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## **VIETNAM REVISITED: HISTORY, HOLOCAUST, IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL DEBATE AND COETZEE'S *DUSKLANDS***

The paper is a response to what has been recognized by the filmmaker Clay Claiborne, the author of the 2008 documentary *Vietnam: The American Holocaust*, as an urgent need to face the suppressed truth about the Vietnam War as the best vantage point from which to examine the mechanism of historical repetition. The continuity of war and violence, despite declarative promises of peace and stability, is the paradox that since the WWII has increasingly engaged the attention of historians, cultural critics and commentators, and artists. In the first part of the paper the views are represented of those among them who come from different fields yet, like Claiborne, use the benefit of the same, post-colonial, hindsight to reach the common conclusion about the holocaust, not as a unique aberration, but as historically recurrent and culturally conditioned phenomenon. The strategies used to justify and perpetuate it – the second major focus in this part of the paper – are not limited to deliberate falsification of historical facts though, for beyond what Harold Pinter called “the thick tapestry of lies” concealing the crimes of the past, there is the willingness, generated by western myths of racial supremacy, to believe the lies and/or condone the crimes. Within this (imperialist, patriarchal) mythic tradition, a particular kind of split identity is produced by, and reproduces in its turn, the kind of violent history we tend to take for granted: I argue, along with J. Habermas, L. Friedberg, C. Nord and H. Giroux, that the factual truth will stop short of the transformative effect, political or moral, we traditionally expect from it as long as the deep-seated affective alienation from whatever has been construed as the other that constitutes this identity remains unrecognized and unattended. Confronting such forms of radical inner dissociation, considered normal or desirable in patriarchal culture, have been, at least since Shakespeare, art's ultimate *raison d'être*. In the second part of the paper I provide what I consider one of the supreme examples of literary deconstructions of western identity-forming traditions – *Dusklands*, Coetzee's novel about the continuity of consciousness bringing together the geographically and historically distant events: the colonial massacres of the African Hottentots and the genocidal assault on Vietnam. Rather than offering a thorough examination of this richly layered novel, the aim of my analysis is to point to the ingenious strategies, particularly to the ironic intertextual allusions to Hegel's master/slave paradigm, Coetzee employs to

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represent the ‘demanifestation/denazification’ of western historical sense as a process parallel to that of dismantling of patriarchal identity.

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## **1. AMERICANIZING THE HOLOCAUST: HISTORICAL REPETITION, LIES, AND SUPREMATIST MYTHS**

“History may be servitude, history may be freedom” T. S. Eliot

“On the horizon of any human science there is the project of bringing man’s consciousness back into its real conditions, of restoring it to the contents and forms that brought it into being, and elude us within it...” Michel Foucault

Produced in 2008, as the American war in Iraq entered its sixth year, Clay Claiborne’s documentary *Vietnam: The American Holocaust* begins with the author’s suggestion that the failure of the Americans to fully understand what happened in the Vietnam War condemned them to repeat it in Iraq. A reminder of various officially produced falsehoods surrounding the Vietnam War, the film reveals the real sequence and political significance of the events leading to the conflict and its escalation (including the evidence never before disclosed that the Tonkin Gulf incident, which served as a justification for LBJ to launch the most massive air raids known in the history of warfare against North Vietnam, had never really happened), the methods employed by the American troops (from nonselective killings, rape, torture, mutilation of corpses required to establish the body count, extra paid in money and career enhancement), to the use phosphorus, napalm, and Agent Orange (only one in the series of color-spectrum nick-named lethal chemicals, known as “the rainbow of death”), and their long-term consequences (with a chilling record of monstrous births resulting from genetic malformation). Among the staggering figures are more than 3,4 million dead Vietnamese (admitted by McNamara, but higher according to the Vietnamese sources), 3000 villages burnt to the ground, 19 million gallons of Agent Orange spread to permanently poison the Vietnamese soil. Yet the film’s chief significance lies in the connection it establishes, for the first time in documentary film, between Vietnam and the U.S. current wars. The question of what makes a holocaust is also raised: suggested in the title itself, a plea is repeated at the end of the film to reconsider the wider social and cultural context in which the Nazi Holocaust, once believed to have been unique and safely consigned to the history of tragic errors, its painful lesson remembered for ever, was allowed to happen again, in a scenario which except for the perpetrator and the victims, followed basically the same underlying principle of total annihilation.

To historicize the Vietnam War, in one or more senses of the term<sup>2</sup>, was however a project undertaken much earlier, in the closing years of the conflict, among others by the South African Nobel Prize recipient J.M. Coetzee whose two novellas published under the common title *Dusklands* I propose to examine in the second part of the paper. In *Dusklands*, Coetzee's first novel, the conflict in Indo-China becomes a starting point of a larger exploration of the deep archetypal matrix underlying the genocides that mark the entire period of modernity. This 'philosophy of history', intentionally reminiscent of Hegel, is shown to be closely bound up with the way identity is constituted in western patriarchal culture. In this respect, Coetzee's novel fulfills the demand facing, according to Jürgen Habermas, not only legal successors to the German Reich, but all responsible individuals implicated in the crimes of history. Habermas formulates it in a rhetorical question: "Is there any way to bear the liability for the context in which such crimes originated, a context with which one's own existence is historically interwoven, other than through remembrance, practiced in solidarity, of what cannot be made good other than through a reflexive, scrutinizing attitude towards one's own identity-forming traditions?" (Habermas 2003: 66).

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The crucial significance of re-examining the past in an attempt to understand the present and control the future became particularly clear in the years following the WWII. It is true that the monolithic, imperialist, approach to history had been challenged before, notably by Nietzsche, and then Eliot in England, but in these cases it was done from the romantic standpoint of a superman, a saint, or a poet, whose exceptional personal strength enabled them to resist our history's death drive<sup>3</sup>. If Eliot, like Nietzsche before him,

2 In their introductory comment to a section from *The Holocaust: Theoretical Writings*, the editors describe the term as referring to three kinds of investigation: the historization of the Holocaust can mean asking where and when historical accounts of the events should begin, considering to which other historical events the Holocaust can be related, and reflecting upon the limits that traditional modes of historical understanding face when addressing the Holocaust. (Levi & Rothberg 2003: 59)

3 In his text about the use and abuse of history (Nietzsche 2010), Nietzsche examines three possible approaches to the past. The first is celebratory: a national (imperialist) history is habitually monumentalized, that is to say, uncritically, unselectively celebrated, with the dire result of transforming its worst injustices and cruelties into patterns of false grandeur to be slavishly followed. The second, antiquarian approach, bent on preserving peacetime cultural values of the past, produces less direct constraint, but provides no impetus to the renewal of life. Only the third, critical approach, whose criterion is the serviceableness of a past to the future growth and unfolding of man's creative potential, is according to Nietzsche, legitimate. It is enacted by individuals familiar with the examples in the past of heroic rejection of the whole burden of inherited false reverence and possessing sufficient moral confidence in their own will to power to repeat the revolutionary gesture. Nietzsche's threefold interpretation of historical understanding are comparable to the distinctions Eliot was to make between history as a living tradition, history as a dead form, and to historical sense, which enables critical judgment and choice between the two. Formulated first in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in 1920, these notions were

celebrated the individual's heroic choice of freedom, William Golding's essay "Fable" explores the more frequent and tragic instances of collective consent to servitude and violence. Published in 1974, but written some years earlier, the essay includes an account of the author's dismay at the horrors revealed upon the opening of the Nazi death camps. Still appalled by what 'civilized' people were capable of doing to their fellow men, Golding developed a (temporary) theory of man as a latently sick animal, the fact, he claims, rational political and philosophical systems serve to effectively conceal. This was a modern version of the pessimistic, medieval doctrine of 'fallen' human nature, but Golding apparently had outgrown this view by the time he published the essay, for in its second part his focus is no longer on human nature but on culture as a source of evil. The international mess into which XX century man got himself is not so much due to man's morally diseased condition as to the historically produced and perpetuated pernicious habits of belief and feeling. History, Golding asserts echoing Eliot, has two meanings, one referring to the "objective yet devoted stare with which humanity observes its past" (Golding 1974: 90), to acquire the knowledge necessary to avoid its errors in the future. The other is subjective history, felt in "the blood and bones" and consisting of prejudices, failure of human sympathy, ignorance of facts, all wrapped in a cloak of national prestige which "the uneducated pull round their shoulders to keep off the wind of self-knowledge". This other history is "frozen", it is a dead thing; but "dead though it is, it won't lie down"; it is handed on, "a monstrous creature, descending to us from our ancestors, producing nothing but disunity and chaos" (94).

These are valuable insights, and relevant in the analysis of the problems Claiborne's film and Coetzee's novel address – except for the colossally naïve mistake Golding makes when he attributes the beneficial knowledge of the past to 'campus' history, while blaming uneducated parents for transmitting bloodthirsty ignorance and chauvinistic prejudices. Numerous historians and cultural critics have since pointed out that while sheer ignorance of facts must lie behind the tragic irony of so many wars waged "to end all wars", it is not, as Golding believed, due to the lack of institutional education, but precisely to the 'campus' history learnt in elite schools and universities. From G. Vidal, to Craig Wilder, John Osborne to H. Pinter and J. Pilger, non-orthodox historians, cultural analysts and artists have helped unravel "the thick tapestry of lies" spun within universities and media to wrap the

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later elaborated within broader, not exclusively literary contexts: initially defined in terms of the individual poet's ability to reject empty traditional forms and bond himself to the living poetic tradition (a product of unified sensibility as opposed to traditions of poetry stemming from and perpetuating the pervasive cultural disease of dissociation of thought from feeling) – Eliot's historical sense acquired a wider cultural relevance by the time he wrote the last section of *The Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding". Inspired by the English refusal to give in under the German air raids through 1940/1 it develops into a philosophical meditation about a choice, facing individuals and nations alike, of which between the two meanings of history – "history may be servitude, history may be freedom" – they are to live by and at what price.

still unconfessed genocidal past of the 'democratic' west.<sup>4</sup> The picture that emerges from their and other recent investigations has two focal points. First it explodes finally the persistent prejudice about the uniqueness of the Nazi Holocaust. It was first challenged by Aimé Césaire in the 1950, but the message of his *Discourse on Colonialism* – first, its location of the origins of fascism within colonialism, and from, and hence within the very traditions of European humanism critics believed fascism threatened – had been largely forgotten, along with the revolutionary anti-colonial mood of the period, and the myth of the defeat of fascism by the western democratic allies re-imposed by 1980. When the German historians in the mid-eighties opened a debate to prove that Hitler had a historical precedent and pointed to Stalin's purges as the model for Nazi extermination of the Jews, authors such as David Stannard, Charles Ward, Lilian Friedberg, G. Monbiott, Sven Lindquist and others, supplied fresh, statistical, evidence that the long predating annihilation of the American Indians, Australian Aborigines, and native African tribes in terms of magnitude, cruelty, and conscious intention to exterminate the entire indigenous population were equal or exceeded Hitler's Final solution.<sup>5</sup> A good

4 In his recent publication *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, Craig Stephen Wilder explains the role that prestigious Ivy League colleges played in supporting and normalising slavery and slave trade. He asserts, in an interview, what sounds like a deliberate refutation of Golding: "It's precisely on campus that the ideas that come to defend slavery in the 19th century get refined. They get their intellectual legitimacy on campus. They get their scientific sort of veneer on campus. And they get their moral credentialing on campus". It is not only racist theory, Wilder explains, but racist practises reminiscent of Nazi experiments that compromise the elite American universities: "And the ugliest aspects of that is the use of marginalized people in the Americas, in the United States—its enslaved black people, often Native Americans, and sometimes the Irish—for experimentation, the bodies that were accessible as science rose. ... In fact, when the first medical colleges are established in North America in the 1760s—the first is at the College of Philadelphia, which is now the University of Pennsylvania, and the second is at King's College, which is now Columbia—... what allows them to be established is access to corpses, access to people to experiment upon. And, in fact, it's precisely the enslaved, the unfree and the marginalized who get forcibly volunteered for that role". (Wilder 2013)

The same can be said of English universities. In his play *Look Back in Anger* John Osborne represented the function of the prestigious Oxbridge education with uncanny accuracy: it was to provide the English political cadre whose chief qualifications were a hazy knowledge of facts, the absence of conscience, and self-protective stupidity. For, as his angry young hero says, "The only thing to make things as much like they always have been is to make any alternative too much for your tiny poor brain to grasp" (Osborne 1957: 19-20). As if to confirm the continuing validity of this statement, in August 2010, Florian Bieber, a political scientist at the university of Kent, published his students' test results which revealed their absurd misconceptions about the history of the Balkans, including the notion that the former Socialist Yugoslavia's president Tito was an Ottoman vassal – and yet, as one of the apposite comments ran, they were future diplomats, entrusted to make fateful decisions about this and other regions under the control of European powers. (Bieber 2010)

5 For the genocide of the American- Indian peoples and its persistent denial see (Stannard 1992), and (Ward 1997). For the genocide of the indigenous peoples of Africa, notably the German extermination of the Herero people in 1904 (see Lindquist 1996). John Pilger's documentary films and public addresses, such as *War on Democracy* (2007) and *Breaking the Great Australian Silence* (2009), speak of the persistently denied crimes of (neo)colonial history in South America and Australia.

example of comparative, historicizing thinking is Lilian Friedberg's paper "Dare to Compare: Americanizing the Holocaust", her recent contribution to the debate on the side of those who defy the long-standing view of Final Solution as an unparalleled event in history. Relying on the results of the latest research in the American history of settlement as a model for later genocides, she argues that the extermination of the native Americans by the settlers conforms, in all crucial points, to the definition of genocide applied to Hitler's treatment of the Jews. Although stretching over centuries and taking place in the pre-industrial virgin forests of the New World, the murder of the Indians possessed the same "merciless, bio-centric intentionality", with the result of exterminating 98 percent of the indigenous population as opposed to the 60 to 65 percent of the Jews killed in the WWII.

Her comparison also covers the analogous attempts by German and American historians to deny their genocidal pasts, the only difference lying in the failure of the former and the general success of the latter. Friedberg quotes from the reactionary historian James Axtell's 1992 study *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* - the following telling passage:

We make a hash of our historical judgments because we continue to feel guilty about the real or imagined sins of our fathers and forefathers...We can stop flogging ourselves with our 'imperialistic origins and tarring ourselves with the broad brush of 'genocide'. As a huge nation of law and order and increasingly refined sensibility, we are not guilty of murdering Indian women and babies, of branding slaves on the forehead, or of claiming any real estate in the world we happen to fancy. (Quoted in Friedberg 2003: 469)

Statements like this, Friedberg comments, when proffered in defense of Germany's genocidal history elicit vehement opposition from the academic and intellectual community, yet with regard to the American past go virtually unchallenged and are integrated into the canon of acceptable discourse. In fact, such statements point to another reason behind the story of ongoing genocidal violence, one that goes beyond mere circumstantial lies and is a version of what Nietzsche called the monumentalizing approach to history. Challenging this underlying myth is the second focus of interest in recent endeavors to historicize the Holocaust. For the factual lies accompanying genocides would never have the power to persuade if it weren't for an a priori readiness to believe them, implanted by the seductive power of the larger myth. Just as the incoherent concoction of absurd assertions essentializing the Jew into a common enemy (simultaneously as Bolshevik conspirators, capitalists, war-mongers, degenerate defilers of German blood, and the international devil) was re-enforced with a promissory myth of the millennial rule of the superior Arian race, so too the representations of the Indians and Negroes (religious or quasi-scientific) as blood-thirsty devils or sexually depraved beasts, used to justify massacres and slavery, tuned in with the myth of America's leadership as divine election. If the analogy between the Nazi Germany and the post WWII USA is incomplete, Germans having admitted to the facts behind their ideological lies, it is because they were defeated and forced to renounce

(officially and temporarily at least) the Nazi dream of a millennial global rule, while the U.S., as their post WW II history demonstrates, have no intention of giving up on their Manifest Destiny or the colonial practice it validates.<sup>6</sup> Gore Vidal summed the situation up in a text “The greater the lie: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, and the origins of Cold War - three myths that America is ruled by”, whose very title alludes to a continuity from Goebbels’s the U.S. practice of political deception: after his exposure of the governmental lies on which the US post WWII history is founded, he concludes laconically – “Good morning Vietnam”. (Vidal 2000)

More recently John Pilger pointed to this unrepentant mythologizing of the American history as a clue to the Vietnam War and the US subsequent international politics. His commentary, originally published in the 02/05/17 issue of *The New Statement* and reproduced on the Information Clearing House under the title “John Pilger finds our children learning lies”, begins with a question, ‘How does thought control work in societies that call themselves free?’ He draws attention to the seeming paradox that their chief disseminators are teachers, broadcasters and authors of history guides, that is to say, privileged communicators with unlimited access to the facts. (He refers specifically to the director of BBC News, who described the most cynical, unobserved, unverified, illegitimate elections, held in Iraq under the most brutal occupation, as “democratic, fair and free”) This is possible, Pilger points out, thanks to the pre-established world-view, or “the unerring assumption” that ‘we’ in the dominant west have moral standards superior to theirs”. It is this (monumentalizing) historical prejudice that gave the propaganda lies about the Vietnam War their insidious plausibility, seducing not only the deceived but the deceivers too : so that “...the longest war of the twentieth century waged against both communist and non-communist, north and south Vietnam”, and causing the death of at least five millions Vietnamese, came to be seen as a conflict of ‘good’ Vietnamese against ‘bad’ Vietnamese, in which Americans were involved in order to bring “democracy to the freedom-loving people of South Vietnam who were facing a ‘communist threat’”.

As an example, Pilger refers to a widely used revision guide for GCSE course in modern world history, Vietnam and cold war. The falsehoods 14- to 16-year olds are asked to learn in the American schools, Pilger describes as shocking: starting with the false assertion that after the withdrawal of the French colonizers, Vietnam was partitioned into the communist north and democratic south, the authors go on to either falsify or omit the facts that would shed light on the true nature of the U.S. intervention. The fact is that the division of Vietnam, at the Geneva Conference, was not meant to be temporary and that its purpose was to prevent the democratic victory of the communist leader Ho Chi Minh, who had the support of the vast majority both in the north and the south – is conveniently elided. This was the reason

6 “The question for the future concerning the genocidal treatment of native Americans is not ‘Can it happen again?’ Rather it is ‘Can it be stopped?’”, writes David Stannard a propos 40 000 disappeared in Guatemala, and another 100 000 openly murdered in the 15 years preceding the publication of his book. (Stannard 1992: xiii)

why the free national elections, promised to be held on 26 July 1956, were hindered by the US, and in the meantime a fake pro-American government of the brutal expatriate mandarin, Ngo Dinh Diem, imported from New Jersey, was put in place in South Vietnam, the CIA being entrusted with sustaining the illusion of its 'democratic' nature. Thereupon phony elections were arranged, hailed as 'free and fair' by the west, with the desired results fabricated by the American officials, despite, as the report said, the 'Vietcong terror'. That so called 'terrorists' were also South Vietnamese, whose resistance to the American invasion was widely popular, is conveniently omitted. The guide is silent about these crucial facts, just as it fails to mention the greatest tonnage of bombs in the history of warfare subsequently dropped on Vietnam, or the nature of the chemicals used, that combined to ruin the once beautiful landscape, poison the soil and dramatically change the genetic order, with lasting human consequences so appallingly documented in Claiborne's film. Its silences, parallel to the omissions in the official syllabuses on cold war from Oxford and Cambridge, reflect, as Pilger points out again, the general tone of the history recorded from the viewpoint of morally superior 'us' as opposed to the unworthy 'them'. The resulting amnesia had long swallowed the truth of its own origins, so that, Pilger concludes, it is now

as if the British empire did not happen, there is nothing about the atrocious wars that were models for the successor power, America, in Indonesia, Vietnam, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, to name but a few along modern history's imperial trail of blood of which Iraq is the latest. And now Iran?...How many more innocent people have to die before those who filter the past and the present wake up to their moral responsibility to protect our memory and the lives of human beings? (Pilger 2002)

The answer is suggested in the final passages of Lilian Freiburg's "Dare to Compare", where she rounds off her analogy between the Nazi and American Holocaust. Like Pilger, and like Habermas too, she calls for a "fundamental alteration in the consciousness of this country". Yet instead of 'denazification' - the term proposed by the native American scholar C. Ward - she prefers 'de-manifestation' as a "more apt designation for the paradigmatic shift requisite for decentering the hegemonistic reign of the master narratives of Manifest Destiny..." This would allow us, she goes on to explain, "to place the postulates of Manifest destiny in a proper chronological order": "denazification" clearly connotes "a thing in the past", de-manifestation implies a present, "manifest" reality, "a trail of rampant plundering, pillage and mass murder" predating "the *subsequent* emergence of theories of Lebensraumpolitik" but also outliving them (Friedberg 2003: 472).

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As Friedberg and Pilger indicate themselves, such a radical "alteration of consciousness" would involve more than acknowledging the facts. Certainly, shared knowledge about 'other' histories, hitherto hidden or marginalized, is a huge step towards the de-centering of the American (or any other western)



master-narrative, and may lead to the healing of some wounds, particularly those suffered by the oppressed, as Aurora Levins Morales argues in “Historian as Curandera” (Morales 1998). To cure the oppressor’s soul though would require a kind of re-mythologizing that takes place on a deepest psychic level, the zone of our original core humanness which, buried under the layers of culturally acquired pseudo-identities, has become impenetrable to truth, with which, as sociologists and psychologists warn us, an increasing number of people, and not only those “who filter the past”, are out of touch. Indifference to the plight of another seems to be the contemporary form of the pathological relationship to the Other that constitutes the western patriarchal identity: whether distrust and fear, scorn or murderous hatred, these all take a tragic swerve away from the reciprocal ‘I/ Thou’ relationship that in original societies shaped human identity because empathy and solidarity were experienced as an embedded, biologically scripted, strategy of survival<sup>7</sup>. It is the self-centered I/IT relationship, involving in modern bureaucratic and consumer societies the reification rather than demonization of the other, that has recently undermined the traditional belief about the liberating power of truth. “We always seem to believe that all you have to do is tell the truth”, the Canadian philosopher Henry Giroux observes in an interview with Bill Moyers, “but I’m sorry, it doesn’t work that way”. The reason it can no longer be taken for granted, he explains referring to his book *Zombi Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, goes beyond the strategies of “organized forgetting of the pasts other than one’s own national history”, and involves what he calls “dis-imagination” – the more deadly practice of eliminating any but instrumental or pragmatist kind of rationality - which, administered systematically in American schools, has produced “a nation of zombies” (Giroux 2013).

7 The relationship Martin Buber’s well-known phrase designates is also central to the philosophy of Emanuel Levinas. His critique, according to the editors of *Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, of the European entire philosophical tradition is relevant to the theme of their book, even where it makes no direct reference to holocaust. As an alternative to the philosophy centering on questions of being and knowledge, essentially egocentric and complicit with violence against the ‘other’, Levinas developed an alternative philosophy of his own, one that begins with the ethical relation, “with the subject’s necessary response to and responsibility for the other, a relation predicated not on knowledge and active mastery but ignorance and open passivity” (Levi & Rothberg 2003: 230). As I have suggested, Levinas is by no means alone in his aim to reverse the western philosophical tradition’s privileging of ‘the same’ against the ‘other’, numerous such reversals having been proposed by poets and playwrights since the Greek tragedians, albeit in a language of their own – non-conceptual, metaphorically binding together what is different and other, and thus infinitely better suited to the purpose. What I want to add here, however, is that the anthropologists, such as Riane Eisler, who provided ample evidence that these alternative modes of relating to the other imagined by poets and philosophers such as Levinas, were once a social reality, have now been joined by neuroscientists, whose latest investigations into the way our brain functions, and particularly the discovery of mirror-neurons and their probable role in the evolution of altruism, seem to confirm that humans are biologically conditioned for empathy, that, contrary to the “selfish gene” theory, we are “hard-wired to care and connect”. See Eisler 1987 and Korten 2008. For discussion on mirror neurons and empathy see Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2005.

## 2. *THE DISEASE OF THE MASTER'S SOUL: COETZEE'S DUSKLANDS*

Confronting such forms of radical dissociation, considered normal or even desirable in patriarchal culture, has always been its art's ultimate *raison d'être*. D.M. Coetzee calls the condition the sickness of the master's soul and examines the symptoms and causes as they appear in the protagonists of the two stories that comprise his first novel *Dusklands*. Positioned at two crucial points in recent history, the Vietnam War and an earlier episode from the Boer settlement in South Africa, their paranoid monologues offer a powerful psychoanalytic x-ray of the pathology inherent in western "identity-forming traditions", which, from the myth of Zeus-born patroness of *techne*, Athene, through the Judeo-Christian theology to the enlightenment trust in scientific power/knowledge, have been underlined by a single purpose of subjugating or annihilating the other: the mother by the father's law, 'barbarian' peoples by the civilized Europeans, but also the 'savage' within by the taming force of reason. Rather than analyze subtle strategies Coetzee employs to weave together his various strands of meaning, I will focus on the points in the novel where this underlying myth seems to bear most obvious resemblance to Hegel's philosophy. For as the phrase "the sickness of the master's soul", as well as the mottos introducing the two stories immediately signal, Hegel's recurring master/slave paradigm and his *Philosophy of History* are a constantly implied reference in the novel.

The quotation used as a motto for the first story, *The Vietnam Project*, is the military and political expert Hermann Khan's comment justifying the "pragmatic rationality" of the American pilots bombing Vietnam:

Obviously it is difficult not to sympathize with those European and American audiences who, when shown films of fighter-bomber pilots visibly exhilarated by successful napalm bombing runs on Viet-Cong targets, react with horror and disgust. Yet, it is unreasonable to expect the U.S. Government to obtain pilots who are so appalled by the damage they may be doing that they cannot carry out their missions or become excessively depressed or guilt-ridden. (Coetzee 1983)

The identical symptomatology of rational enlightenment and moral impenetrability affects the story's fictional hero, the American mythographer Eugene, engaged on the military project for a quick victory in the Vietnam "war to end all wars" as well as his predecessor and spiritual double from the second story, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Boer explorer and slave-owner Jacobus. Neither acquires the healing self-knowledge, suggesting on the contrary that the master's megalomania is incurable. The unsuspected and often grotesque incongruity their delirious monologues reveal - a sense of unreality in which the identity founded on infinite power over the other ultimately dissolves - is left to the readers who care for more than original narrative strategies and resonant language, to ponder and relate to the versions of history, myth and identity they have accepted as their own.<sup>8</sup>

8 Both stories offer a historical and anthropological perspective superior to most official views on the role the US and NATO played in the conflict that disintegrated former Yugoslavia -

The motto to the second novella – “What is important is the philosophy of history” – fuses this kind of consciousness with the master narrative of western expansion. In an analogy with Hegel’s philosophy of history as the self-realization of the spirit, Coetzee’s protagonists both feel to be serving a purpose of which the eradication of the Bushmen, or the devastation of Vietnam, are only local manifestations – that they are heroes in a story, as the intellectual Eugene puts it, of “life itself, life in obedience to which even the simplest organism represses its entropic yearning for the mud and follows the road of evolutionary duty to the glory of consciousness” (Coetzee 1974: 27-8). They have in common a hypertrophied conscious mind, and the worship of the Goddess of *techne*, set off by the contempt, hatred and fear of all ‘lower’ forms of life – whether the dark-skinned races of the world, the female, or their own bodies. Yet to successfully subdue or eradicate those ‘others,’ which they feel to be their duty to the ‘master-myth of history,’ they also need to suppress the enemy within, the natural wellspring of moral imagination that has become the most threatening ‘other,’ and that Eugene, the child of enlightenment, appropriately calls “the dark self”. As opposed to the bright self, which strives towards obedience and order, and longs to kneel before a superior paternal authority, the dark self, nourished by the atavistic maternal emotion, strives towards turmoil and humiliation: it craves “to kneel before the slave, to wash the leper’s sores. It is moved by courage”; and it “sickens the bright self with doubts and qualms”. It is only after the eradication of the dark self’s ‘archaic’ virtues of courage, compassion and conscience that the Manifest destiny Eugene feels cracking in his bones will be fulfilled, the rebellious Vietnamese bombed into obedience, and a new perfect world order permanently established. Successfully suppressed in the robust man of action Jacobus, who has no qualms about massacring a tribe of Hottentots as part of fulfilling the white man’s mission, these ‘dark’ vestiges of humanity resurface in Eugene to poison him with the sense of guilt he shares temporarily with millions of TV audiences as they watch an unnamed village after village disappear in napalm flames. Eugene soon reassures himself they are the necessary purgatorial fires before the coming of the future paradise. Yet having pressed back his atavistic guilt, Eugene breaks down mentally and ends in an asylum. His affliction never turns into a healing, Shakespearean madness though: for the symbolic message of his dreams, in which he beckons to the dark shadows of Vietnamese as they are swallowed by flames, reaching towards them with a gesture of an orphan seeking readmission to the home he was exiled from, is never allowed to break through his paranoid delusion of racial grandeur. What his breakdown signifies remains for the reader’s contemplation: it certainly suggests that the asymmetry in the white patriarchal identity paradigm makes the master as vulnerable as the mastered and that the history that might get him out of the trap belongs to the other. This is also comparable to what Hegel observed in an unexpected turn in his parable about the master and the slave.

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but very few intellectuals or academics in Serbia have, to my knowledge, chosen to attend to this aspect of the novel.

Hegel's argument, most completely formulated in the section 'Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage' of *The Phenomenology of Mind* (See Hegel: 1807), begins with an assertion that the constitution of the self as an autonomous and free being can only happen in relation to the other. At this initial point, and quite in the orthodox vein, Hegel defines selfhood as equivalent with the status of the master - of the man, that is, who had entered the struggle for recognition, got out of it victorious, and is recognized by the defeated and enslaved opponent as free and autonomous. Here comes the surprising turn in the argument: for what the winner realizes after the struggle is won, is that he is not the man he had wanted to be when he entered it - a man recognized by another man. For the recognition, in order to be valid, must come from the other who is also recognized as autonomous and free. Without this reciprocity, this mutual acknowledgement of each other's human reality and dignity, all identity is illusory: as long as it depends on the testimony of the other that he has overpowered, and precisely in proportion to the degree of the submission inflicted, the western selfhood remains unreal, a ghost, a mirage in a desert the exercise of his power has produced.

There is another, crucial, point in Coetzee's second story, where the protagonist-narrator undergoes a crisis of identity also analyzable in terms of Hegel's parable. It occurs at the culminating point of the narrative, as Jacobus and his men swoop down on a village of the wild Namaqua, and massacre the entire tribe, along with the several of his own defected slaves, in revenge for what Jacobus, the archetypal Judeo-Christian father, calls the unpardonable "crimes against spirit" - irreverence and disobedience. However, the act of retribution - long savored in advance as a redress of proper balance whereby the white master, humiliated, expropriated and exiled, roaming the desert as a "pallid symbol", "an insubstantial phantom", was to reclaim his reality - suddenly seems inadequate to its metaphysical purpose. For, as Jacobus realizes, whatever kind of torture he may choose to inflict upon them, the scared, imploring victims strike him as unworthy guarantee of his existence:

But this abject treacherous rabble were telling me that here and everywhere else on this continent there would be no resistance to my power and no limit to its projection. My despair was a despair at the undifferentiated plenum, which is after all nothing else but the void dressed up as being. ...The only sound was the cold whistling of images through my brain. All were inadequate. There was nothing that could be impressed on these bodies, nothing that could be torn from them or forced through their orifices, that would be commensurate with the desolate infinity of my power over them...I was undergoing nothing less than the failure of imagination before the void. I was sick at heart. (Coetzee 1974: 102)

Unlike Eugene who ends up clinically mad, Jacobus overcomes the moment of this existential self-doubt, finding the illusory cure in what may be understood as a horrible travesty of Hegel's master/slave dialectics: among the pitiful crowd of his former slaves, he comes across a Hottentot who demonstrates human dignity and freedom by refusing to beg for mercy and is hence worthy of his respect. In that sense, he qualifies for the kind of

the identity-guaranteeing other Jacobus seeks. And yet, in a grotesque, but historically accurate, parody of Hegel's original meaning, the "admiration" Jacobus feels for the Hottentot does not preclude the latter's murder, it only makes it a more satisfying experience – albeit somewhat marred by the clumsiness of the execution. The choice of words leaves no doubt that beyond its uncanny psychological power, the whole scene has an additional purpose of ironic inter-textual allusion. Regarding his victim, stabbed in the throat after the bullet in his chest failed to produce the swift clean effect Jacobus hoped for, he remembers the disgust and the pity he felt in the past, when in his favorite boy's pastime, instead of killing a bird outright, he only managed to wound it and had to snap its neck once again. He "cuddled the tiny creature expiring in his hands, venting upon it tears of pity for all the tiny helpless, suffering things, until it passed away". The racist evolutionary trope in the subtext becomes then quite explicit:

Such was the emotion re-awoken in me by him whose passage from this world I have so unkindly botched but who was on his way on his way. He opened his lips and bubbled uncomfortably through the blood flowing inward to his lungs and outward in a red sheet over his chest and on to the ground. So prodigal, I thought, I who had been more miserly of blood than any other of my fluids. I knelt over him and stared into his eyes. He stared back confidently. He knew enough to know I was no longer a threat, that no one could threaten him any more. I did not want to lose his respect. I cuddled his head and shoulders and raised him a little. My arms were lapped in blood. His eyes were losing focus. He was dying fast. 'Courage', I said. 'We admire you.' (Coetzee 1974: 105)

This persistent denial of the other by Coetzee's heroes is ultimately not a departure from Hegel, who changed his views with time. What Jacobus calls the disease of the master's soul, Hegel referred to as the 'tragedy of the master's situation,' and declared that the future belonged to the slave. Yet, as a recent critic phrased it, "his moment of lucidity passes" and Hegel's subsequent lectures reflected increasingly his time's racial prejudices about non-European, particularly African societies (Bak-Mors 2003: 373-4)<sup>9</sup>. Eventually his *Philosophy of History*, consisting of lectures he delivered through the period

9 Susan Buck-Morrs attributes Hegel's moment of lucidity to the historical upheaval caused by the Haitian revolution, whose leaders, armed slaves, forced the French Republic to acknowledge the abolition of slavery in Saint Domingue in 1794 and in other French colonies. The admiration for the heroic risks undertaken by the black Haitians must have qualified them, in Hegel's eyes, for the status of free men, for his original, historically inaccurate and thoroughly racist, assumption was that slaves are themselves responsible for their condition, having failed to risk their lives in a struggle for freedom. For Buck-Morrs, Hegel's relapse into his original racism is less significant than the revolutionary content of his master/slave parable, and particularly its hitherto unsuspected connection to the historical reality of the Haitian revolution. For the purpose of the parallel I want to establish between Hegel's changing views of history and identity and the way they are offered for understanding and judgment through Coetzee's fictional characters, the eminent European philosopher's *failure* to sustain his revolutionary insight is as significant as the fact that he for a moment saw the truth.

of 1822 to 1830, settles into a monumental justification for the two subsequent centuries of self-complaisant, murderous Euro-centrism<sup>10</sup>.

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Writing on the eve of the Vietnam War, Arthur Miller identified the drive to “make life real by conquering denial” as the secret thrust of all great art (Miller 1987: 519) The power of great ironic literature, resolving, as it does, its conflicts in defeat or failure, lies in its unique capacity to inspire the reader for the completion of this task. Coetzee’s protagonists never conquer their denial, remaining locked in their solipsistic illusory existence. Yet the novel’s ironic exposures of the self-annihilating contradictions of the master’s omnipotence allow the reader to confront an impasse, a nothingness at the heart of western identity, in such a way as to understand its historical origin, and instead of acquiescence, or cynicism, imagine a path leading back to being.

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10 In fact, the section on the “African Character” from his *Philosophy of History*, published in 1830/31, more than twenty years after the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, contains views about the African – as lacking a sense of subjectivity, having no inkling of the existence of an Other, or Higher Power, and hence being incapable of having a history, or destiny; as being quite deprived of reverence, morality or justice and incapable of feeling; and there being “nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character” (Hegel 2006: 208-9) – that are reproduced almost verbatim in Jacobus’ opening meditation on the wild Hottentots.

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## JOŠ JEDNOM O VIJETNAMU: ISTORIJA, HOLOKAUST, IDENTITET U SAVREMENOJ KULTUROLOŠKOJ DEBATI I ROMANU *ZEMLJE SUMRAKA*

Rezime

Rad predstavlja odziv na ono što su filmski reditelji poput Kleja Klejborna prepoznali kao nužno suočavanje sa potisnutim istinama o Vijetnamu, da bi se iz te perspektive sagledao tragični mehanizam istorijskog ponavljanja. Klejborn je samo jedan od sve brojnijih savremenih autora – istoričara, analitičara kulture, umetnika – koji se suočavaju sa kontinuitetom rata i nasilja uprkos deklarativnim opredeljenjima za mir i stabilnost, nastojeći da razotkriju uzrok ovom paradoksu. Prvi deo rada posvećen je autorima različitih provenijencija ali sličnih humanističkih uverenja i zajedničke, postkolonijalne tačke gledišta, iz koje rat, a posebno holokaust, sagledavaju ne kao istorijsku aberaciju uslovljenu manjkavošću ljudske prirode, već kao viševakovni, rekurentni fenomen svojstven zapadnoj (imperijalnoj patrijarhalnoj) kulturi. Među strategijama koje obezbeđuju neometanu upotrebu genocidnog nasilja svakako je sistematska, institucionalizovana proizvodnja neznanja, odnosno falsifikovanje istorije, o čemu rečito govore Goldingovi i Pinterovi eseji, Vidalovi, Pildžerovi ili Monbiotovi komentari, kao i istoriografske studije Svena Lindkvista i Č. S. Vajldera. Međutim, pored guste tkanice laži koja prikriva zločine prošlosti, postoji i spremnost, koju generiše rasistički mit o beloj supremaciji, da se lažima poveruje, a zločini opravdaju. Proizvod tog mita je raspolučeno, od 'drugog' otuđeno jastvo, koje sa svoje strane reprodukuje poznatu i naizgled neizbežnu istoriju nasilja: sve dok se rascep na kome počiva zapadni identitet kritički ne prepozna i eventualno isceli, kako sugerišu filozofi od E. Levinasa, J. Habernasa do H. Žirua, činjenična istina neće imati onaj transformativni učinak koji smo navikli od nje da očekujemo. Suočavanje sa takvim radikalnim unutrašnjim disocijacijama, normalnim i poželjnim u patrijarhalnoj kulturi, suštinska je uloga umetnosti, od grčkih dramatičara i Šekspira do danas: drugi deo rada je stoga posvećen romanu *Zemlje sumraka* u kome južnoafrički nobelovac Dž. M. Kuci, aludirajući na Hegelovu paradigmu gospodar/rob, otkriva neizlečivu bolest gospodareve duše, odnosno dekonstruiše pseudo-identitet zapadnog čoveka sa kojima su lažna tumačenja neprekinute istorije nasilja u dubokom dosluhu.

*Ključne reči:* istorija, holokaust, identitet, mit, Kuci, *Zemlje sumraka*

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