



The Sounds of Cruelty, the Silence of Care. About the Novels of J.M. Coetzee

Júlia VALLASEK

Babeş-Bolyai University
Faculty of Political Science, Public Administration and Communication
jvallasek@yahoo.com

Abstract. The essay gives a general description of the several ways cruelty and alterity appear in J.M. Coetzee's novels. The essay presents two groups of novels: those in which the writer focuses on the psychology of the colonizers/conquerors and the relationship of power between master and slave, and those presenting the theme of the suffering body, and finally draws attention to the hidden motif of human empathy and care.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee, suffering, cruelty, master, slave, alterity, care

“Somewhere, always, a child is being beaten.”
(*Waiting for the Barbarians*)

What can happen if a human soul loses the feeling of compassion? What can happen if there is not, and has never been any compassion in a soul? If we had to characterize the world of Coetzee's novels with just one word, “cruelty” would be the best one. Cruelty, in its most elementary form, inflicting physical suffering. His novels are full of naked bodies distorted by torture, disease or accidents, his heroes have to face scenes of cruelty done by people or simply by existence.

Stephen Abell (2011) writes in *Times Literary Supplement*: “in all of his fiction, he [Coetzee] is our best authority on suffering, our most credible literary authority on the body.” Of course, his “competence” is not accidental; it is directly connected to his origin, which is somehow responsible for the choice of topic in his

novels, for the modulations of his way of speaking about the body, about suffering and cruelty. In his volume of essays and interviews, *Doubling the Point*, which also contains autobiographical elements, Coetzee wrote: “in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body” (1992).

The work of the novelist, who was born in South Africa and presently lives in Australia, belongs to the mainstream of English literature; he has been given many important literary awards both in his native country and in England, among them the Man Booker prize. In 2003 he was also awarded the Nobel-prize and since then he has been considered a writer of international importance, his novels have been translated all over the world. (To the Hungarians, as it generally happens, the person of the prize winner came as a surprise, although *Waiting for the Barbarians* was already published in 1987, being translated into Hungarian by Éva Sebestyén. Due to the prize, in the following years the Art Nouveau published six of his novels.)

“Amongst this audience, his fiction has been received as embodying a powerful moral critique of apartheid,” Clive Barnett (1999, 289) stated, while analyzing the reception of Coetzee in his study.

However, Coetzee has continuously been criticized for his novels not being closely connected to any historical or political question. Before being taken aback on hearing that literature can be approached with such an expectance too, let us remember that his first six novels (*Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K.*, *Age of Iron*) were written between 1974–1990, that is, in the shadow of the South African apartheid regime, when the postcolonial view of literature gained ground firmly. It would be far from reality to say that such questions are not present in Coetzee’s novels, because practically they speak about the permanent, painful consciousness of South African existence that generates unsurpassable antagonisms. But it is true that Coetzee’s approach to these problems contains nothing of the political commitment that characterizes other white South African writers like Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach or even Doris Lessing and the works of the black “African” writers. He does not seem to be interested in the rapid healing of century-old injustices, but focuses on the work of the powers hiding behind the process and wants to unveil them. In his view the engine of these powers is human cruelty, he keeps analyzing its anatomy and the mechanisms of its causes and effects, the ways people experience it and suffer because of it. The suffering party of cruelty is always the OTHER, even the suffering self is looking at himself from the perspective of the outsider, that is, in a detached way. The narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate, wants to find out “what happened to her” with an almost perverse eagerness, examining the traces of torture on the body of the barbarian girl taken into his house. He is searching for the truth by using the signs of the crippled, distorted body, but the victim refuses to take part in this, she does

not divulge anything of what was done to her in the cell, remains silent just as the awestruck soldiers who actually did the torturing. "Suffering is the truth..." the judge states at the beginning of the novel, almost making a hint to the suffering of Jesus Christ. At the end of the novel, after he himself being imprisoned, tortured and humiliated, the judge draws the conclusion that suffering is a private matter and torturing is needless, because the victims cannot speak only moan.

In the present essay I will examine the way cruelty and its subject, the "other," appear in Coetzee's novels. First I will examine novels belonging to the first period of his career, and those in which he focuses on the psychology of the colonizers/conquerors, the relationship of power that takes shape in the connection between master and servant or rather to say slave (*Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*). Next I will focus on the works presenting the theme of the suffering body (*Elizabeth Costello*, *Age of Iron*, *Slow Man*), and finally I will speak about the possibilities of doing away with cruelty, about the presentation of human empathy, sympathy and care.

1.

J.M. Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*, published in 1974 (in Hungarian in 1988) is a sort of postmodern play with the text, a parody of the power discourse of the colonizers and is very far from the South African realities of those times. The novel contains two stories rhyming to each other and the narrator in both of them describes the way leading towards insanity. Eugene Dawn, the narrator in *The Vietnam Project*, speaks in first person and is writing a report about the war propaganda of the USA in Vietnam, while the second one, *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* describes the expedition of the title hero to the "land of the Great Namaqua" in the style of travel books written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The reader cannot help drawing a parallel between the language, nature and way of working of the American invasion in Vietnam and that of the Dutch colonization in South Africa.

The other to be conquered does not belong to the human race any more. In *The Vietnam Project* the coloured people appear in the imagination of the American soldiers not as enemies, but rather as mysterious "gods." Here the dominant motif is cruelty hiding in the impossible view of the conqueror, we witness a horrible process of "victimization," which offers excuse to the murderer for what he did, exemption being based on the sheer fact that the victim proved to be different from what was thought of him.

The other, who must be defeated, does not belong to the human race any more. In Jacobus Coetzee's narrative the Bushmen are evidently animalized. He calls them "males" and "females" and gives a detailed description of how the white settlers are hunting them. Dead victims are not considered humans either. "Bullets are too good for the Bushmen" (Coetzee 1983, 85), the narrator states, mentioning

how a bushman caught on their fields was roasted like a goat on fire, and offered to the servants for supper.

After such an introduction it is not surprising that, when Jacobus Coetzee turns back to the village of the natives where he was lying sick during his first voyage, he takes revenge for all his real and imagined humiliations. He sets the village on fire and kills, or puts his men to kill not only the servants who by that time abandoned him, but everybody without fail. The story that serves as a framework proves that the presentation of the relationship between the almighty master and the servant/slave considered to be an animal, does not characterize only the shadowy past, a barbaric era.

According to the contemporary secretary report the narrative of the illiterate explorer is a “boring” one, while the epilogue, which is meant to ensure background and explanation to the fictive story, with its bombastic rhetoric proves that behind the scientific language of the nineteenth-century essay, in a sophisticated and concealed form, we can find the same mentality that characterized the world of Jacobus Coetzee and of the first explorers of the Cape. The natives are still considered to be human beings of lower quality just as they used to be formerly. In the framework story the white man, who is able to denote, and accordingly, to rule the world, becomes the master of the slave, who is unable to use “white” speech, they only repeat their master’s commands to show that they are accepting it.

In fact the servant’s, the native’s, the Other’s inability to speak is a recurrent theme in Coetzee’s early novels. For example, in the novel *Foe*, which can be read as a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday, whose tongue has been injured in unknown circumstances, stubbornly refuses to describe from his own point of view what has happened on the island. (The novel, as a Defoe rewriting, offers both a feminist and a postcolonial reading because the two disregarded characters are Susan Barton, the woman who arrives at the island after a shipwreck and the native servant, Friday, while the central question is who the one, grasping the possibility of telling and shaping the story is.) The mutilated Friday, who cannot, (or will not) speak, grows to be the symbolic figure of colonial oppression, his scars, the proofs of his physical suffering, speak instead of him just as in the case of the girl in the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. “Can the subaltern speak?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, representative researcher of postcolonial literature asks and her answer is negative. The oppressed one is silent; s/he is unable to tell his/her own story. In the final scene of the novel the narrator is speaking instead of Friday, as if he was making a dream journey, dives into the sea and finds the wreck of a ship. This underwater dream world is the place where not the words, but the traces of suffering on the bodies are speaking (for example, the scar on Friday’s neck left by a chain or rope): “This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday” (Coetzee 1987, 157).

The novel entitled *In the Heart of the Country* can be approached not from the point of view of speech, as the material of storytelling, but from that of communication, of the problem of speaking to the other human being. The novel is the everlasting monologue of the heroine, the spinster embedded into the monotony of her life on a farm. The scenes of her life, her thoughts, dreams, daydreams and fears follow one another in numbered paragraphs as if she kept trying to tell something, as if she was struggling against the impossibility of opening up. In the novel silence is the dominant element, not because the few characters closed into the order of the farm have nothing to tell one another, but just because there is too much that cannot be spoken about, cannot be put into words and because there is no language in which they could be told. Miss Magda is forced to realize that she is trying in vain to build a relationship with her servants, which would make human communication possible, because her language is the one used by the white masters when speaking to their black servants, it is the language of orders and of obeying orders and not that of communication. In this relationship of domination and subordination words suffered corruption and are deteriorated for ever, physical relationship (the father's contact with the girl whom he turns into his mistress and the heroine's relationship with the servant, full of humiliation) are desperate attempts "to compel from the lips of a slave, albeit in the dead of night, words such as one free being addresses to another" (Coetzee 1982, 132). Her language is a cruel and totally sinful one, she cannot use it to talk to the servants only to give orders to them. The vocabulary of the servants is a very limited one, their answer to the orders cannot be anything else but "yes," and in this way silence is born, the silence of the foreigner that can be broken neither by words nor by deeds. Then comes the final realization: "It is not speech that makes man man, but the speech of others" (Coetzee 1982, 126).

The best-known novel of Coetzee's early period, in fact of his whole literary career, is the emblematic *Waiting for the Barbarians*. As we all know, the *barbarian* has been the most significant way of denoting the Other ever since the antiquity. Analyzing the idea of barbarianism in the ancient Greek and Roman conception, Reinhart Koselleck says that the barbarians were considered to be "stammering strangers," "savages, uncivilized, unable to conceive a constitution, they are inborn slaves who need to be taken care of." The term "barbarian" is a term to define the stranger who can always be perceived as enemy (Koselleck 1998).

Although the action of the novel takes place at the border of a not specified Empire, and racial characteristics play no significant role either in the description of the barbarians or in the presentation of the soldiers sent from the faraway capital, yet in 1980, when the novel was published, it was evident for everybody that it wanted to tell something about the political conditions in South Africa. According to David Atwell, the Empire is a parody of the apartheid order,

presenting its paranoid nature and its attempt to control history. But as we advance in time we understand that it is not only about the apartheid, but also about the illogical mechanism of any dictatorship and, generally speaking, it is a novel about human cruelty. In spite of this, the process of torture is rarely described; in the first part of the novel the judge can see mostly the traces of it, or hear its sound. The narrator of the story is almost disgustingly eager to find out something about the suffering of the people brought in out of a misunderstanding or false accusation. Looking at the scars on the blinded, crippled girl who is taken to his house he wants to find out what has happened, more precisely, what was the action he could have prevented, in what he did not take part, yet he did not do anything against it, consequently he can also be blamed for it. For a long time he is not even conscious of all this, he discovers cruelty hiding in indifference only when he himself has to play the role of the innocent, tortured victim. As a prisoner, thinking about his relationship to the girl, remembering the father of the girl who was tortured to death, he realizes how merciless he was when he could feel no pity. "They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them (on a day I spent occupied with the ledgers in my office)" (Coetzee 1999, 109).

Colonel Joll, who comes from the mysterious Third Office, is looking for enemies and as he can find none he creates enemies of all those, who due to their "being otherwise" can fit into this role. Torture will be the device that makes, in the materialist sense of the word, enemies from the randomly chosen fishermen, the natives, who speak a language unknown to the colonel. The process of textual creation of enemies is particularly forcible in the scene in which Colonel Joll writes with ember the word "enemy" onto the back of the prisoners and then he orders first his soldiers and when they get tired, the mob maddened by the sight of torture to whip them until blood washes away the inscription (Coetzee 1999a, 140-142). The narrator wants to find the answer to the question whether the one who commits cruelty is still a human being and to what extent can those be blamed who do not take part in cruelty but do not prevent it either. Is the one who remains silent among criminals just as bad as they are? This question actually refers to his own behaviour. At the same time the writer points out the uselessness of a lonely fight: the judge, now himself a prisoner, tries to prevent colonel Joll from hitting with a four pound hammer the already unconscious men, but the only result of his attempt is that he himself is beaten until bleeding. "What would I have said if they had let me go on? That it is worse to beat a man's feet to pulp than to kill him in combat? That it brings shame on everyone when a girl is permitted to flog a man? That spectacles of cruelty corrupt the hearts of the innocent?" (Coetzee 1999a, 146). Besides the question of collective responsibility the judge also realizes that it is not enough to demand justice for the tortured Other, because it is "Easier to lay my head on a 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?" (Coetzee 1999a, 146).

When he was a free man, it was almost an obsession for him to look for the traces of torture on the body of the barbarian girl and now, as a humiliated prisoner he is wondering whether it is possible for the one who tortures other people to go on living with an unimpaired soul. First he is wondering what the training of colonel Joll was like, and then he asks his own torturer, Mandel:

How do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been ... working with people? That is a question I have always asked myself about executioners and other such people. ... Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? I have imagined that one would want to wash one's hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don't you think? Some kind of purging of one's soul too – that is how I have imagined it. Otherwise how would it be possible to return to everyday life – to sit down at table, for instance, and break bread with one's family or one's comrades? [ellipsis in the original] (Coetzee 1999a, 169)

In an essay (*Into the Dark Chamber: the Writer and the South African State*) written in 1986 and included into his volume entitled *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee himself states that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is "a novel about torture," that is to say, he wanted to examine the effect of torture on human consciousness. According to him, the main problem is that by presenting cruelty in fact we reproduce it. To avoid this, the main hero of the novel is a character who keeps responding to cruelty, who is a victim, but at the same time the narrator too, that is, he can be a victim tortured in his body and soul, but he can never become an object, it is not the point of view of the torturers representing the power that becomes dominant, but his own one.

2.

In the following I will examine the ways J.M. Coetzee presents physical prostration in some of his novels, mostly written in the latter half of his career (*Elizabeth Costello, Age of Iron, Slow Man, Disgrace*). Although politics, some aspects of the South African everyday life and cruelty in its organized or institutional forms, are also present in these novels, yet the writer mostly focuses on the presentation of the suffering body.

The heroine of the earliest novel, *Age of Iron*, written in 1991, is Mrs. Curren, a retired teacher who is sick of cancer. The process of her physical disintegration is accompanied by her becoming more and more conscious politically. It can be viewed as an inverse novel of development; the "growth" of the heroine consists in the fact that, while preparing for death, she accepts physical suffering and realizes

her own unimportance. Her feeble, sick body, with “cold, obscene swellings” appears as a parody of pregnancy. Her body is not the carrier of life, but that of death. According to its technique of narration the novel is in fact a confession, although it takes up the form of a letter written by Mrs. Curren to her daughter living abroad. The heroine is searching for redemption, although not in the religious meaning of the word, and realization comes to her in the moment when the police shoot two young black men who tried to take refuge in her house. When the police is questioning her, she is showing them the wounded, distorted hands of her new acquaintance, Vercueil, the tramp, who plays the role of the angel of death. Thus, she “aligns herself with the sign of suffering in the face of the oppressor, and reminds us of the positive connotation and authority Coetzee has frequently assigned to the disfigured, scarred, or mutilated body in his novels, as the repository, and the text of colonial oppression” (Head 2009, 70).

Physical pain, mutilation and the suffering caused by violence appear in a richer and somewhat different context in the novels published since the late nineties. The theme of suffering caused by the injustices of the relationship between master and servant, generated by colonial existence does not disappear totally, but new, more general conceptions are offered by the writer, or he approaches the central theme of cruelty from a new perspective. New problems appear like that of cruelty towards animals or inability of love and compassion as a sin, the ethical questions related to the presentation of the evil in literature.

The novel entitled *Slow Man*, written after the writer moved to Australia in 2005, is seemingly the story of how an elderly, lonely man, crippled in a car accident tries to build up a new way of life for himself. Paul Rayment, who loses his legs in a car accident, falls in love with his nurse, Marijana Jokic, a Croatian immigrant, and to sublime his love, he soon becomes a sort of self-appointed grandpa to her family. Although the writer describes in a realistic way both the crippled body and a large scale of feelings generated by its sight (disgust, aversion, contempt and natural approach), the main motif of the novel is not the distorted body but the shaping of a special world of the identity. The novel draws attention to a new problem, that of the immigrants, who on the one hand try to find their new national identity, but on the other hand keep their relationship to history and continuity.

Rayment wants to donate his collection of photos taken of the immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century and also containing some of the works of the famous nineteenth-century photographer, Antoine Fauchery, to the National Library of Adelaide, hoping that his modest present will carry him, the French immigrant, into the mainstream of Australian history. Marijana’s son, Drago, steals a Fouchery photo and, with the help of digital technology produces a sepia-coloured print with the image of his own father dressed to blend in with those “stern-faced Cornish and Irish miners of a bygone age” (Coetzee 2005, 218). He is

also posting the photo on his own blog. The manipulated photograph, the world of simulacrum points to the problem of the original and the false, and at the same time to the fact that in this digital world and in the time of global communication identity itself becomes a problem. Not only the well-known forms of national identity have become anachronistic, but it is impossible to make an authentic record of the historical facts too.

The theme of cruelty towards animals has appeared many times in Coetzee's novels since the latter part of the nineties. In the first two volumes of his autobiographic novel (*Boyhood, Scenes from Provincial Life*) it turns up as an inevitable, although scaring part of country life, presented with a somewhat bucolic nostalgia, from the perspective of a child. The boy watches with curiosity mixed with dread the castration of the lambs, the weekly event of slaughtering a ram and the animals driven to the slaughter-house, and while doing this he wonders why they accept their fate, why does not the instinct of life urge them to fight for their lives. Finally he accepts the unconscious human cruelty towards the animals as the unavoidable part of nature, of the bucolic, provincial life of the farmers.

Coetzee included into his novel *Elisabeth Costello* a text that was earlier published as an essay (*The Lives of Animals*, 1999). In it the writer examines the relationship between humans and animals. When writing the novel *Elisabeth Costello*, the writer used the postmodernist technique of loosely connecting within a vague framework academic presentations, speeches, and essays. The heroine is an elderly woman who got tired of discussing about the great problems of the world. It is a routine for her to keep lectures about the most different themes to any kind of audiences, whose members however are only interested in the coffee breaks. The only topic that deeply touches her is that of the exploitation and organized, industrial slaughtering of the animals. In a somewhat exaggerated way she compares this to the Holocaust. She keeps two lectures on this theme, the title of them being *The Philosophers and the Animals* and *The Poets and the Animals*. Costello's opinion is that man's cruel behaviour towards the animals largely resembles the way people generally behave with the defeated enemy, with war prisoners or slaves.

People complain that we treat animals like objects, but in fact we treat them like prisoners of war. (...) The prisoner of war does not belong to our tribe. We can do what we want with him. We can sacrifice him to our gods. We can cut his throat, tear out his heart, throw him on the fire. There are no laws when it comes to prisoners of war. (Coetzee 2003, 96)

This is related to another lecture of hers about the problem of the evil. Here she is interested in the question of what and how much the writer is supposed to present of human evil, of the horror that cannot be told with words. But here the

text loses its self-concerned character, the heroine speaks with more and more ardour, she desperately wishes to move her audience. She stops repeating the old, politely composed sentences and tries to find some truth for herself, to seize a valid explanation of something. While thinking about the systematic killing of the animals, about the respect towards the victim and about the right to intimacy in death she draws the conclusion that there is no justice which would entitle the writer to present some special kinds of horrors because when doing so, he will revive them on the pages of his book, that is, the writer recreates the evil (like one of Paul West's novels, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, analyzed by Costello, in which the writer describes the execution of the members of the Stauffenberg conspiracy against Hitler). In this way the writer will not let those who do not want to see the humiliation of the others turn their heads away, that is, he will prevent them from expressing their protest at least by this gesture.

3.

Compassion seems to be the only efficient weapon against cruelty, against "the flap of Satan's leathery wings," but this is not necessarily part of the human soul. The theme of compassion and the lack of it play an important role in Coetzee's novels and the one entitled *Disgrace*, written in 1999 is a good example in this respect. Showing consideration towards a suffering human being (and, generally speaking, towards our fellow-beings) or turning suffering into a topic is not the same thing as being considerate and involved. The hero of his latest novel, *Summertime*, has a lot of autobiographical characteristics; he is even called J.M. Coetzee. He is a teacher, and one of his former colleagues mentions that He took a "rather abstract, rather anthropological attitude towards Black South Africans ... They might be his fellow citizens but they were not his countrymen ... at the back of his mind they continued to be *they* as opposed to *us*" [ellipsis, emphasis in the original] (Coetzee 2009, 232).

David Lurie, a teacher of English Romanticism, the hero of the novel *Disgrace* is also such a man. He seems to be a man without feelings, looking at everything with the eyes of an anthropologist. He is unable to build up real relationships in university life, in his rather sterile connections with women or when living at his daughter's farm. In this way he has to face his own lack of compassion and, beyond this, the inherent lack of compassion of the cold, rationalistic mind, which becomes the source of helplessness too. David is dismissed from his job because getting into relationship with one of his students, therefore he withdraws to the farm of his daughter, Lucy, to think about the possibilities of his life. The farm is a foreign world to him inhabited by strange people, he looks at it from the comfortable position of an outsider. He does not criticize them, yet he slightly despises them and makes no effort to understand them. But one day four black men plunder the farm, beat him and rape his

daughter, and this humiliation forces him to try to understand things, which he formerly simply rejected on the basis of some rationalistic arguments (for example, the fact that his daughter does not ask for the help of the police and wants to go on living on the farm). However, his attempt to understand things fails again and again, because in a sheer intellectual way, thinking only rationalistically a state that would be favourable for understanding cannot be reached. Lurie's way of thinking is firmly interwoven with the elements of the colonial scale of values that makes impossible any communication between the white and the black, the masters and the servants. His daughter, on the other hand, is the representative of a new scale of values that is favourable for getting closer to each other, to communicate. She considers violence a price that she has to pay in order to remain in the world of the lands cultivated by the black. (The beauty of her almost romantic love for the land is shown by the fact that she grows not only vegetables but also ancient plants, cycadas. Lurie realizes his own lack of compassion, his sinfulness and the fact that he has always been making use of other people, which is against Kant's ethics, when his daughter, who wants to soften the sharpness of the racist elements during the argument with her father, places the professor, who failed in the role of the careful father, beside the aggressors, as he is also a man.

Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (Coetzee 1999b, 158)

David Lurie, Paul Rayment or J.M. Coetzee from the novel *Summertime* all demonstrate that a sheer intellectual approach, even if it is an elaborate and a daring one, is unable to face cruelty. These heroes can become victims on their turn; the simple compassion that they feel towards the subjects of cruelty proves to be not only helpless, but also useless and pointless.

For J.M. Coetzee cruelty is not an abstraction; he gives it the meaning of a performance, for him it is a human characteristic which either stirs reflection or it does not, but it is manifested through actions (or, on the contrary, through the lack of actions). In this way the opposite (and to some extent, the remedy) of cruelty cannot be any abstract idea that is close to love, humanism, mercy or compassion. Active involvement and care, shining up in Coetzee's dark world are the only means that, even if they cannot do away with cruelty, yet they can tame it to some degree. We meet the different forms of care appearing in different contexts and actions. The judge washes and rubs the legs of the mutilated girl every day; Marijana Jokic, the nurse takes care of the crippled body of her patient both with a

sort of professional indifference and with a calm naturalness, showing respect towards his human dignity; Elisabeth Costello, although she herself is surprised by her gesture, shows her naked body to the old, dying painter, whose only desire is to see female beauty; Bev, in the novel *Disgrace* cures, or, if nothing else can be done, sends the sick animals into death in a mild way.

Care itself, and taking care of the injured, suffering or actually dead body is not exclusively women's attribute, yet in J.M. Coetzee's novels, just as in common thinking, it appears like that. The magistrate in the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is just curious, he wants to find answers, to unfold an abstract "truth," David Lurie's work in Bev's office is a kind of penitence. Maybe Coetzee presents care, the only means that can be turned against cruelty, otherwise dominating his novels, as a female characteristic only to show that fragile as it is, at the same time it is able to surpass everything and is eternal because of its capacity of reproduction.

This differentiation is very evident when he describes the cell of the prisoners who were executed because of taking part in the Stauffenberg plot.

No one to wash them, afterwards. Women's work since time immemorial. No womanly presence in the cellar business. Admission reserved; men only. But perhaps when it was all over, when dawn's rosy fingers touched the eastern skies, the women arrived, indefatigable German cleaning women out of Brecht, and set to work cleaning up the mess, washing the walls, scrubbing the floor, making everything spick and span, so that you would never guess, by the time they had done, what games the boys had got up to during the night. (Coetzee 2003, 166)

This scene, (which can also be considered as one describing the clearing away the traces of murder), leaves without answer the ethical question: is the writer (and art in general) permitted to present cruelty, and if yes, then how is he supposed to do it? All Coetzee's writings that have been published so far can be considered as an attempt to answer this question.