



Alice Civieri<sup>1</sup>

## THE MASTER OF PETERSBURG: COETZEE AND DOSTOEVSKY MERGING THROUGH FICTION

How to define *The Master of Petersburg* by J.M. Coetzee? Is it a biography (or better, a fictional biography)? An autobiography (or better, a fictional autobiography)? Is it simply fictional? For those who are familiar with J.M. Coetzee's works, it would come natural to guess that one of his *creations* cannot be defined through compartmentalized categories. On the other hand, for those who have not entered the labyrinthine *truth* of this author yet, the reading of *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) could be a less striking and puzzling way to approach the author (the reasons for which will be explained later on). Anyway, it would not be plausible to consciously read and try to understand the novel at the centre of this analysis without making any reference to Coetzee's life and historical, cultural and social background which are obliquely but unambiguously evoked in all his works.

John Maxwell Coetzee (1940 -) was born and raised in Cape Town, South Africa; he studied and worked in Europe and in the United States before coming back to his home country (he is now living in Adelaide, Australia). The issues of *origins* and *identity*, besides the feeling of being an exiled in his own country, appear to have been haunting him during his whole life, being himself divided between his Afrikaner<sup>2</sup> and English descent. This condition of a man divided between two cultures and two languages (Afrikaans and English) causes Coetzee to feel the need to define his own cultural identity as a white liberal writer of Afrikaner descent. Coetzee lived in apartheid-ruled South Africa, therefore in a political and social context that reached its peak of violence and tragedy during the 70s and the 80s. He shares with authors such as Alan Paton, André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, Breyten Breytenbach, the urge to denounce this reality, though in his own, anti-realistic modes. The 90s witness dramatic changes in the political and social system of South Africa: apartheid is dismantled thanks to a series of negotiations from 1990 to 1993 leading to the universal-suffrage election, in 1994, of Nelson Mandela as the new President of South Africa. However, this is not a peaceful period: right-wing violence brings to mass assassinations and terrorist attacks along the streets.<sup>3</sup> This is the background in which Coetzee writes *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), a work reflecting a fragmented and deceitful reality run through by clashes and violence that still makes authentic human relationships and communication impossible.

This writer, whose novels have always been explicitly focused on the master-slave relationship to denounce the oppressive apartheid system of South Africa, now, when apartheid appears to be defeated at last, writes a novel set in Petersburg in 1869 featuring the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. Not only does Coetzee relocate the focus of his writing in another country, in another century, on another writer, but he also decides to realize an intertextual work which funnels in its structure biographical elements of Dostoevsky's life, autobiographical elements of Coetzee's life, elements from Dostoevsky's novels (in particular from *The Possessed*, 1871), and fictional ones. No need to say that Dostoevsky and revolutionary Russia are openly 'used' by Coetzee to represent his own country in such a dramatic moment of historical change.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alice Civieri ([alice.civieri@univr.it](mailto:alice.civieri@univr.it)) is a PhD Student at the University of Verona (Italy). Her area of research is South African postcolonial literature in English. She took her degree with a thesis entitled "Deranged Heroines in The Grass is Singing by Doris Lessing and In the Heart of the Country by J.M. Coetzee," and for her final PhD dissertation she has been working on the theme of confession in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa, focusing her attention on texts by Breyten Breytenbach, Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee.

<sup>2</sup> The term *Afrikaner* refers to white people of Dutch, German or Belgian origins that live in the South African territory as distinguished from the whites of British origin.

<sup>3</sup> "In the final weeks before the election, violence escalated to new levels in Natal and the southern Transvaal. In central Johannesburg on March 28, the IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) staged a massive demonstration, which was fired at from the building that housed the ANC (African National Congress) head offices, leading to the deaths of at least fifty-three people." (Thompson 253).



The urges at the source of Coetzee's intellectual activity are to be considered as absolutely identifiable with the purpose of historical Dostoevsky's writing. As Attridge notes about Dostoevsky's intents: "In *The Possessed* the historical Dostoevsky attempted a diagnosis of the sickness he believed had beset his country (...). It is as a manifestation of Russia, that is to say of his place and time (...), of its darkneses and tensions, that the figure of the other emerges" (130). And again: "It (*The Master of Petersburg*) doesn't speak to us of South Africa, but it speaks of the role of literature, of art, in a country like South Africa, a country struggling to be born anew" (133). The interesting story that, in the novel, fictional Dostoevsky tells his housekeeper's daughter, as we will see later on, can be read as a metaphor for both Russia and South Africa that, because of their history and of what has been done of them, are said to have been born to be abused. The story told is about a woman, Maria, a spinster mistreated by her brother, who accepts being abused because this is the only brotherly approach that she has ever known: "'He (the brother) beat her (Maria). That was all. Old-fashioned Russian beating. She did not hold it against him. Perhaps, in her simplicity, she thought that is what the world is: a place where you get beaten.' (...) *This is Russia!*"<sup>4</sup> In light of this observation, it is apparent how, in Coetzee's novel, the parental responsibility for what has been done to his own country is reflected in the problematic relationship between generations. Similarly, "the metaphor of the revolution as a paradigm of the Freudian rivalry between fathers and sons is also made to resonate through the text" (Kosew 214).

Briefly evoking the novel's plot can, here, be useful: in 1869, after the death of his 23-year-old stepson, Dostoevsky, exiled in Dresden, decides to go back to Petersburg to find out the truth about the boy's death who is said to have committed suicide. While lodging in the house where his son lived, Dostoevsky has to face and to come to terms with his *passions/demons*: from the suffering for his son's death to the physical attraction for the housekeeper (Anna) and her young daughter (Matryona), from the desire to stay in Petersburg to know more about his stepson to the need to go back to Dresden for fear of being captured by creditors. As anticipated, the novel is enriched with biographical elements from Coetzee's and Dostoevsky's lives and narratives, and from Russian history. The first thing striking the biographically informed reader is the motif of *the dead son*: in fact, in 1989, Coetzee's son, Nicolas, died in ambiguous circumstances, falling (or jumping) from the balcony of his apartment. The author transports this dramatic event of his own life in the novel by attributing Dostoevsky a fictional dead stepson, Pavel, who dies falling from the 'shot tower' in Petersburg. Actually, the Russian author had a stepson named Pavel, like the fictional character created by Coetzee, but the boy outlived his father. This element magnifies the relationship between father and son: Coetzee's relationship with his son had been influenced by the sharp and controversial character of the boy, who left South Africa to study in the USA while being economically supported by his father. Back to South Africa he had been involved in criminal activities which had made the relationship with his parents even more difficult. As Attwell highlights, "Nicolas's waywardness was undoubtedly a source of anguish for Coetzee" (32). Fictional Dostoevsky's son can be seen as Coetzee's son's reflection: Pavel, too, is described as scorning his stepfather and stepmother behind their backs, and his way of rebelling to the older generation is by entering the secret revolutionary group controlled by Nechaev (or at least this is what Nechaev himself wants Dostoevsky, and the reader, to be convinced of). Worthwhile underlining is the type of death chosen for Pavel, his falling from a high building, that corresponds to Nicolas's destiny. Zinato and Pes note:

Coetzee merges the existential and the aesthetic in very complex, subtle ways, that support and illuminate each other and that enable the fictional stepfather/biological father – Dostoevsky/Coetzee – to exorcise the maddening, unhealable grief at his stepson/son's life being tragically cut short and at their difficult relationship being left inconclusive, suspended, perhaps unreconciled. (9)

As said before, Coetzee's dilemma of identity discovery is mirrored in his works, which are built on the multiplicity of reality, on how a univocal reality cannot be truthful, but just a tool for the powerful, the authority. As official History is always written by the powerful and is always univocal, the author exposes it,

---

<sup>4</sup> Coetzee 72-73. Hereafter quotations from the text will refer to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as MP followed by page numbers.



showing it to be a series of lies. It is through the following words that Coetzee defines 'official history' as based on the *historic myth*: "(...) an edifice constructed of selected fragments of the past by a historiography in the service of twentieth-century nationalist politics. It was put together for precisely the purpose of buttressing and justifying the activities of a specific political grouping" (Penner 7).

For these reasons, Coetzee refuses to identify himself with the powerful, and takes side against the South African Nationalist Party. But the author has to come to terms with the fact that he cannot avoid defining himself as "a man who is himself a colonizer, at least objectively speaking. (...) but a colonizer who does not *want* to be a colonizer" (Watson 377). Thus, the author's view of South African history is that of a fragmented reality, of a society lacking cohesion and a unifying culture. This is why the attention of the author towards the ethics of history is present in his whole opus, in this novel as in all the other works by Coetzee. *I* is perceived as representing the powerful who use it to perpetrate their power and superiority. As a consequence, for Coetzee, struggle and hard reaction against the system are necessary. It has to be said that all references to historical reality become means to represent the psyche of the individual subjected to this reality.

In this regard, what is worthwhile observing is that each character in the novel is given a sort of multiplicity of identities, above all the dead Pavel: he is first described to the reader from the point of view of his father who then reveals himself as being deceived by his desire to see his son from a positive perspective.

Concerning Pavel's identity, there are two main iconic moments in the novel. In the first one, the object which symbolizes the supposedly innocent candour of Pavel is his white suit. This garment becomes the physical obsession of his father who tries to imagine the cloth filled with his son's body, in order to 'feel' his presence. Fictional Dostoevsky longs for identifying with his son, in a desperate attempt to give him life again ("His son is inside him (...)". *MP* 52; "Because I am he. Because he is I." *MP* 53). Besides the continuous desire of being dead in his turn, there is his obsessive wearing of his son's white suit as if to sacrifice his own body for the resurrection of his son. The unbearable thinking about the moments of his son's death makes the father live a sort of *catharsis*, through vicarious suffering, as if he could feel what his son felt:

At moments like this (the thinking about Pavel's death) he cannot distinguish Pavel from himself. They are the same person; and that person is no more or less than a thought, Pavel thinking it in him, he thinking it in Pavel. The thought keeps Pavel alive, suspended in his fall. (*MP* 21)

The second moment concerns the story of Pavel's courtship of a woman. As hinted at before, Coetzee's novel presents several elements which are present in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. The son seems to be courting this woman just to be kind towards her (this is what appears to be at his father's eyes). This story is particularly relevant in *The Master of Petersburg* because it best represents the doubleness of Pavel's identity: the first time, the story is told through the father's, fictional Dostoevsky's, eyes and Pavel is described as a compassionate boy who sacrifices his time and energy to court a woman suffering for love:

Pavel had a kind heart, that was one of the nicest things about him, wasn't it? (...) To Maria he behaved very considerately, very politely, like a complete gentleman, though he was not yet twenty. (...) It was a lesson to everyone, a lesson in chivalry. A lesson to me too. (*MP* 74)

The same story is successively retold by Dostoevsky after having read Pavel's diary, and so after having discovered his son's real temperament, with the intent to negatively describe the boy to little Matryona. In the diary, this new Pavel justifies his action as follows: "Why did I do it? For a joke. Summer in the country is so boring – you have no idea how boring" (*MP* 249). This doubleness is also eloquently symbolized by the dream Dostoevsky has once arrived in Petersburg. He dreams of finding Pavel in the depths of the waters and, just when the son seems to lean towards the father to kiss him, he is not sure if it actually is a kiss or a bite. This ambivalent gesture is clearly a suggestion of an ambivalent identity. Still, in the father's visions, the son appears as having a smile "of friendliness and forgiveness" (*MP* 28). It is only in chapter 6 that a vision



allows the reader to understand that the father is beginning to accept real Pavel: when Dostoevsky calls his son in a moment of despair, instead of Pavel's face, he sees Nechaev's, Nechaev standing as the representative of the sons' rebellion against the fathers: "*Pavel!* he whispers over and over, using the word as a charm. But what comes to him inexorably is the form not of Pavel but of the other one, Sergei Nechaev" (*MP* 60). This process of awareness continues in chapter 10, where Dostoevsky finally rejects Pavel's idealization:

The same demon (the demon that is in Nechaev) must have been in Pavel, otherwise why would Pavel have responded to his (Nechaev's) call? It's nice to think that Pavel was not vengeful. It's nice to think well of the dead. (...) Let us not be sentimental – in ordinary life he was as vengeful as any other young man. (*MP* 113)

Coetzee's Dostoevsky becomes an anguished and disquieted soul, a victim of his obscene attraction towards the housekeeper's daughter (which mirrors the probable attraction of fictional Pavel to the same girl, and can also be found in the Russian novel in the character of Stavrogin), longing for an unattainable *truth* not only about his son's death, but also about his son's true nature. The latter more and more appears as a fragmented and shadowed figure to the reader, who can perceive him only through fictional Dostoevsky's eyes. The father's awareness that he does not know his son is projected in his sense of guilt when realizing his failure as a father-figure; the obsession for keeping Pavel's memory alive tries to compensate this lack, thus mitigating his desperate sense of guilt. As a matter of fact, "Dostoevsky does not, cannot, know what he is waiting for, under the name of Pavel. (...) He allows his actions to be determined by impulses, attractions, obscure desires, though without fully trusting in any of them" (Attridge 124-125). Besides Dostoevsky's fake official identity as Isaev, the real father of Pavel, the refusal of his own identity embodies the sense of guilt of the father who doesn't want to recognize his face anymore since he has not been able to accomplish his parental task. Fictional Dostoevsky is even described as the image of Death: "(...) this blackness of mine, this beardedness, this boniness, must be as repugnant as death the reaper himself. Death, with his bony hips and his inch-long teeth and the rattle of his ankles as he walks" (*MP* 14). Worth emphasizing is the mirror image, which recurs more than once in the novel: "(...) the face in the mirror (...) is the face of a stranger from the past" (*MP* 9). When Dostoevsky stares at his image in the mirror while wearing Pavel's white suit, he falls in a profound identity crisis:

But now, looking in the mirror, he sees only a seedy imposture and, beyond that something surreptitious and obscene (...). (...) he has again lost all sense of who he is. He knows the word *I*, but as he stares at it it becomes as enigmatic as a rock in the middle of a desert. (*MP* 71)

Seemingly, in the last chapter, just before accepting the real nature of his son, and so, just before beginning the writing of Pavel's diary, as a way to reject himself, he refuses to recognize his image in the mirror:

In the mirror on the dressing-table he catches a quick glimpse of himself hunched over the table. In the grey light, without his glasses, he could mistake himself for a stranger (...). The head of the figure across the table is slightly too large, larger than a human head ought to be. In fact, in all its proportions there is something subtly wrong with the figure, something excessive. (...) From the figure he feels nothing, nothing at all. Or rather, he feels around it a field of indifference tremendous in its force, like a cloak of darkness. (*MP* 236-238)

But let us go back to consider the historical urges for Coetzee's writing such a novel. What is worth noting, in this particular case, is that, in the moment of victory against apartheid, against the oppressive system, Coetzee chooses to write a fictional biography of Dostoevsky following the birth and creation of *The Possessed*, which distinguished itself from other novels by Dostoevsky exactly for its antirevolutionary contents. What is relevant to us in this context is to see *how* and *why* the South African author creates a multisource (auto)biography centered on this great anguished and tormented figure. About this, David Attwell argues as follows:



Dostoevsky's condition is the result of Coetzee's writing a novel in which he would respond to the death of his son, Nicolas, two months before his twenty-third birthday in April 1989. This biographical assertion takes us into old but still uncomfortable critical territory: the tension between biography and the autonomy of art. (...) Dostoevsky's biography is overpowering (...) so that Coetzee's problem is to find a crack wide enough through which to insert his own story. (28)

The central chapter of the book is entitled "The Shot Tower," the tower from which Pavel, supposedly, jumped to put an end to his life. As Attwell points out, there is no shot tower in Petersburg. It is as if Coetzee, while "writing a novel that is about novel-writing" (29), wanted to tell his reader that writing, as any other kind of story/history, originates from a lie, a lie that demonstrates how life and art can be intermingled in the description of the self and used to get to the author's purpose: "(...) the limit between autobiography and fiction (...) coincides with the limits between autobiography and history and between the self and family (...)" (Gilmore 9). But, once again, why choosing to write an autobiography through a third-person narrator whose real life elements are included in the report? But, above all, how to define *The Master of Petersburg*? As Gilmore points out, autobiography always comes from an original trauma of its author. For this reason the report as told by the traumatized writer could be considered as not totally true: "When the contest is over who can tell the truth, the risk of being accused of lying (or malingering, or inflating, or whining) threatens the writer into continued silence" (3). Furthermore,

For many writers, autobiography's domain of first-person particularities and peculiarities offers an opportunity to describe their lives and their thoughts about it; (...) to emerge through writing as an agent of self-representation, a figure, textual to be sure but seemingly substantial, who can claim "I was there" or "I am here." (9)

Coetzee's Dostoevsky gives reasons for the act of writing when he thinks about the need to write that comes from painful experiences: "You write *because* your childhood was lonely, *because* you were not loved. (...) We do not write out of plenty (...), we write out of anguish, out of lack" (MP 52). Coetzee chooses not to talk about himself through himself but to exorcize his *demons* through the trauma of another person, be it real or fictional, in this case being real *and* fictional Dostoevsky. This becomes the way to overcome the issue of the truthfulness of what is written. For this reason, *The Master of Petersburg* can be defined not as a mere biography (Dostoevsky's personal life events being just the starting point of the narrative development), not even as a mere autobiography (as the novel is not narrated by a first-person voice, and deals with Coetzee's and Dostoevsky's personal events and psychologies strictly intermingled), but as an *autre*biography. Attwell explains:

Is this Coetzee writing about himself, remembering Nicolas's funeral, or is he writing about his character, Dostoevsky? The answer is best thought of as both: it is Dostoevsky *in himself*; "he" is half-way to becoming the fictional author; the situation is autobiographical, while the third-person syntax signals the start of a self-fictionalisation. (29)

As seen so far, Coetzee's novel definitely contains fictionalized elements from Dostoevsky's life, for instance, the presence of the Russian author in Dresden in 1869 (while there seems not to be any evidence of his coming back to Petersburg). Coetzee interpolates the main aspects of this figure: from his being a socialist intellectual linked to subversive groups, for which he is also arrested, to his being sentenced to death and finally condemned to prison in Siberia, in his later years, Dostoevsky "became convinced that rational schemes to transform society would never succeed while humanity was in need of salvation" (Attwell 30) and wrote anti-rationalist and anti-nihilist novels, among which the above mentioned *The Possessed*. These aspects on historical Dostoevsky's life are presented by Coetzee when introducing fictional Dostoevsky; more than once, in the novel, it is possible to find references to Dostoevsky's exile in Dresden and his problems with creditors ("You have been abroad and returned to Russia under false name. (...) If your creditors discover you are in Petersburg they are of course equally free to take such steps as they may



decide on.” *MP* 42), to the imprisonment of Dostoevsky (“And don’t tell me the story that you were a revolutionary who went to Siberia for your beliefs. I know for a fact that even in Siberia you were treated like one of the gentry.” *MP* 188), or to the changing of political position by the Russian author. Concerning the last point, it is important to consider the conversation between Nechaev and Dostoevsky in which the first, in trying to provoke a reaction from him, asks the latter to write about the miserable living conditions of the poor people in Russia criticizing his anti-revolutionary position: “Weren’t you (Dostoevsky) a revolutionary yourself in the old days, or am I mistaken? (...) Perhaps you used to know (how to act like a revolutionary), but now all you can do is mumble and shake your head and cry” (*MP* 103-104).

Another important element to consider are family relationships. In Coetzee’s novels the family unit is always seen as a microcosm which represents the social macrocosm in all its ethical and political aspects. So, the patriarchal structure of power in the nuclear family reflects the deformed social, political and cultural system under apartheid:

The negative family trope can therefore be taken to symbolize the distortion of all ties, political cultural, and moral (...). (...) The amputated families of Coetzee’s novels mirror in their deformity another larger distortion, perpetrated by the colonial system and exacerbated by apartheid. (Splendore 150)

And again:

Family relations (...) are (...) strained, distorted, marked by violence. They are “deformed and stunted” as Coetzee describes all relations between human beings under colonialism, bearing the scar of a failure of “love,” a feeling unlikely to flourish in the South Africa of apartheid. (149)

The “amputated families” (150) of Coetzee’s novels symbolize the deformed and unnatural reality of the colonial system as well as, in this particular case, the Tsarist historical reality in Dostoevsky’s lifetime.

As Jacques Catteau highlights, while analyzing Dostoevsky’s novels, the element working as the pivot on which the whole action originates is “le tout-puissant complexe d’Œdipe, sous sa forme la plus excitante, l’obsession du parricide” (125). Here in Coetzee, as in Dostoevsky, the struggle between generations of sons and fathers seems to become the main explanation for the rebellious behavior of the former as pushed by an inner urge of change for doing better: “Not the People’s Vengeance but the Vengeance of the Sons: is that what underlies revolution – fathers envying their sons their women, sons scheming to rob their fathers’ cashboxes?” (*MP* 108). Of course this intention is not always sustained by good means, as it is clearly represented both in Coetzee and Dostoevsky in the character of Nechaev: from fictional and historical Dostoevsky’s point of view, this young man, representative of the revolutionary nihilist movement in Russia, morally errs, suffering from a sort of delusion of omnipotence that leads him to want to have full control over his own life, as if he were God himself. This is how Coetzee’s fictional Dostoevsky describes Nechaev to the police officer:

Nechaev stands first and foremost for the violent overthrow of all the institutions of society, in the name of a principle of equality – equal happiness for all or, if not that, then equal misery for all. It is not a principle that he attempts to justify. In fact he seems to despise justification in general as a waste of time, as useless intellection. (*MP* 35-36)

Nechaev defines *revolution* espousing a cyclic view of the nature of history: “Revolution is the end of everything old, including fathers and sons. (...) With each generation the old revolution is overturned and history starts again” (*MP* 189). Even the definition of *revolutionary* is given by Coetzee through Dostoevsky’s remembering of a pamphlet entitled *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, that is said to have been inspired by Nechaev:



'The revolutionary is a doomed man,' it began. 'He has no interests, no feelings, no attachments, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed in a single and total passion: revolution. In the depths of his being he has cut all links with the civil order, with law and morality. He continues to exist in society only in order to destroy it.' And later: 'he does not expect the least mercy. Every day he is ready to die.' (MP 60-61)

When fictional Dostoevsky is given the possibility to write in support of the revolutionary movement, he writes to denounce the murder of his son at the hands of Nechaev, thus probably contributing to Nechaev's being discovered by the police:

The novel that we see being born (Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*) was intended as an onslaught on the Russian radical movements of the time, and was published in a conservative Russian journal.

Coetzee gives us, it is true, a Nechaev who is eloquent in his denunciation of poverty in Tsarist Russia and his demonstration of its source in the collusion of interests that benefit from it, but he is countered by an equally eloquent Dostoevsky, who willfully or blindly fails to comprehend the young man's proto-Marxist argument and proffers a more individualized view of the suffering of the poor. (Attridge 119)

As already hinted at, the clash between father and son parallels the clash between revolutionaries and established systems, in Russia as well as in South Africa. Dostoevsky himself, in the novel (but this aspect echoes historical Dostoevsky's point of view), "does not believe in revolution; he thinks it is merely a question of competition between the old and the young, a form of the old rivalry between fathers and sons" (Splendore 156). Furthermore, taking into consideration Coetzee's will to place himself (and the writer in general, of course) 'outside *History*', with the intent of *demythologizing* the role of History as a mere 'clot' of lies at the service of the powerful, it is possible to see how "*The Master of Petersburg* can be read as a painful reflection on the inadequacy of a Myth (of fathers)" (153) in their failure as parental figures. This is how Coetzee works on the fathers' (and his own) sense of guilt for having abandoned their sons: "I (the father/Dostoevsky) *will come back*: the same promise he (the father/Dostoevsky) made when he took the boy to school for his first term. *You will not be abandoned*. And abandoned him" (MP 5). This awareness arouses a strong feeling of negation in the father for what he has done (or he has missed to do) thus claiming what he clearly knows not to be true: "I am his mother and his father, I am everything to him, and more!" (MP 16). It is interesting to note how Coetzee's Dostoevsky, after seemingly becoming conscious of his failure as a father, commits the same guilt towards his son when visiting the boy's tomb: "I will come again tomorrow, he promises (...)." Actually, Dostoevsky will not go back to the tomb of his son for the rest of the novel. This sense of guilt of the fathers is cunningly exploited by Nechaev in trying to provoke Dostoevsky: "Pavel Isaev was a comrade of ours. We were his family when he had no family. You went abroad and left him behind. You lost touch with him, you became a stranger to him. (...) You are fourth cousin, fifth cousin to Pavel Alexandrovich, not father, not even stepfather." (MP 119). And again: "How can you abandon Russia and return to a contemptible bourgeois existence? (...) What has become of you? Is there no spark left in you? Don't you see what is before your eyes?" (MP 180).

The betrayal of Pavel becomes the betrayal of Russia. Here Coetzee is working at a double level, the historical and the personal ones: the fathers' guilt has brought to the historical events of the present (colonialism and apartheid for South Africa, tsarism for Russia) which become the source for suffering, alienation, oppression and poverty. In the same way, the parental figures that could not prevent the most tragic and fatal event in a parent's life, the loss of a child, become "painfully conscious of having failed to understand (or share) their children's needs and ideals and so have failed in their responsibilities towards them" (Splendore 154). The sense of guilt goes as far as to blame the father himself for not having predicted what was happening: "(...) galling memories of what he (Dostoevsky) was doing in Dresden (...). Why was there no breath of a presentiment in the Dresden air? Must multitudes perish before the heavens will tremble?" (MP 8-9). This problematic relationship between generations is also represented by the presence of *darkness* and *silence*, typical elements in Coetzee's narrative to express a world characterized by



incommunicability between opposites. In the first chapter, while lodging in his son's room, Dostoevsky falls into yearned-for darkness and silence: "(...) waiting for the darkness to thicken, to turn into another kind of darkness, a darkness of presence. Silently he (Dostoevsky) forms his lips over his son's name, three times, four times" (MP 5). This very hope to find the presence of the son in darkness and this calling him through silence clearly symbolizes the father's awareness that he does not know his son, and his consequent need to find answers which will probably remain unanswered. The novel presents other examples of physical incommunicability between father and son, the most significant being Dostoevsky's dream about his 'watery' encounter with Pavel. In his dream, Dostoevsky is swimming underwater searching for his son; when he tries to open his mouth to speak, water fills it so that any attempt to articulate sounds is absolutely vain: "He knows what he is in search of. As he swims he sometimes opens his mouth and gives what he thinks of as a cry or call. With each cry or call water enters his mouth; each syllable is replaced by a syllable of water" (MP 17). Other moments follow in which Dostoevsky tries, fruitlessly, to call his son: "'Pavel!' he (Dostoevsky) whispers, conjuring his son in vain" (MP 49).

Being a fine linguist, Coetzee believes in the power of words. This is why his linguistic choices become symbols for the author's struggle in subverting, through his own writing, the 'language of History'. Even though *The Master of Petersburg* presents a more linear narrative structure compared to other novels by Coetzee, the author asks for an effort of comprehension from the reader when he describes oneiric journeys inside the protagonist's mind:

Coetzee never allows the reader to take refuge from the contradictions and paradoxes he sees in language, history, and politics. His strategic positioning of the reader in such a way as to stimulate an active "reading out" and questioning, rather than a passive smoothing of the liberal brow, is a way of provoking an individual response to the text, a process not just of reading but of "rereading" in a post-colonial sense. (Kosew 21)

As usual, Coetzee gives wide relevance to the creative process by choosing to write a meta-fictional novel about the creation of a masterpiece such as *The Possessed*: "it is a case of one artist confiding in another, enclosing his creativity in the creativity of another" (Attwell 31). But, as said before, Coetzee reminds his readers that every story comes from a lie, from a moment of frustration which needs to be elaborated and given expression. For this reason, the act of writing cannot be considered as totally truthful, or it can be true in the way of madness. As fictional Dostoevsky states about himself, when writing in such a moment of suffering: "(...) the writing, he fears, would be that of a madman – vileness, obscenity, page after page of it, untameable. He thinks of the madness as running through the artery of his right arm down to the fingertips and the pen and so to the page" (MP 18). Therefore, the act of writing derives from a *fall*, as Coetzee tries to explain to his reader through the telling of the fictional genesis of Dostoevsky's novel. Attwell highlights:

Coetzee, reading Dostoevsky as fellow-author, (...) proposes that the indirection and then transformation of Dostoevsky's writing was *the result of grief*; that it was the death of a child, and the desire to incarnate him back into life, that drove the quest for Stavrogin; this is the consoling fiction that Coetzee creates for himself. (34)

Every situation in the novel recalls the motif of the falling down: from the physical *falling*, the death of the son, to the oneiric *falling*, the eloquent vision experienced by Dostoevsky who dreams of going down into the depths of waters where he can finally see Pavel, to the moral and ethical *falling*, that of Nechaev and of all his followers in their merciless and totalizing revolutionary intent. But, also, that of Pavel, as realized by Dostoevsky in reading the cruel diary of his son. Writing can be considered as a *betrayal*: in the final chapter "Stavrogin," Dostoevsky decides to continue his son's diary by writing about Stavrogin (the main character of historical Dostoevsky's novel), thus giving birth to the masterpiece *The Possessed*. As Attwell points out: "The writing that accomplishes this falling/madness is double-edged, perhaps triple-edged: it betrays his memory and legacy; and it corrupts Matryona, for whom it is written" (39).



What Dostoevsky is waiting for, thus, comes at the end of the novel when, while finally writing, he discovers real Pavel. As already pointed out, this last chapter, “Stavrogin,” is a self evident reference to the main character of Dostoevsky’s novel; as a matter of fact, the name in the title is never mentioned throughout the chapter, whereas the reader’s attention is directed towards historical Dostoevsky’s masterpiece, where Stavrogin’s character immediately recalls the Pavel described in our novel’s last pages. Both of them are presented as evil, bored aristocrats. This negative and cruel version of Pavel, as argued by Attridge, is not only the product of a father aware that he does not know his son really, or of a father who is angry for his own failure as a father-figure, but it is also a probable rejection of the father in himself: “Soon Dostoevsky is writing, letting the writing happen, falling into writing. He depicts the apartment, and sketches a version of Pavel (who is also a version of himself) (...)” (129). Thus, both for Dostoevsky (be he real or fictional) and Coetzee, the act of writing requires the sacrifice of innocence betrayed by the writer himself:

(...) we now see Dostoevsky moving slowly and painfully through a series of betrayals – betrayal of the political utopianism he once embraced and now rejects in Nechaev, betrayal of the innocence of childhood, betrayal of the obligations of fatherhood – to the final betrayal, the madness, the inhumanity or ahumanity that enables a great work of fiction to come into being. (132)

Fictional Dostoevsky admits to his guilt in the writing act (final chapter), when he writes for Matryona: “If he ever wanted to know whether betrayal tasted more like vinegar or like gall, now is the time. (...) it seems to him a great price to pay. (...) he had to give up his soul in return. Now he begins to taste it. It tastes like gall” (MP 250). The creative process, therefore, is compared to a possession, an act of madness and betrayal, to which fictional Dostoevsky does not want to surrender till the final pages. More than once, he is pushed to write by these *demons*, but tries to resist: “Visions that come and go, swift, ephemeral. He is not in control of himself. Carefully he pushes paper and pen to the far end of the table and lays his head on his hands” (MP 53). These demons are the same that make fictional Dostoevsky write about Pavel’s (and his own) attraction for the baby-girl Matryona, with a clear intertextual reference to the famous chapter of *The Possessed* that was never accepted by censorship and was not published because it was considered obscene since it contained the raping of a girl and her following suicide. Coetzee rewrites a similar situation which, by the way, remains imagined, it really never happens, but haunts fictional Dostoevsky’s mind: “He (Dostoevsky) has no difficulty in imagining the child in her ecstasy. His imagination seems to have no bounds” (MP 76). Further in the novel, Dostoevsky meditates on the possibility of writing a book without moral bounds from censorship, when he describes the mental creation of the above cited chapter of *The Possessed*:

If he (Dostoevsky) were more confident of his French he would channel this disturbing excitement into a book of the kind one cannot publish in Russia (...). A book of the night, in which every excess would be represented and no bounds respected. (...) to be printed clandestinely and sold under the counter on the Left Bank. *Memoirs of a Russian Nobleman*. (...) With a chapter in which the noble memoirist reads aloud to the young daughter of his mistress a story of the seduction of a young girl in which he himself emerges more and more clearly as having been the seducer. A story full of intimate detail and innuendo which (...) makes her (the daughter) so doubtful of her own purity that three days later she gives herself up to him in despair, in the most shameful of ways (...). (MP 134)

In addition to the above, the betrayal inbred in the writing act becomes blatant when Dostoevsky explicitly describes his work as an exploitation of people’s shadows: “Sell my life, sell the lives of those around me. Sell everyone. (...) Sell you, sell your daughter, sell all those I love. Sold Pavel alive and will now all the Pavel inside me, if I can find a way. Hope to find a way of selling Sergei Nechaev too” (MP 222). In the moment of the final writing on Pavel’s diary, Dostoevsky admits that the writer is completely at the mercy of a-moral inspiration, literary creation: “Is the thing before him (the creative inspiration) the one that does the fathering, and must he give himself to being fathered by it?” (MP 240-241). But this is the only way, for the fiction/lie of writing, to bypass the lies of ‘reality’, struggling to reach an unreachable truth.



## Works Cited

- Attridge, Derek. "Expecting the Unexpected. The Master of Petersburg." *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 113-137.
- Attwell, David. "'The Shot Tower'. History, *Autre*-biography and Madness in *The Master of Petersburg*." *Ex-centric Writing: Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction*. Ed. Susanna Zinato, and Annalisa Pes. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. 25-42.
- Catteau, Jacques. *La Création Littéraire chez Dostoïevski*. Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1978.
- Coetzee, John Maxwell. *The Master of Petersburg*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Kossew, Sue. "Introduction." *Pen and Power: a Post-colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996. 1-31.
- . "Text/Intertext. *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and *On the Contrary* (1993)." *Pen and Power: a Post-colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996. 205-223.
- Penner, Dick. *Countries of the Mind: the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- Splendore, Paola. "'No More Mothers and Fathers': The Family Sub-Text in J.M. Coetzee's Novels." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38.3 (July 2003): 148-162.
- Thompson, Leonard. *A History of South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Watson, Stephen. "Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee." *Research in African Literatures: Special Focus on Southern Africa* 17.3 (Autumn 1986): 370-392.
- Zinato, Susanna, and Annalisa Pes. "Introduction." *Ex-centric Writing: Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. 1-24.