WESTERN CLASSICS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN STATE OF EMERGENCY

GORDIMER'S *MY SON'S STORY* AND COETZEE'S *AGE OF IRON*

Lars Engle

My title refers to the formal State of Emergency of the mid- to late 1980s in South Africa, years marked by a general bleak acceptance that heightened violence and repression had become endemic in the country and that only worsening conflict was in sight. The light we now know to have been just around a sharp bend in the tunnel was visible to almost no one, certainly not to white anti-government intellectuals. Both J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* were written in the late 1980s and published in 1990. *Age of Iron* is entirely, and *My Son's Story* largely, set in the Emergency. Both novels—far too new to be thought of in any meaningful way as candidates for classic status themselves—confront directly, almost literally, questions about the utility and power of the Western literary tradition in this emergency, an emergency consisting, at base, of a confrontation between a white state power which claimed to be European in its core beliefs and an oppressed non-white majority which had encountered European traditions in the form of colonialism, racist capitalism, and white-owned technologies of oppressive power. Under such circumstances the Western literary tradition operates at a disadvantage, under cogent political accusation as an instrument of oppression, or as a sop offered by oppressors, or as a distracting irrelevance. Such a disadvantage might be emblematized by the final tableau in *My Son's Story*. Sonny, the mixed-race Shakespeare-loving ANC activist, speaks to mixed-race neighbors amid the smoking ruins of his house, which has been firebombed by angry white reactionaries. His son Will narrates:

We can't be bombed out, he said, we're that bird, you know, it's called the phoenix, that always rises from the ashes . . .
Flocks of papery cinders were drifting, floating about us – beds, clothing – his books!  

Sonny's "books" – which Wili suddenly sees in ashes floating around his father – are above all his precious complete Shakespeare: a classic reduced to ashes, but possibly the Phoenix's self-renewing ashes, by the Emergency.

*Age of Iron* is hardly less direct, if somewhat less material, in bringing classics into the Emergency. Mrs. Curren, the narrator, seeks out the teenage comrade John, confussed after the police have knocked him off his bicycle in the war against the children, in a black ward of Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. When she finds him she delivers a short, incongruous, heartfelt lecture which begins "If you had been in my Thucydides class ... you might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in time of war." Not only does she bring this classic into the Emergency, she cites Thucydides on how humanity is lost when states of Emergency galvanize collective action.

While these books bring classic texts into the politics, violence, and horror of this grim period of South African history, both also reflect more generally on the contemporary role of writings which claim a lasting hold on those who find themselves in a line (however crooked or far-flung) of European thought, writings which have long enjoyed a privileged place in elite identity formation and now find that place less secure in South Africa and elsewhere. One sign of this insecurity is the general replacement of "the classic" by "the canonical" in academic discussion of great texts, a replacement intended to stress the set of interests and negotiations involved in picking some texts for special veneration in education. For both Coetzee and Gardiner, however, it is inappropriate to write of "the classic" rather than "the canonical." Both stage contradictions between classic texts and disenfranchised people which largely bypass the agency of the school or university, and neither is concerned directly with the cultural politics of curricula. Sonny has been a teacher, but we never see him teaching. Mrs. Curren imagines what John would have learned in her Thucydides class, but has no memories or reflections about her experiences as a teacher, and encounters no former students who bear the imprint of what she taught and how she taught it. Both novels concern the direct use of classic texts in emergent political and personal crises.

It is an interesting question, too complex to be treated properly here, whether these novels frame, or are framed by, John Guillory's insistence that the school is the primary and for his purposes the only important site for discussion of literary canons formation and its relation to the reproduction of social institutions. Both Gardiner and Coetzee, at any rate, show the South African emergency bringing classics out of the schools and into yet more tawdry political settings, and both promote reflection on what powers classics have outside the school. Where classics exercise powers within the self-understanding of protagonists, the powers may well be residues of formal education (though this is unmentioned in the novels). When classics are invoked in situations where they do not have such residual relation to schooling, they are being tested for survival when the apparatus that has upheld them is disabled.

Ancient explanations of the class have them rising to or retaining
prominence by virtue of time-tested excellence—a somewhat tautological account, but not thereby wrong. Recent explanations stress political and institutional factors in the selection of canonical works. In view of the non-institutional but intensely political treatment of the classics in My Son’s Story and Age of Iron, it might help to offer a naturalizing metaphor for this double-nick. Suppose that a classic endures in culture in the complex way a landmark endures in a landscape: in a relation of slow frictional natural interchange, leading sometimes to diminished, sometimes enhanced prominence, and also as a marker to be variously named and sometimes abruptly renamed according to changing cultural and political purposes. If so, the classics in these two books are both alive in the culture that produces the protagonists in the slow mode of acculturation I would liken to ecology, and are also visible political markers by which protagonists orient themselves and measure others.

Given my topic, I originally expected to use Gordimer as a foil to Coetzee. I read My Son’s Story when it came out, found it spoke to me less powerfully than some of Gordimer’s earlier novels, and set it aside; Age of Iron fascinated me instantly. I expected a comparison of the treatment of the classic in the two books to favor Coetzee over Gordimer, or at least to reveal this as a more deeply integral concern of his than hers. But My Son’s Story turns out to be considerably more subtle and interesting on this score than I thought on first reading.

In My Son’s Story Shakespeare is quoted frequently throughout and supplies the novel’s epigraph (from Sonnet 13: “You had a father, let your son say so”). Sonny, the father/son of the epigraph (this son, who makes himself custodian of his father’s story, becomes thereby a kind of son/father), a young teacher in the colored high school in Benoni, an industrial city near Johannesburg, has formed himself and his family to some degree around Shakespeare:

The boy was Will, diminutive of William. He was named for Shakespeare, whose works, in a cheap complete edition bound in fake leather, stood in the glass-fronted bookcase in the small sitting room and were no more ornamental pretention to culture. Sonny read and reread them with devotion; although the gilt lettering had been eaten away by fungus, and the volume he wanted had to be selected blindly, his hand always went straight to it. (MSS, p. 6)

Shakespeare names and gives meaning to the father-son relation, and hints that there will be some parallel between Sonny’s relation to Shakespeare and Sonny’s relation to Will. This hint gains force from the odd patterns of naming in the family: Sonny and his daughter Baby have names that sound like roles in a family romance. Moreover, the account of Sonny’s hand going blindly but unerringly to a text that no longer has a visible title or author suggests the way a choice initially guided by Shakespeare’s cultural prestige has become part of a form of life.

The narrative alternates between present first-person from Will’s viewpoint as child, angry adolescent, and young adult, on one hand, and past third-person, often using Sonny as a center of consciousness, but sometimes Hannah
Plowman, Sonny’s white lover, or a more general center like that of the state security forces. On the other. Shakespeare figures prominently in both strands of narrative, which mark Sonny’s development toward radical political involvement through a series of Shakespeare references, as Sonny explores the consequences in apartheid South Africa of his shared discovery with his wife Aila that “for both of them the meaning of life seemed to be contained, if mysteriously, in leading useful lives” (MS, p. 9). Sonny sees his teacherly responsibilities to his students “open out”:

He saw the need to bring together the schools and the community in which it performed an isolated function – education as a luxury, a privilege apart from the survival preoccupation of the parents. He bought books that kept him from Shakespeare. He read them over and over again in order to grasp and adapt the theory that recognized social education of the community, the parents and relatives and neighbours of the pupils as part of the school’s function. (MS, p. 9)

Gordimer thus establishes early on an opposition between Shakespeare and the language of politics that runs right through the novel. But she also documents from the start a kind of power in Shakespeare that inoculates Sonny and Aila against the appeal of hire-purchase gentility, “bedroom ‘suits’ and lounge ‘suits’ named so to bring to cramped and crumbling hobels the dimensions of palaces, ‘Granada,’ ‘Versailles’.” (MS, p. 11)

Sonny and his wife did not covet “Granada” or “Versailles”: with an understanding of Shakespeare there comes a release from the gullibility that makes you prey to the great shopkeeper who runs the world, and who would sell you cheap to illusion. (MS, p. 11)

And Shakespeare helps Sonny’s start in politics (as do his man-of-the-people nickname and his dark skin):

He... was only gratified that his years of reading – that individualistic, withdrawn preoccupation, as he was beginning to think of it – were being put directly to the use of the community in providing him with a vocabulary adequate to what needed to be said. Words came flying to his tongue from the rooms of his private pleasures. (MS, p. 33)

Literature, a private luxury, aids the rhetoric of public engagement.

It is interesting that Shakespeare never figures in My Son’s Story as an instrument of oppression. Gordimer does of course show alertness to the ways classic literature gets inscribed in authority structures. Horace’s Carpe Diem stands over the entrance to the whites-only municipal library: Sonny reads Kafka and absorbs a “profoundly defeatist” way of allegotizing his social weakness (MS, p. 17), but

He knew better. There were the local law-makers, procursals, gauliteers
in the town’s council chamber under the photographs of past mayors and
the motto CARPE DIEM.

Horace’s phrase echoes through the novel, shadowing both the love affair that
complicates Sonny’s life and the political struggle to seize their day in which he
and all the other characters are by the end engaged. But for the first half of the
novel Gordimer treats Shakespeare and Shakespeare education implicitly as
moral/aesthetic rather than political experiences. Sonny’s passage into an
government politics is neither fostered nor impeded by his love for Shake-
spere. Literature rather appears for him, as he rises in the movement, as a
mildly but not deeply regretted alternative. Imprisoned for the first time,
Sonny reflects:

He knew he was on his way to prison from his days back in the Colourde
location . . . or if he didn’t know it, he should have, he realized this as
instinctively taking up one form of political action after another, he
understood that the mystery of the meaning of life he and Aita had
vaguely known to be contained in leading useful lives was no mystery. For
them, their kind, black like the others, there was only one meaning: the
political struggle. (As he loved the magnificent choices of Shakespearean
language, the crudely reductive terms of political concepts were an embar-
rasean to him, but he had to use them, like everybody else.)

(MSS, pp. 47–8)

Up to this point in the novel Shakespeare functions as a marker of beautiful
mental freedom – the “magnificent choices of Shakespearean language” – which
nonetheless can pose no real threat to the necessity of the struggle, even if it
points up the relative flatness of revolutionary rhetoric. When Will discovers
Sonny’s affair with Hannah, Sonny feels awkward in the same way about both
kinds of speech:

“It’s the ‘cleaning of the graves’ of the nine youngsters who were shot
by the police last week outside Jubilee Hall. They were buried yesterday.
The Street Committees have asked for some kind of oration. The kids were
condemned——

As he said “oration” the boy came in, after all. In the place of greeting
he gave his son he felt a tug of embarrassment, as if he had been caught out
quoting Shakespeare as he used to do to give the boy the freedom, at least,
of great art.

(MSS, p. 99)

Sonny’s idea of Shakespeare as “freedom,” “greatness,” “choice” offers a rather
thin incarnation of the familiar humanist idea that literature liberates and
exalts us into an unfocalized space where we encounter genuine human nature
and thus meet as free equals. This is not a currently fashionable notion, and it
is not one that Gordimer embraces elsewhere. Sonny’s view of Shakespeare, then,
with its naivety and potential sentimentality, does not suggest that he’s an
especially perceptive reader — or, to put the matter more compellingly, it does
not show Gordimer thinking very precisely about what it might mean to enter the struggle with a Shakespearean sensibility. Shakespeare appears as a general good that must temporarily be foregone for the struggle.

The novel’s treatment of Shakespeare becomes more complex, however, as Sonny’s political life leads him to a love-affair with Hannah, since the affair is shadowed by Shakespearean references. Sonny falls in love with Hannah when she visits him in prison. Unlike Sonny’s wife Aila, Hannah can develop “a private, oblique language” to give information to Will past the prison guards who oversee their conversations: when a warden stops Sonny from answering a question about prison conditions, she says

—Well, I suppose you find sermons in stones— . . .

He grinned to receive this, another kind of message, she was almost certainly not aware of; elated to be able to recognize it. —And good in your kindness in coming to see me.—

(MSS, pp. 49–50)

Hannah’s tag from As You Like It — from Duke Senior’s “Sweet are the used of adversity” speech — unlocks something for Sonny: “A stranger has no love-tale, but she was the one who unknowingly found the way to connect him with home” (MSS, p. 49). Hannah allows Sonny to unite his literary romanticism with his political commitment. Though Gordimer, perhaps surprisingly, quotes Orlando only once later in the novel, it is clear that while Hannah loved black Sonny for the dangers he had passed, and he loved her that she did pray them.

It is what happens to Shakespeare and to the literary late in the novel that establishes the subtlety of Gordimer’s treatment of the issue. Sonny’s family has been, in predictably painful ways, transformed by the never-opened but widely-known secret of his double life. Aila, Baby, and Will all separately make their discoveries. Hannah is a smoker, her smell lingers on Sonny. Baby cuts her hair, it fatally; Aila cuts her long beautiful hair, Will pointedly ignores both his father’s political and his literary aspirations and reads commerce at university. Sonny finds him “such a disappointment” (MSS, p. 137), and Sonny’s disappointment is clearly a victory for Sonny’s son. Both Aila and Baby, without consulting Sonny, join Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed resistance wing of the ANC. They thus opt for more direct, and even more dangerous, anti-government activity than Sonny’s, and end up in exile in Lusaka. Moreover, Sonny’s affair with Hannah — undisclosed to his comrades — also limits, he thinks, his advancement in the movement: he finds himself doubted, outmaneuvered, and ultimately demoted in the ANC executive because of his double life.

So why not a triple life? If a man of his old and proven integrity could withhold information from the movement to which total dedication was due, loyalty was the letter of faith, he also might be vulnerable — open, like a wound — to disaffection.

_Better to be vile than vile esteemed, when not to be receive reproach of being._

_He hated to have coming up at him these tags from an old habit of_
Their final blaze, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

A poem about how political meaning gives way to eros over time gets ironically invoked at the moment when Hannah’s political career is about to end their love affair, to which Sonye has partially sacrificed both his own family and his own career, taking off his armor to hold her hand. Sonye now quotes Othello with a vengeance:

—I’ll be able to come back sometimes.—Oh thou weed.
Oh thou weed: who art so lovely faire, and smellis so sweet that the sense abides thee, Wouldst thou hadst never been born.

(MSS, p. 224, italics Gordimer’s)

And Will takes up here more vaguely a Shakespearean motif from the sonnets (especially 60, “Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore / So do our minutes hasten to their end”) in describing Sonye’s “eroding connection with his own past:

He turned fifty-two. The day was not remarked in any way. His son did not remember the birthday...

A tide wasting away a coastline, little by little, falling into the ocean of time.

(MSS, p. 264)

Again, this is Shakespeare not as magnificent choice or freedom, but Shakespeare as register of loss, ambivalence, and failure.

In the passage with which I began Sonye stands in his burned-out house, mixed-race neighbors before him:

And then of course the old rhetoric took up the opportunity. We can’t be burned out, he said, we’re that bird, you know, it’s called the phoenix, that always rises again from the ashes. Prison won’t keep us out. Petrol bombs won’t get rid of us. This street – this whole country is ours to live in. Fire won’t stop me. And it won’t stop you.

Flocks of paper cinders were drifting, floating about us – beds, clothing – his books?

The smell of smoke, that was the smell of her.

The smell of destruction, of what has been consumed, that is first brought into that house.

(MSS, p. 274)

In those slightly odd “cinders” are the ashes of Shakespeare’s “The Phoenix and the Turtle”:

Beauty, truth, and rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclosed, in cinders lie.
And Will decodes this for us:

"It's an old story - ours. My father's and mine. Love, love/hate are the most common and universal of experiences. But no two are alike, each is a fingerprint of life. That's the miracle that makes literature..."

(MSS, p. 277)

Shakespeare then emerges as a sign of literature's mastery of commitment and ambivalence over time, reduced to a brilliantly terse formula: "Love, love/hate." And Will makes Shakespeare, in this case Hamlet, his signature of triumph over time.

I've learned what he didn't teach me, that grammar is a system of mastering time; to write down "he was," "he is," "he will be" is to grasp past, present, and future.

Whole; no longer bearing away.

All of it, all of it.

I have that within which passes show. (MSS, p. 276, italics Gordimer's)

In My Son's Story, the classic survives the State of Emergency and indeed to some extent prevails over it. Gordimer creates in Will a mixed-face inheritor of the political efforts of the independence movement who testifies to the continuing utility of Western classics, a utility that has to do both with sponsoring desires for freedom and, more importantly, with recognizing ambivalence at the core of love-relations, both personal and political. One might, perhaps presumptuously, read into the way Gordimer brings Shakespeare into the end of the novel a covert suggestion that white art (including Gordimer's own) will continue to be useful in South Africa's black-governed future, and will be useful partly by expressing ambivalence.

* * *

Age of Iron, on the face of it a book far more deeply involved with classical literature - the dying narrator, Mrs. Curren, is a retired Classics lecturer from the University of Cape Town - is also less sanguine about the survival of classic literary traditions, just as she is less sanguine about the political future of South Africa than any character in My Son's Story. Mrs. Curren is "Trying to keep the soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul" (Al, p. 130). She has the privilege of the old, the sick, the clearly non-combatant, of saying what she pleases without its being either a challenge to immediate violence or an erotic challenge. What she says is also thereby dismissable, the words of someone who does not matter, who is not a player. (In this, of course, she speaks not only for old ladies with bad hips, but for liberal white South African English-speakers, who were from the 1950s through the 1980s in a position of increasing political marginality in South Africa.) "Keeping the soul alive" involves speaking her truth not only to her exiled daughter, to whom the book is addressed as a letter, and to the white authorities, but also to the black children of whose heroic militancy she also disapproves. She argues with her African housekeeper
Florence and with Florence's son Bheki about the school boycott which is one of the major forms of political action on the children's side (a form of action that, in effect, aligns the classics and indeed all schooling with the white government). And, as mentioned above, she speaks of the lessons of the Peloponnesian War to Bheki's comrade John, who lies bandaged and sedated in hospital after being knocked off his bicycle by white policemen as part of their war against young blacks:

"Be slow to judge...."

"If you had been in my Thucydides class...you might have learned something about what can happen to our humanity in time of war. Our humanity, that we are born with, that we are born into."

...he... knew who I was, knew I was talking to him. He knew and he did not listen, as he had never listened to any of his teachers, but had sat like a stone in the classroom, impervious to words, waiting for the bell to ring, bisecting his time.

"Thucydides wrote of people who made rules and followed them. Going by rule they killed entire classes of enemies without exception. Most of those who died felt, I am sure, that a terrible mistake was being made, that, whatever the rule was, it could not be means for them. 'Eho!': that was their last word as their threats were cut. A word of protest, I, the exception.

"Were they exceptions? The truth is, given time to speak, we would all claim to be exceptions. For each of us there is a case to be made. We all deserve the benefit of the doubt."

"But there are times when there is no time for all that close listening, all those exceptions, all that mercy. There is no time, so we fall back on the rule. And that is a great pity, the greatest pity. That is what you could have learned from Thucydides. It is a great pity when we find ourselves entering upon times like those. We should enter upon them with a sinking heart. They are by no means to be welcomed."

Quite deliberately he put his good hand under the sheet, in case I should touch it again. (At, pp. 79, 80-1)

This is a dense passage that participates in a number of the strategies of the novel. It invites recognition first, and perhaps rather unexpectedly, of the extent to which Coetzee is a quite reverent participant in a Western literary and philosophical tradition deriving from Athens, a tradition under attack (in North America as well as in South Africa) precisely because its rationalism is intimately linked with the very imperialism and ethnic pride that undid Athens in Thucydides' Athenian account. Coetzee, through Mrs. Curren, insists that the words of Virgil and Thucydides be treated in contemporary South Africa, thus suggesting we take seriously their potential value in this context even to people like John who for their own, sufficient reasons cannot and will not bear them.

I do not think the novel's ironies attach to Mrs. Curren's feelings for Bacher for Greek and Latin literature, but other readers feel differently. David Attwell,
granting Mrs. Curren "the authority of irrelevance," calls her "a retired professor of classics whose canon means little to anyone except herself," but begins and ends his excellent book with an epigraph in which J. M. Coetzee describes his work in terms virtually quoted from Plato's Parable of the Cave: "I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations—which are shadows themselves—of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light" (SAFW, vol. x, p. 125). John Coetzee is clearly not someone for whom Mrs. Curren's canon means little. In fact, while much in the novel may seem to support the idea that Mrs. Curren's classics fail in the face of the Emergency, there is considerable external evidence that for Coetzee these very classics are part of what the Emergency is testing; there is also evidence that Mrs. Curren, in her partial, classically-infected answer to the question "what is to be done?" stands in Coetzee's mind for himself and for other white South African writers.

During the 1980s, Coetzee was active as a reviewer, and Coetzee and David Atwell collect and reprint important reviews in Dubbing the Point. In a review of Athol Fugard's Notebooks, 1960–1977, Coetzee comments that

the Notebooks are ... the autobiography of a man of intelligence and conscience who chose to remain in South Africa at a time when many fellow writers were opting for (or being forced into) exile. Fugard's choice meant, among other things, that he would ... continually be brought face to face with the question of his relationship with a ruling order characterized by a remarkably loveless attitude toward its subjects (or some of them), an attitude of lovelessness that sometimes extends to stricken callousness.

Mrs. Curren sees the central problem before her, perhaps by extension the problem for people like her, to love those with whom they have no immediate sympathy, in this case Bheki's friend John:

I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? by doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. He is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation. I must love him. But I do not love him. Nor do I want to love him enough to love him despite myself.

(Al, p. 156)

Coetzee finds this imperative in Fugard:

The route he follows out of his crisis of conscience is to take upon himself (following Sarre) the task of bearing witness. "The truth must be told ... I must not bear false witness." "My life has been given in order: love the little grey beasts," by which he means, love the insignificant, the forgotten, the unloved. Against a system whose own degradation he measures by the degradations it imposes on others (at one point he goes further
and suggests that the ultimate and unwitting victims of a regime of degradation are its perpetrators, Fugard opposes an ethos of love. "South Africa's tragedy is the small, neglected portions of love in the hearts of the men who walk this beautiful land." "People must be loved." ... "What is beauty? The result of love. The ugliness of the unloved thing." (DP, p. 370)

It is clear that Mrs. Curren, in her own self-writing, has accepted the same "order" heard by Fugard; indeed, I cannot read this passage without seeing Mrs. Curren temporarily as Fugard, as a perhaps parodic but by no means sketchy embodiment of the humanist artist in the South Africa of the 1980s. Similarly, though in a more barbed idiom (perhaps the slight edge of a competition), Mrs. Curren offers a scaled-down version of something Coetzee finds in Nadine Gordimer's essays:

Without necessarily being egocentric, she is more interested in herself than in other writers: in herself as the site of a struggle between a towering European tradition and the whirlwind of the new Africa (DP, p. 386).

I argue above that Sunny and Will in My Son's Story are the site of such a struggle (though framed less grandly than this). Coetzee, discussing Gordimer as an essayist and commentator, suggests that she sees such a struggle between the towering accomplishments of European literature and the centrifugal energies of the liberation struggle in herself and her own work—with perhaps a hint that she casts herself as Moses trying to follow these signs. Mrs. Curren is, in her reduced way, the site of exactly such a struggle.

To push the argument further and involve a third important white contemporary author, Mrs. Curren's plan to immortalize herself in her ancient Hillman in front of Parliament House may be an echo, from Coetzee's viewpoint, of Breyten Breytenbach's "quixotic foray into the fortress of the enemy." (DP, p. 379)—the doomed attempt to infiltrate South Africa under a false name that led to Breytenbach's conviction and nine-year sentence as an enemy of the state. Coetzee finds the most valuable aspect of True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist (1985), Breytenbach's account of his political mission, trial, incarceration, and release, to be the passages in which Breytenbach "tries to feel his way into the experience of the condemned man, into the experience of death itself." (DP, p. 379), which is very much what Mrs. Curren is doing. In the essay on Breytenbach in Giving Offence, Coetzee's recent book on censorship—an essay originally published in 1990—Coetzee comments of Breytenbach's Mmamer (1984), a prison text published after Breytenbach's eventual release, that "Text becomes conscripted with life: text will not end till writing ends; writing will not end till breath ends." Mrs. Curren of course exacts this arrangement in Age of Iron, a narrative in the form of an unfolding letter to her daughter which will only be sent when she dies of the cancer which is destroying her, if then. As she says:

For as long as the trail of words continues, you know with certainty that I
have not gone through with it: a rule, another rule. Death may indeed be the last great fee of writing, but writing is also the fee of death.

(At, pp. 115-116)

Thus, very evidently in the case of Fugard, and plausibly in the cases of Gordimer and Breytenbach, Mrs. Gurne offers a view, despite her in political impotence, but not I think a satiric, of the role of the literary artist and the bearer of literary traditions in the South African State of Emergency.

This makes her also, as I commented above, a partial self-portrait on Coetzee's part. She writes, in a passage that is both funny and moving, of Bach as one of the immortals — thus extending, perhaps strategically, the book's idea of the classic to include great music. (The auditor she senses halfway through the passage is her detractor tenet Verucel, a homeless alcoholic, probably of mixed race, whom she brings into her home in the course of the novel.)

Then at last I went back to Bach, and played clumsily, over and over again, the first fugue from Book One. The sound was crude, the lines blurred, but every view and again, for a few bars, the real thing emerged, the real music, the music that does not die, confirmed, serene.

I was playing for myself. But at some point a board cracked or a shadow passed across the curtain and I knew he was outside listening.

So I played Bach for him, as well as I could. When the last bar was played I closed the music and sat with my books in my lap contemplating the oil portrait on the cover with its heavy jowls, its sleek smile, its puffy eyes. Pure spirit, I thought. yet in how unlikely a temple! (At, p. 24)

In a brilliant but little-known essay, "What is a Classic?" originally delivered at a symposium at Michigan State University, which begins with a re-examination of T. S. Eliot's essay of that name and its relation to Eliot's own move from periphery to metropolis, Coetzee narrates the story of his own first encounter with Bach — a story which casts him in somewhat the role of Verucel:

One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1975, when I was fifteen years old, I was moaning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, boredom being the main problem of existence for me in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before.

What I was listening to was a recording of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier played on the harpsichord. I learned this name only some time later, when I had become more familiar with it, at the age of fifteen. I knew only — in a somewhat suspicious and even hostile teenage manner — as "classical music." The house next door had a transient student population, the student who was playing the Bach record must have moved out soon afterwards, or lost his/her taste for Bach, for I heard no more, though I listened intently.

I don't come from a musical family. There was no musical instruction offered at the schools I went to, nor would I have taken it if it had been
offered: in the colonies classical music wasissy... At home we had no musical instrument, no record player. There was plenty of the blander American popular music on the radio... but it made no great impact on me.

And then the afternoon in the garden, and the music of Bach, after which everything changed. A moment of revelation which I will not call Eliotic—that would insult the moments of revelation celebrated in Eliot's poetry—but of the greatest significance in my life nevertheless: for the first time I was undergoing the impact of the classic? I have quoted at considerable length, though I have nonetheless scanned the careful ways in which Coetzee-contextualizes this personal experience. He goes on to ask several questions, questions that I think we find Mrs. Curren also asking and attempting to answer:

The moment in the garden was a key event in my formation. Now I wish to interrogate that moment again, using as a framework both what I have been saying about Eliot—specifically, using Eliot the provincial as a pattern and figure of myself—and, in a more skeptical way, invoking the kinds of question that are asked about culture and cultural ideas by contemporary cultural analysis.

The question I put to myself, somewhat crudely, is this: Is there some non-vacuous sense in which I can say that the spirit of Bach was speaking to me across the ages, across the seas, putting before me an ideal of form, of what was really going on at the moment that I was symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society and ultimately out of what I must have felt, in whatever obscure and mystified terms, as the dead-end of that society itself—a road that would culminate (again symbolically) with me on a platform here addressing a cosmopolitan audience on Bach, T. S. Eliot and the question of the classic? In other words, was the experience what I understood it to be—a disinterested and in a sense impersonal aesthetic experience—or was it really the masked expression of a material interest?

Note Mrs. Curren's related meditation in Age of Iron:

Pure spirit, I thought, yet in how unlikely a temple! Where does that spirit lead itself now? In the echoes of my fumbling performance receding through the ether? In my heart, where the music still dances? Has it made its way into the heart too of the man in the sagging trousers eavesdropping at the window? Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound?

Coetzee in his essay attempts to answer these related questions—the question posed by what we might call the rampant surrealism of modern cultural criticism which assumes that Coetzee must have been sensing an interpellative call
to a material social advantage — sensing the possibility that he might acquire
cultural capital — when he heard Bach in the backyard, and the question posed
by Mrs. Curren about where the spirit of Bach may be said to reside if it is not
in the cultural capital which has accrued to him over time. In his essay on the
classic, Coetzee historicizes the most famous aspect of the transmission of Bach
through time — the supposed "rediscovery" of Bach by Mendelssohn — and shows
that in fact the huge increase in Bach's reputation in the nineteenth
century was connected with the projects of German nationalists. Does this, he
asks, undermine the notion of the classic as the timeless? And how does it bear
on his own first experience?

If the notion of the classic as the timeless is undermined by a fully histori-
ical account of Bach-reception, then is the moment in the garden — the
kind of moment that Eliezer experienced, no doubt more mystically and
more intensely, and turned into some of his greatest poetry — undermined
as well? Is being spoken to across the ages a notion that we can entertain
today only in bad faith?

(WC, pp. 17-18)

"To answer this question," Coetzee continues, "to which I aspire to give the
answer No, and therefore to see what can be rescued of the idea of the classic, let
me return to the story of Bach" (WC, p. 18). And he then points out that in fact
Bach was not entirely forgotten in the eighteenth century, but was rather in
continuous, though not very prominent, use by a small community of profes-
sional musicians in Berlin and Vienna. Mendelssohn did not find the choral
music of Bach wrapped around a fish, he heard about it from a friend of his
banker father's, C. F. Zelter, director of the Berlin Singakademie, who however
"regarded the Passions as unperformable and of specialist interest only" (WC,
p. 18). Thus, according to Coetzee, Bach survives through the experience of
continual examination that comes of being part of the material worked on by an
expert community. Here Coetzee may implicitly endorse the retention of clas-
sics in university curricula — or he may simply assert that true classics will
remain part of the material experts need to know whatever the political climate
in which the experts work:

If there is anything that gives one confidence in the classic status of
Bach, it is this testing process that he has been through within the profes-
sion. Not only did this provincial religious mystic outlast the Enlighten-
ment turn toward rationality and the metropolis, but he also survived
what turned out to have been a kiss of death, namely, being promoted
during the nineteenth-century revival as a great son of the German soil.
And today, every time a beginner stumbles through the first prelude of
the "48," Bach is being tested again, within the profession. Dare I suggest
that the classic in music is what emerges intact from this process of day-
by-day testing?

(WC, p. 18)

It is the associated fugue, "the first fugue from Book One," that Mrs. Curren
plays for herself and Vercueil. I think we are encouraged by this context in
Coetzee’s essay to see the moment as part of the testing of the classic. But if so, we should also see the reference to her professional life as a classicist at the beginning of Mrs. Curren’s hospital visit to John cried above as another such reference to testing: “If you had been in my Thucydides class . . .”

Moreover, in the context of *Age of Iron*, we need to invoke Coetzee’s final words in his essay on the classic, words that come after he has, ultimately, suggested that he did have a relatively disinterested encounter with Bach in the garden (while also finessing the autobiographical question to some degree):

I hope I have allowed the terms Bach, the Classic to emerge with a value of their own, even if that value is only in the first place professional and in the second place social. Whether at the age of fifteen I understood what I was getting into is beside the point: Bach is some kind of touchstone because he has passed the scrutiny of hundreds of thousands of intelligences before me, by hundreds of thousands of fellow human beings.

(WC, p. 19)

And Coetzee goes on to invoke Zbigniew Herbert’s view of the classic as that which survives its confrontation with barbarism (a confrontation which, as we have seen throughout, includes the appropriation of the classic by the barbarian for barbarian purposes):

It is not the possession of some essentialist quality that, in Herbert’s eyes, makes it possible for the classic to withstand the assault of barbarism. Rather, what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs—that is the classic.

(WC, p. 19)

From this, Coetzee concludes, criticism (in fiction) which interrogates the classic and appears to endanger it is in fact part of the mechanism of testing by which it survives:

Thus the fear that the classic will not survive the decentering acts of criticism may be turned on its head: rather than being the foe of the classic, criticism, and indeed criticism of the most skeptical kind, may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival. Criticism may in that sense be one of the instruments of the cunning of history.

(WC, p. 19)

While Mrs. Curren does not exactly have this view, her work within the novel vacates it, and her articulation of views largely identical to Coetzee’s on Bach and other classics suggests, again, that we should regard her as something of a self-portrait. Coetzee does not explicitly raise the obvious question hovering over this particular close to his essay, which has elsewhere scupulously followed the directions of a materialist critical practice which seeks to demystify the classic: should criticism wish to ally itself with Herbert’s barbarian, or should it ally itself with a tradition of classics which have survived? Coetzee
seems to say: if the classics are real, criticism will not be able to help itself. A classic demystified is not born of strength. But his novel is more partisan, ethical, and desperate in its approach to this issue, since it offers an account of a woman for whom the classics partly constitute the bonds of love that may link a failing human life to "what does not die," as she says of Bach.

Let me return in closing to the Thucydides passage yet again. Like her description of the spirit of Bach linking her to Vercueil, Mrs. Curren's hospital lecture to John attempts to use the classic to get out of the isolation in which she finds herself: to speak, to touch, and to love in a process of intergenerational transmission that is both personal and cross-cultural. Mrs. Curren recognizes her failure, the failure of her people, and the failure of her daughter (who has left South Africa in anger) as a failure to love, to be present as an eye, a voice, a hand, a body in the lives of others. Yet she cannot do anything except attempt to be such a presence, to see, touch, and speak. Nor does she wish her intervention in the horrors she witnesses to mitigate her guilt or make us sorry for her. This is a point she stresses, and here she clearly speaks for her author, who wants from us something other than our sympathy: "I tell you this story not so that you will feel for me but so that you will learn how things are" (AI, p. 103).

Despite its commitment to life, this text is narrated by a dead woman — either a woman who dies in Vercueil's cold embrace at the novel's end or the woman whose package he has taken to the post office. Here again, like Coetzee's Foe though less obviously, Age of Iron rewrites a canonical subtext from a more or less subaltern viewpoint: it is recontextualizing The Aeneid — the story of the death of one city and the struggle to find another — from the viewpoint of Creusa, who, abandoned by Aeneas and killed by the Greeks, nonetheless returns as a ghost to urge him to set aside his grief, get on with his divinely-appointed mission, and live out for the sake of their child and the displaced future of their community. Needless to say, in the un reassuring context of Age of Iron the ghost of Creusa does not bring such an encouraging message. Such a narrator produces many uncanny effects. The Aeneas to whom she would speak has no definite identity: her own daughter is absent, her own "defenders" are bloodstained criminals, the young blacks she defends and admonishes get killed, Vercueil, her one faithful listener, is so politically unenumbered, so immune to the summation of history, that he can dance to the old South African national anthem, "Die Stem" (AI, p. 180). Yet she must speak her truths even from death, awaiting a bearer.

This, I suggest, is Coetzee's pared-down and uncanny version of the classic humanist tradition in the South Africa of the Emergency. He presents the classics, and those writers like himself who have been shaped by their call, as poised between being abandoned despited ghosts, tossing on the shore of Styx without passage beyond (the ghosts described in the Latin passage Mrs. Curren recites for Vercueil [AI, p. 192]), and being so to speak ghosts with a future. That future will only happen if this Creusa can find a true Aeneas, a man or woman destined to establish new cities willing to be both a political parent and a cultural child. Thus Coetzee, unlike Gordimer, makes the survival of the classics in the State of Emergency a matter for future politics to decide, yet suggests, like Gordimer, that if truly classic, they will find an Aeneas who hears their call.
structural postcolonial, not only are colonial subjects denied knowledge of the construction of the Manichean opposition but also, more importantly, colonizers can reduce themselves to forget the artificiality of that construction. Nominal dissidence becomes the stage for the colonizers themselves.

(RL, p. 18)

No application of Sally's statements to Nkosi's novel suggests that, paradoxically, he has absorbed and reproduced the process whereby the colonial subject becomes "complicit" in constructing the Manichean opposition.


29 She says later to Verwoed: "I eased at times against the men who did the dirty work - you have seen it, a shameful sagging as ugly as what it eased against - but I accepted too thin, in a way, they lived inside me. So that when in my rage I wished the dead, I wished death to myself too" (AF, p. 164).

CHAPTER 8

WESTERN CLASSICS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN STATE OF EMERGENCY: GORDIMER'S MY SON'S STORY AND GOETZEK'S AGE OF IRON (LARS ENGLE)


5 For the novel's relation to epistemology and the difficult necessity of communicating with others, see Derek Attridge, "Trusting the Other: Ethics and Politics in J. M. Coetzee's Age of Iron", *VAQ*, vol. 93, no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 59-83. Attridge anticipates my argument at several points, concluding that "Coetzee's work... does not hesitate to engage the dominating legacy of Western thought and culture and to stage, with remarkable results, the transformation that it undergoes, in a curious and conflicted Irvington, in our postcolonial world" (p. 177).


9 J. M. Coetzee, "What is a Classic?", *Current Writing*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1993), p. 15. Henceforth cited as WC.
pedantry; useless, useless to him. In a schoolteacher's safe small life, aphorisms summed up so pleasingly dangers that were never going to have to be lived. There is no elegance in the actuality - the distress of calamity and self-betrayal, difficult to disentangle. (MSS, p. 190, italics Gordimer’s)

Here and elsewhere with increasing pressure as the novel closes. Shakespeare returns as the sign not of freedom but of ambivalence, not as a dreamy alternative to a life of action, or a beautiful vision of the rich cultural engagement a life of action might aim to provide future South Africans, but rather as a way of mapping the failures and limits of Sonny’s life in politics. Sonny has insomnia: “I lie could get to sleep. But then begins a journey in my head, to work my mind. The old combination of line words become a cause” (MSS, p. 183, italics Gordimer’s, from sonnet 27)

As Shakespeare appears refigured in this way, Will begins to emerge as author. “I’ve begun a project - call it that - that needs solitude” (MSS, p. 136).

With Will’s literary vocation, a new kind of literary reference enters the novel. Hannah tells Sonny, after lovemaking, that she has been offered an important UN job based in Addis Ababa.

—I haven’t even replied . . . They’re written again. By courier.—
—Of course. They want you. Highly recommended.—
—Lie down, I can’t talk to your back . . . please. —

He sank beside her. They were sketched out like two figures on a tomb commemorating a faithful life together. She took his hand. (MSS, p. 203)

Will has had little opportunity to view medieval sepulchral sculpture, but his work seems to have been reading modern poetry. The description echoes and possibly derives from Philip Larkin’s “An Arundel Tomb,” especially the first two verses and the last:

Side by side, their faces blanched,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jousted armour, vassal plume,
And that faint hint of the absurd -
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, enjoin.
It merits his left-hand gauntlet still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

. . . Only an attitude remains

Time has transfugured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
PART FOUR: EASTERN EUROPE AFTER COMMUNISM

CHAPTER 9

CREATOR VERSUS CONSPIRATOR IN THE POSTCOMMUNIST REVOLUTIONS (MARCEL CORNIS-POPE)


7 For more on the subversive-emancipatory role played by these discourses against the socioeconomic and ideological constraints of East European communism, see my book The Unfinished Battle: Romanian Postmodernism Before and After 1989 (Iași: Polirom, 1996).
