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**Zoé etc. – J.M. Coetzee, Biopolitics and Testimony**

**Zoé etc. – J.M. Coetzee's Schriften der neunziger Jahre zwischen Biopolitik und Zeugenschaft**

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**Abstract**

The 1990s witnessed South Africa's traumatic transition from late apartheid to democracy. J.M. Coetzee's novels of those years take shape in the wake of its first intimations, its distinct historic circumstances and implications. In so doing, however, they bring into focus yet a wider (in the sense of a more global and even a more epochal) configuration, which in this particular form only the end of apartheid could have laid bare: the cultural inferences of biopolitical power with its sovereign ban on natural, socio-politically unqualified life. In light of the biopolitical subject, which is intrinsically resistant to narrative (there can only be narratives on the biopolitical subject, its modulation, so to speak, not of the biopolitical subject), and in view of the contentious core instrument of South Africa's path onto a new social order (i.e. the Truth and Reconciliation Commission / TRC), Coetzee's texts stipulate new inquiries into the *mise-en-scène* character of literary remembrance and testimony rather than into their pure epistemology or aesthetics. According to the TRC testimonies and statistics, South Africa was experiencing a vehement rise of violence in both quantity and dimension in the 1980s. In the subsequent years, while first forms of individual remembrances were still projecting themselves into a more composed future and eventually would help establish a form of public memory system, Coetzee has produced an ardently, if also by no means less controversially received collection of narratives: "Age of Iron" (1990), "The Master of Petersburg" (1994), "Boyhood" (1997), "The Lives of Animals" (1999), "Disgrace" (1999).

For both its key (here: theoretical rather than empirical) terms, biopolitics and testimony, this study turns to the ethico-political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and, thus, tries to readdress Coetzee's work, to realign it with and, at times, sever it from its often exclusively, or even reductively, postcolonial or postmodernist reception. If the subject in question, then, becomes increasingly anchored in natural life (*zoé*), rather than (in the Aristotelian differentiation that both Agamben and Michel Foucault with his groundbreaking notion of biopower rely on) in socially qualified life (*bios*), this has two implications. First: through the notion that in Western civilization since antiquity – at least, however, since modernity – all cultural practices, in largely varying forms of course, resonate with the traumatic rupture between the living being and the speaking subject. In this sense, the presumed shift would sharpen a more fundamental cultural cluster. Second: through the notion that *zoé*, by definition, cannot be pinned down by historical or realist record, is bare of, or banned from any 'bio-graphical' articulation. Once the sociopolitical subject is determined via *zoé*, every narrative of him becomes logically paradox and ethically precarious. If its records are thus to go unheard or to remain at least momentarily interrupted, it requires a guarantee, an instance of a belated recognition. It demands a witness. While biopolitics determines a subject that can provide no

narrative account of itself, testimony in Agamben's definition is the very site where an impossibility of speech articulates itself as such.

The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak that is, in his or her being a subject. Testimony thus guarantees not the factual truth of the statement safeguarded in the archive, but rather its unarchivability, its exteriority with respect to the archive – that is, the necessity by which, as the existence of language, it escapes both memory and forgetting. (Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Archive and the Witness*, New York: Zone, 1999: 158)

Although Coetzee had distinctively portrayed South Africa as a biopolitical landscape as far back as 1983 (when his novel "Life & Times of Michael K" depicted the Kafkaean resistance to a virtual civil war society that had established specific sites where, in the definition offered by Agamben, natural life is taken in the biopolitical ban, being both excluded from and at the same time included in the political), it is particularly in his narratives of the Nineties that his protagonists and narrators, although scholars, writers, and intellectuals, find themselves at the mercy of the biopolitical ban. They characteristically figure a discrepancy between an intellectual form of resistance and the very subjection as bare life.

To be sure, this study does not intend to simply vindicate South Africa's racist regime, or its final overcoming, through a large-scale global process of late modernity. What is not meant by 'literary testimony to biopolitics' is merely a particular kind of naturalistic narration. Neither is biopolitics here to be taken simply as a meta-political term. Instead it provides a certain set of conjectures regarding the modern subject that seem to predetermine the narrative accounts of social and cultural practices. Here, we have two distinct moments coinciding: the moment of testimonial remembrance with its specific socio-political setting and the sheer impossibility of a narrative account due to the biopolitical ban. Only in this sense does this study argue that Coetzee's literary figures are witnesses to a biopolitically determined subjectivity. Their particular literary testimony, then, confronts mainly two obstacles or dispositions. First, in line with fundamental challenges to psychic and social processes of identification and signification, be it trauma or other processes of elementary transgression. Second, in the way that subjectivity and its transgressions increasingly tend to coincide, hence, in processes of de-/subjectification.

In Coetzee's prose, which equally glints with realist clarity as with allegoric allusion, the mere materiality of the text itself becomes a witness in the way that it embeds intertextual references in situations that leave little trace of their subject positions. Along this line, the texts appeal to, so to speak, an 'immanent referentiality' rather than mere symbolic signification.

This, then, is the horizon on which this study brings forth its specific queries:

In its testimonies, the TRC has been one of the most sound instruments in one of the most furious civil (i.e. non-military, while by no means without bloodshed) transitions. What relation, then, do the fictions of Coetzee bear to the oppressors and the victims of a belated colonial system?

There has to be a 'response-ible' account of the witness towards this traumatic transition – a response which just like the trauma itself cannot be incorporated into a successive line of signification, yet does somehow bind the excessiveness of the traumatic. What form of

empathy, then, does literature as an "alignment of witnesses" (Shoshana Felman) offer in this particular context?

Coetzee's specific intertextual frame of reference is not only to be read via the complicity of Western cultural traditions with the colonial system (as does his more traditional reception), but, furthermore, through the biopolitical lens. How, then, does the updating of these references determine the relation of the social and the cultural?

If biopolitics destabilizes the transition from natural, unqualified life to a socially qualified subject, this will fundamentally alter the allegorical and metaphorical exposition of 'creatures' and 'figures'. In what form, then, does allegory become incorporated by Coetzee's realist narratives?

If the author – with its etymological root in the auctor (the one who can only speak on behalf of others) – testifies to the intimacy of the living being and the speaking subject through the gestures and the materiality of language, how, then, is the relation between the corporal and the lingual staged in Coetzee's literature?

### **Related Articles**

'Visiting Himself on Me' – The Angel, The Witness and the Modern Subject of Enunciation in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. In: *Journal of Literary Studies*, 18:3/4 (2002).

J.M. Coetzee's Prince Albert and the Site of Cultural Memory, Proceedings of the 16th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), Pretoria (forthcoming).

Coup de grâce – Die südafrikanische "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" und J.M. Coetzee's "Disgrace". In: Reinhold Göring/Vittoria Borso (Hg.), *Kulturelle Topographien*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003.

### **Short biographical note**

Kay Sulk, M.A., born in Germany in 1970, submitted in 2003 his dissertation to the Department of German Literature at the University of Hanover. He has taught American Literature at the University of Cologne and currently teaches Cultural Studies and the Media at the Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf.

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