself. Sentences become increasingly awkward and illogical. The collective ‘we’ switches into a solitary ‘I’. The scientific report lapses into a delirious confessional monologue. It soon turns out that it is Dawn himself who imagines himself as the vengeful father inflicting violence on the outside world. His report for the military becomes a pseudoscientific fantasy of wielding infinite power. What is interesting is that the scientist’s report does not lose the sense of mission, even when it becomes delirious: “I have a duty towards

history” (Coetzee 2004: 29), he writes towards the end of his work. He does not specify what this “duty” might consist in, but at this point it becomes evident that what he means is bringing about American domination in Indochina. Dawn wholly subjects himself to the rationale of Western imperialism. He internalizes its logic which takes the guise of spreading Western values in Vietnam, but is, in fact, based on the politics of infinite expansion. The moments in which Dawn’s rationalistic discourse breaks into a disorganized confessional monologue are precisely when the hidden mechanisms of imperialism are laid bare.

The workings of violence

From the very beginning of his narrative, Dawn presents himself as an outsider. In fact, the sense of being outside is what drives his confession. He positions himself against his boss, and even his wife. His attitude towards Coetzee is a strange amalgamation of respect and resentment. In fact, Dawn treats his supervisor as a potential opponent in his struggle for academic recognition. What is interesting, the relationship with his wife, Marilyn, is also referred to in terms of a confrontation. Marilyn, who is presented as a young and unhappy wife, is forever eager to “unveil the mysteries” (Coetzee 2004: 10) of her husband. Dawn, on the other hand, is spying on his wife whom he suspects of adultery.

Dawn’s pathological distrust of other people and his emotional withdrawal from human relations situates him in the ranks of the underground people. The first in the long line of descent is the protagonist of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*. The middle-aged collegiate assessor is chiefly characterized by his state of paranoia, which manifests itself in a long-standing suspiciousness and a willfully imposed state of isolation. As Peter Axthelm writes, Dostoevsky’s confessional novel “presents the hero’s individual self against the external world” (Axthelm 1967: 15). There is, however, an important difference in how the two protagonists approach the outside world. The protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* despises the reality outside of his room and decides to withdraw from it. He loses contact with the reality of human relations as a result of his conscious choice. Eugene Dawn, by contrast, seems to have no access to the reality outside of his books. This is primarily because of his ardent devotion to academic work. Significantly, he conducts his research in the basement of a local library which is presented as a secluded place kept in meticulous order by a neurotic librarian. He resents having spent the prime of his life on gruelling research, nonetheless continues to do so. Even when talking about trivial things (for example his nervous tics), he makes constant forays into psychological and sociological studies. He refers to his wife and his home as “props” (Coetzee 2004: 15), the former being taken out of a novel and the latter from a catalogue.

Dawn has an acute sense of the artificiality of his life. This frustration induces him to seek strong impulses which are often of sadistic and pornographic nature. A considerable part of his narrative is devoted to the description of three photographs which depict the cruelty of American soldiers in Vietnam. Two among these, which particularly attract Dawn's attention, show a scene of torture and a scene of rape. The emotions which they provoke are for Dawn more tangible than reality itself, they *are* the reality. He measures his manhood by the amount of excitement that they cause. He carries them with him at all times as if without them his life was running the risk of turning into a fiction.

Dawn seems to achieve his long-awaited sense of reality when he abducts his son and takes refuge in a provincial hotel. This criminal act is a result of marital problems and his growing paranoia. According to him, Marilyn has bad influence on their son and should be kept away from him. Far from realizing the precariousness of his situation, he seems confident about the decision. He is enthusiastic about the fact that he has finally moved from the realm of thoughts to action. After having described the details of his new surroundings, he writes: "There is no doubt that contact with reality can be invigorating" (Coetzee 2004: 36). After several days, Dawn and his son, Martin, are found by the police detectives. When the policemen enter the room, Dawn hurts his son with a knife. He is then knocked unconscious by one of the policemen.

It seems that the causes which pushed Eugene to his criminal act are not unlike those which drove the American army to wreak destruction in Vietnam. In both cases, violence is presented not as an outcome of power, but of helplessness. Eugene hurts his son as a result of terror and panic. Through the kidnapping of his son, he wants to assert himself on the outside world, or, as David Attwell writes, "to regain self potency" (Attwell 1993: 54). His plan falls through when he is caught by the police and put into a mental institution. The brutal acts of the American army also stem from a certain kind of inability; the inability to prove their own existence. The war in Vietnam, as Dawn writes, is an attempt to recover their sense of reality. Halfway through his confession, the scientist discusses the Vietnamese soldiers who have been captured and tortured by the Americans:

These poisoned bodies [...]—it is they who are the occasion of all my woe. [...] We could have loved them: our hatred grew only out of broken hopes. We brought them our pitiable selves, trembling on the edge of inexistence, and asked to acknowledge us. We brought with us weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we knew between ourselves and our objects [...]. We landed on the shores of Vietnam [...] pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality: if you will prove yourself, we shouded, you will prove us too [...] (Coetzee 2004: 17).

The domineering nation is presented as isolated and thus incapable of self-affirmation. Paradoxically, it seeks this affirmation not through meaningful dialogue with the other, but through violence. When it turns out that the Vietnamese offer no resistance to the armed assaults, the Americans are painfully

disillusioned. Violence is an attempt to overcome their isolation, “a tragic reach for transcendence” (Coetzee 2004: 18), as Dawn puts it.

The image of a gun figures prominently especially in the second novella, “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”. For Coetzee, an eighteenth century explorer and elephant hunter, the gun is vital both for his physical survival and material well-being. A relatively large fragment of his narrative is devoted to the explanation of why he carries the gun with him at all times. As it turns out, hunting animals for food is not the most important use of the gun. Killing, as Jacobus Coetzee presents it, is a vital element of not so much physical as “metaphysical survival” (Coetzee 2004: 80). The explorer inflicts violence so as not to lose the sense of boundary between himself and the outside world. The wilderness in which he finds himself is threatening, because it generates an acute sense of loneliness. The gun is what saves him from this isolation, because it mediates between himself and the outside world. The perverted logic of the gun is that in the act of killing, it acknowledges the existence of life. Jacobus Coetzee kills because he needs constant confirmation that life outside him exists, that he is not the only living being. A similar confirmation is sought by the American army in Vietnam. The army use the gun in order to ascertain their distinctiveness from the world of objects. Violence becomes the only means of self-confirmation².

If it is true that gun mediates between the person and the outside world, the same may be said about language. Both can be used as instruments of destruction. In fact, J. M. Coetzee's novel shows that violence on the level of language is prior to physical violence. Eugene Dawn is a clear example of this. Before he abducts his son and attacks him, he weaves brutal fantasies based on his work on mythography. As can be recalled, Dawn works on the myth of the vengeful father who severely punishes his wife and his sons for disobedience. While working on his report, the scientist indulges in a wild dream in which he installs himself in the place of the powerful father. The kidnapping of his son, and the subsequent attack may be read as a partial realization of this delirious dream. The same mechanism can be observed in the case of Jacobus Coetzee. When the man is betrayed by his servants, he never ceases to plan his revenge. After recovering from his illness, he finds his men and kills them one by one. He relates his revenge in a cold tone, not devoid of a tinge of disillusionment. As it turns out, the actual act of killing does not give him as much satisfaction as imagining the act. The language of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee is saturated with violence which ultimately finds its actualization in reality. In *Dusklands* violence begins from language.

One troubling question which J. M. Coetzee's novel leaves is: Are there any underlying features of imperialistic discourse which make it amenable to violence?

² Dominic Head suggests that violence as inflicted by Jacobus Coetzee is “a quest for ontological reassurance”. Head, however, does not go so far as to ascribe this motive to the American military intervention in Vietnam (cf. Head 1997).

Jacques Derrida poses this question not only in the context of imperialistic discourse, but language in general. According to Derrida, violence is present in the very structure of language. It originates from the inside–outside binary opposition. The inside–outside is a spatial metaphor without which language cannot operate. In fact, as Derrida states, this opposition is language itself. Without it, no meaning would be possible. Language cannot conceive of alterity outside of this structure. The other has meaning only when it enters into language, but by this time it becomes finite and mortal. Language cannot grasp the outside reality otherwise than by domesticating its otherness. The other can only be comprehended when its singularity is brought to its end. One is reminded of Jacobus Coetzee, who only notices animals when he is in the act of killing them. The violence inherent in language is its inability to grasp a phenomenon without inflicting harm on it.

At the beginning of this article I wrote about Emmanuel Levinas criticism of Western philosophy which, according to the philosopher, relies excessively on the powers of rationality. Violence, as Levinas suggests, takes place when the other is brought into line with impersonal Reason. In *Dusklands*, this Reason finds its realization in the claim to the superiority of Western democracy (in “The Vietnam Project”), and the confidence about the necessity of spreading humanistic values in Africa (in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”). Both are the rationale behind which the colonizing impulse masks itself. There is, however, a deeper structure which underlies the colonizing project. William Barrett suggests that colonialism stems from a certain metaphysics of power whose founding father is Descartes. It was Descartes who installed the separation between the subject and object, the person and the outside world. The effect is that nature is no longer seen as constitutive of man himself, but as “a realm to be conquered” (Huggan 1996: 20). A disharmony, or even antagonism arises between the subject and the outside world. According to Barrett, from the time of Descartes man suffers from this dualism. When a man conquers nature, he is, in fact, striving to overcome this self-division. The subject-object duality figures prominently in Coetzee’s novel. A significant example is Dawn’s reflection on the motifs of American invasion in Vietnam. The gun is presented as a copula between the man and the world of objects. It mediates between the man and the outside reality.

The subject–object structure cannot be considered apart from the inside–outside duality. In fact, as Jacques Derrida suggests, the former is born out of the latter. Both constitute the mechanism which drives the imperialistic project. Jacobus Coetzee’s reasoning is solely based on the inside–outside binary opposition. When the stability of this structure is threatened, he uses the gun in order to preserve it. The explorer resorts to the gun because it saves him from losing “his sense of boundaries” (Coetzee 2004: 81). He kills to keep his sense of interiority intact. The outside reality can exist when it is turned into a group of ob-

jects. An exterior phenomenon is only meaningful for him when it can be killed or wounded. A tree or a bush does not yield any significance because it does not react to the probing of the gun.

The subject's identity is created as a result of an antagonism with the object. The imperialistic subject defines itself against the other. There is a paradox which underlies this reasoning. On the one hand, the subject anticipates the time in which he will dominate and destroy all opposition. On the other, it cannot evolve its identity otherwise than through this conflict. The end of the conflict would mark the end of the subject's self-constitution. Therefore, the imperialistic psyche needs to constantly reenact it, while, at the same time, projecting ultimate victory. The fact that my true identity will arrive at the moment of complete dominance is termed by Slavoj Žižek as an illusion (Norval 1996: 63). It is an illusion which is very much present in *Dusklands*. According to Eugene Dawn, the Western man has an "evolutionary duty" to attain this state of identity which he calls in imperialistic rhetoric "the glory of consciousness" (Coetzee 2004: 28).

The fact that the imperialistic self is constituted in the struggle with the other is a recurrent thought in J. M. Coetzee's oeuvre. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a good example of this. In his third novel, Coetzee describes the outpost of a nameless Empire. The city is ruled by an army which constantly indoctrinates its subjects with the image of barbarians. Those barbarians, as the story goes, are particularly ruthless and threaten to attack the city any day. The city-dwellers ardently believe that the army is engaged in constant conflict with its enemy. Even though the aggressive barbarians never materialize, the threat of their arrival keeps the Empire in order and gives it a sense of purpose. This strong explanatory principle collapses at the very end of the novel when it turns out that the existence of the enemy is a myth invented by the Empire.

Conclusion

In *Dusklands* J. M. Coetzee refuses to posit violence outside the subject. War is not what comes to the individual from the external world, it is to be found within the human psyche. Stephen Watson observes that colonialism is "primarily the projection of a certain mental aberration" (Watson 1996: 19). I have presented this aberration as stemming from an inability to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the other. The monological discourse of the protagonists may be understood as an expression of loneliness and isolation. Both protagonists in *Dusklands* posit themselves against the outside world. Eugene Dawn perceives the relations with his supervisor, his wife and his son only in terms of conflict. Jacobus Coetzee's thinking is permeated with the master-slave dialectic. Dawn and Coetzee feel scorn towards the outside world, yet are unable to define themselves outside of

social relations. As their confessions unfold, their feeling of alienation becomes so acute that the men lose a sense of reality. Eugene Dawn refers to his life as “a fiction of my own” (Coetzee 2004: 10), Jacobus Coetzee has a presentiment that he is “a prisoner of [his] own underworld” (Coetzee 2004: 78). Violent acts which they commit are an attempt to transcend the feeling of unreality, or, in the words of Jacobus Coetzee, to “assert their reality” (Coetzee 2004: 106). The same mechanism is to be observed in the American military intervention in Vietnam. Here, the nation seeks self-affirmation in the brutal pressures it exerts on other nations. Violence, as David Attwell writes, is presented as a “hysterical attempt at self-validation” (Attwell 1993: 51). *Dusklands* narrates the failure of those attempts. The sense of reality which is eagerly awaited by Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee and the American army does not arrive. After attacking his son, Dawn is taken to an institution where he resumes his narrative. His aim is to analyze the motifs which led him to commit the crime. “I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am” (Coetzee 2004: 49) is the last sentence of his confession. We are given to understand that his process of self-analysis, to which he was so devoted throughout his narrative, has not reached any conclusion. On the contrary, it has just been reenacted. Far from embracing the reality, Dawn finishes his confession with a familiar introspective turn. Jacobus Coetzee’s narrative ends on a similar note. After killing his enemies, Coetzee claims that he has attained a sense of reality. Yet, the acts of murder leave him brooding on the nature of life and death. At the end of the novella, he states, rather surprisingly, that he is not interested in whether he is alive or dead because he has “other things to think about” (Coetzee 2004: 107). What those things are, the reader does not learn. This introspective turn, however, already undermines his sense of satisfaction from the revenge. Jacobus Coetzee’s sense of reality seems very pallid indeed.

Three centuries ago Descartes demonstrated that the capacity to think is enough to prove one’s existence. This principle collapses in Coetzee’s novel. Eugene Dawn’s and Jacobus Coetzee’s project of self-examination does nothing of the kind. On the contrary, it only succeeds in abstracting them from reality. The protagonists seek confirmation of their own existence by inflicting violence on the outside world. This spiritual impoverishment is presented in *Dusklands* as the driving force of the imperialistic project.

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Przemoc w powieści Johna Maxwella Coetzee'ego *Ciemny kraj*

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest krytyczna analiza sposobu przedstawienia przemocy w powieści J.M. Coetzee'ego *Ciemny kraj* (*Dusklands*). Tezą pracy jest twierdzenie, iż źródłem kolonialnej agresji jest brak dialogu z drugim człowiekiem. W swojej metodologii artykuł opiera się na filozofii Emmanuela Levinasa, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jego krytyki kartezjańskiego racjonalizmu, który według tego myśliciela charakteryzuje się zamknięciem na Innego. Bohaterowie powieści Coetzee'ego są intelektualnie i emocjonalnie odseparowani od otaczającego ich świata. Rezultatem zamknięcia się na drugiego człowieka jest rosnące poczucie alienacji, powodujące, że bohaterowie ci tracą poczucie rzeczywistości. Agresywne czyny, jakich się dopuszczają, są dramatycznym wyrazem ich potrzeby wyjścia ze swobodnego podziemia i odzyskania kontroli nad własnym życiem.

W drugiej części artykułu autor porównuje przemoc jednostki wobec jednostki z przemocą państwa wobec państwa. Kończącym wnioskiem jest, że na obu tych poziomach przemoc wynika z duchowego zubożenia i braku otwarcia na drugiego człowieka.

NOTA AUTORSKA

Marek Pawlicki jest doktorantem w Instytucie Filologii Angielskiej UJ. Jego projekty badawcze obejmują: wyznaczenie jako formę narracji, autobiografizm oraz autotematyzm w prozie Johna Maxwella Coetzee'ego.