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Gillian Dooley

“The Origins of Speech Lie in Song”: Music as Language in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*

Abstract I: In *Vergogna*, David Lurie trova irragionevole l’affermazione secondo cui “la società umana ha creato il linguaggio per comunicare pensieri, sentimenti e intenzioni”, credendo, privatamente e al contrario, che “le origini della parola risiedono nel canto” (Coetzee 2000: 3-4). Nel mio libro del 2010 *J. M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*, ho incluso una breve disamina di riferimenti musicali come forma di linguaggio nel lavoro di Coetzee. In questo articolo esaminerò i miei presupposti in modo approfondito, rintracciando risonanze musicali in *Età di ferro*, sia nella prosa che nella forma e struttura del romanzo. Cercherò di dimostrare che nonostante sia noto per la sobrietà dello stile, Coetzee è in realtà uno scrittore lirico e appassionato, attento ai ritmi e alle strutture musicali che sono elementi essenziali per il suo lavoro.

Abstract II: In *Disgrace*, David Lurie finds preposterous the proposition that “Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other”, privately believing that, on the contrary, “the origins of speech lie in song” (Coetzee 2000: 3-4). In my 2010 book *J. M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*, I included a brief survey of references to music as a type of language in Coetzee’s work. In this paper I will examine my claim in greater depth, seeking musical resonances in his novel *Age of Iron*, both in his prose and in the form and structure of the novel. I will attempt to account for my impression that despite his reputation for spare, academic prose, Coetzee is a lyrical and impassioned writer, and that musical rhythms and structures are an essential element in his work.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, music in literature.

I begin with David Lurie’s unspoken belief that “the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul” (Coetzee 2000: 3-4). The temptation might be, perhaps, to proceed with an examination and elaboration of this idea in *Disgrace*, with the opera David Lurie struggles to write on his daughter’s farm, as “he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line” (Coetzee 2000: 184): the music a symbol of the human soul trapped

in the toils of life, of the doubts and difficulty of the specific life of this specific character in his time and place.

But no, I am pulled back to the earlier South African novel *Age of Iron*, and another soul even more tortured than David Lurie who needs to learn not so much how to live in her time and place, as how to die in it. Although in July 1990 Coetzee said of *Age of Iron*, "I am still too near its writing – too near and too raw – to know what to think of it", he allowed himself to comment that

Elizabeth Curren brings to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment that resound around her two kinds of authority: the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics. Both these authorities are denied and even derided in her world: the first because hers is a private death, the second because it speaks from long ago and far away (Coetzee 1992: 250).

For much of the novel, this denial of Mrs Curren's authority means that she speaks without being answered. The novel itself is a letter addressed to an absent other who may never read it. Nevertheless, it is possible to read Coetzee's work as a kind of polyphony¹. And indeed, in *Doubling the Point* he writes that

there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/ invoke those countervoices in himself, that is, step down from the position of what Lacan calls "the subject supposed to know" (Coetzee 1992: 65).

Carrol Clarkson glosses the Bakhtinian implications of this passage: "A serious author, playing up this dialogic potential of writing, instead of trying to suppress it, raises a countervoice, producing a discourse inflected by an invisible interlocutor" (Clarkson 2009: 8). So rather than being a monologue – like a melody alone, perhaps supported by simple harmonies, strummed on a guitar, say – this kind of writing requires or assumes separate but interdependent equal voices engaging together in a discussion – as in polyphony or counterpoint. Clarkson does not make the musical connection explicit, but she does say that "Coetzee pulls out all the literary stops to switch the terms of the conversation" (Clarkson 2009: 104), and "in so doing, Coetzee plays up the countervoices" (Clarkson 2009: 105).

"Countervoice" is itself not a musical term. The musical term is "counterpoint", defined succinctly in the *Penguin New Dictionary of Music* as "the simultaneous combination of two or more melodies to make musical sense" (Jacobs 1958: 86). The musical implications of the word "voice", apart from the obvious, are explained in the entry for "counterpoint" in the *Oxford Companion to Music*: "The term 'voice-part' in the definition is intended to include instrumental strands as well as choral, the word 'voice' being commonly used by musicians

¹ Brian Macaskill has discussed the contrapuntal character of narrative in Coetzee and Bakhtin extensively in several essays, including his "Fugal Musemathematics" triptych in *Word and Text* 2014-2015.

in this comprehensive sense" (Scholes 1970: 260). For a musician, reading about "voices" being "played up", not to mention "pulling out all the stops", inevitably makes one think of counterpoint on the organ, and the master of contrapuntal organ music, Johann Sebastian Bach.

In "What is a Classic?", Coetzee interrogates his youthful memory of hearing Bach for the first time, drifting on the South African summer air from a neighbour's record player to the 15-year-old "mooning around our back garden", transfixing him. What he heard that day in 1955 was, he confidently states, "Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* played on the harpsichord" (Coetzee 2001: 8). The *Well-Tempered Clavier* is perhaps the most famous of Bach's works for solo "klavier" – a generic term for a stringed keyboard instrument (as opposed to the organ, which is a wind instrument). It consists of two sets of 24 preludes and fugues, each containing a prelude and fugue in each key of the chromatic scale, major and minor, from C major to B minor. The word "prelude" took on independent life with Chopin in the nineteenth century, but in Bach's days it merely meant something to be played before something else, and was often improvised: it did not imply any particular form – it could be fast or slow, in common, triple or compound time. In this case, of course, the something else a prelude preceded was a fugue, the apotheosis of counterpoint. However, counterpoint is present in almost all Bach's works.

Mrs Curren is a classicist. Her sensibility is anchored in the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome. But her classicism encompasses "classical" music too. Early in the novel, she sits at her piano and plays "the old pieces: preludes from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Chopin preludes, Brahms waltzes" (Coetzee 1990: 23) – the standard fare of an amateur pianist, the sort of thing I also play when the mood comes upon me. "Then at last I went back to Bach, and played clumsily, over and over again, the first fugue from Book One" (Coetzee 1990: 23). She is challenging herself: we amateur pianists of a certain age can manage many of the preludes, but the fugues are a different matter. Edward Said talks about the difficulties Bach presents to the amateur keyboard player:

The technical problems he presents derive mainly from a contrapuntal style in which every voice (every finger) must be independent, so that what one hears is not a melody and simple accompaniment but a flowing, constantly transformed texture comprising two, three, four, five or six voices, each of them imitating the others with minute differences in rhythm, inflection, melodic variation. Most players end up by struggling through this, with the result that Bach's amazing harmonic audacity, ingenious rhythmical flexibility and constant melodic inventiveness (many performers can scarcely manage two voices, whereas Bach requires the capacity to play several strands simultaneously, each with complex clarity) are ignored (Said 2007: 251).

Mrs Curren makes music despite her difficulties – "the sound was muddy, the lines blurred, but every now and again, for a few bars, the real thing emerged, the real music, the music that does not die, confident, serene" (Coetzee 1990: 24). The confidence and serenity of Bach seems bound up with her ability to face death, and her capacity to imagine physical union with the homeless man, Vercueil:

I made tea, put on a record. Bar by bar the Goldberg Variations erected themselves in the air. I crossed to the window. It was nearly dark. Against the garage wall the man was squatting, smoking, the point of his cigarette glowing. Perhaps he saw me, perhaps not. Together we listened.

At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love.

Though it came unbidden, though it filled me with distaste, I considered the thought without flinching (Coetzee 1990: 30).

Just a few pages earlier, she had written: "My existence from day to day has become a matter of averting my eyes, of cringeing. Death is the only truth left. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth" (Coetzee 1990: 26). And at the end of the novel, she dies in Vercueil's embrace, from which "there was no warmth to be had" (Coetzee 1990: 196). Thus the music of Bach has accompanied, if not facilitated or occasioned, a change in Mrs Curren, from cringeing at the thought of the inevitable approach of her death, to facing without flinching a thought which fills her with distaste, which she may not yet associate with death but which the reader will learn to. Coetzee writes of Bach, in "What is a Classic?"

In Bach nothing is obscure, no single step so miraculous as to surpass imitation. Yet when the chain of sounds is realized in time, the building process ceases at a certain moment to be the mere linking of units; the units cohere as a higher-order object that I can only describe by analogy as the incarnation of ideas of exposition, complication, and resolution that are more general than music (Coetzee 2001: 9).

Is this not, in turn, analogous to the progress we witness in this first part of *Age of Iron*? Exposition: Mrs Curren receives the diagnosis of terminal cancer and on the same day Vercueil appears in her backyard. Complication: struggling with the news, she plays Bach on the piano, and Vercueil listens. She begins to think of Heaven, absurdly, as a hotel lobby: a place of comfort and no pain where Bach's "Art of Fugue" is piped through the public address system. She talks of "cringeing", evading the truth by not thinking of death. She plays Bach again, this time on the record player. Resolution: she sees Vercueil listening too and imagines making love with him, at first with distaste, but then with more acceptance: "Two souls, his and mine, twined together, ravished. [...] Stillness and ecstasy" (Coetzee 1990: 30). This acceptance foreshadows her willingness at the end of the book, at the end of her life, to face Vercueil in the embrace of death.

The two souls twined together while listening to the Goldberg Variations anticipates the moment when Vercueil first responds to her verbally, waiting with her in the hospital carpark while Florence and her son Bheki search the hospital for his friend. "He was learning to talk to me. He was learning to lead me on. I felt an urge to interrupt: 'It is such a pleasure!' I wanted to say. After long silence it is such a pleasure" (Coetzee 1990: 76). She can speak the truth to Vercueil, even if his response is often vague, sketchy or deliberately uncommunicative: "Early on he decided he could get away with choosing which of my questions to hear, which

not to hear" (Coetzee 1990: 187). At last she has a real countervoice, rather than the absent daughter she has to call up in her imagination with impassioned appeals and rhetorical questions, or occasionally on the telephone with "love but not truth" (Coetzee 1990: 129). Perhaps there is an analogy here between Bach's works for solo instruments – the cello suites are the most famous examples, but as I write I am listening to a sonata for solo flute (BWV 1013) which, although it is a single line, has all the complexity of a contrapuntal work: other voices are implied: the ear supplies the harmonising countervoices – and his two-part inventions, where the two parts are present, although the work is on smaller and simpler scale.

In the immediate aftermath of writing *Age of Iron* Coetzee said to David Attwell, "I think of my own prose as rather hard and dry; but there remains in me a tug toward sensual elaboration – toward the late-Romantic symphony and away from the two-part invention, say" (Coetzee 1992: 208).

Bach's two-part inventions are simple counterpoint for keyboard, written as teaching pieces for perhaps not beginners, but elementary students. His use of the term "*inventione*" is not drawn from musical language: it is a reference to rhetoric:

Traditionally, this concept of "invention" denoted an important stage in composition; it originated from [...] Cicero's rhetoric, which was still widely studied in the 18th-century Germany. In his *De Inventione*, Cicero listed five stages in creating an oration, namely invention (*inventio*), arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*) and delivery (*pronuntiatio*). He explains, "one must first hit upon what to say; then manage and marshal his discoveries, not merely in orderly fashion, but with a discriminating eye for the exact weight, as it were, of each argument; next go on to array them in the adornments of style; after that keep them guarded in his memory; and in the end deliver them with effect and charm" (Tomita 1999).

In choosing Bach's music for elementary students as one axis on a continuum with the late-Romantic symphony at the other end, Coetzee allows for a huge range and diversity of music. They are almost as different as music can be. The inventions can be played by one inexpert pianist: the late-Romantic symphony – those of Mahler would be the prime examples – needs the largest possible orchestral forces, with an expert conductor and players of the highest technical expertise, and often virtuoso singers as well.

Along that spectrum, although towards the complex end, lie Bach's choral works, including the cantatas and the two Passions. Mrs Curren's love of Bach does not stop with the works for solo keyboard – the preludes and fugues, the Goldberg Variations, the Art of Fugue. As she approaches the settlement at Guguletu, which is being destroyed by violence and fire, she hears a noise "which at first might have been taken for wind and rain" but which "began to break up into shouts, cries, calls, over a *ground bass* that I can only call a sigh: a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing" (Coetzee 1990: 94; my emphasis). This musical allusion most vividly evokes the opening chorus of Bach's St Matthew Passion. Although it is not strictly speaking a ground bass – a bass part consisting of a phrase repeated many times, similar in many ways to the riff in a rock song

– it has a sighing, tragic pulse in the orchestra that accompanies the divided choir, one half calling to the other in antiphonal countervoices: “Sehet! Wen? [...] Seht ihn! Wie? [...] Sehet! Was? [...] Seht? Wohin?” This famous chorus is as moving as any Mahler symphony, and hardly less complex, with eight orchestral and nine choral parts.

Later in her journey towards death Mrs Curren writes, to her absent daughter, of what will be left when she goes:

Never fear, I will not haunt you. [...] It is not my soul that will remain with you but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold (Coetzee 1990: 129-130).

Turbulence in the air could be caused equally by the voice, singing or speaking, or an instrument being sounded. And indeed, in the next paragraph:

Letting go of myself, letting go of you [...]: a hard task, but I am learning. The music too. But the music I will take with me, that at least, for it is wound into my soul. The ariosos from the Matthew Passion, wound in and knotted a thousand times, so that no one, nothing can undo them (Coetzee 1990: 130).

Bach’s sacred vocal music, the Passions and the cantatas, are perhaps the most complex, moving and dramatic music ever written about death. The “ariosos” – the arias – in the St Matthew Passion are not based on biblical texts like much of the narrative recitative, but are settings of original German texts by Picander. They contemplate the death of Christ and the death of the singer: “Mache dich, mein Herze, rein; ich will Jesum selbst begraben”, sings the Bass in part Two. This attention inward is found in many of Bach’s sacred arias:

This contemplation of, and preparation for, death was peculiar to Lutheran Germany and had its roots in the Reformation. [...] Central to Luther’s reforms was his belief that the fate of the soul was determined at death. [...] For Lutherans such as the Bachs, the fate of the soul was the responsibility of the living individual, nurtured by the family and the church; at death the destiny of the soul was determined irrevocably. The *ars moriendi* became an essential task of an everyday life shadowed by mortality (Yearsley 2005: 238-239).

Mrs Curren’s *ars moriendi* – art of dying – is also her essential task, though for her it is not a simple theological question. She longs to be saved: “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?” (Coetzee 1990: 136). The Bach aria, in the most sublime and comforting rhetoric, answers, “Welt, geh aus! Lass Jesum ein!” Mrs Curren writes, “Why do I not call for help, call to God? Because God cannot help me. God is looking for me but he cannot reach me. God is another dog in another maze” (Coetzee 1990: 137-138). William Purcell suggests that “*Age of Iron* should [...] be read as an account of Christian salvation in which a lost soul, Mrs Curren, is saved by learning to love

the unloved and unlovable" (Purcell 2013: 1). There is no doubt that Christian rhetoric is continually called up in the novel, although it is accompanied by a heavy freight of allusions to other ancient and classical cultures². However, I think it is possible that much of the Christian rhetoric we find in Mrs Curren's account is mediated through the Lutheran ethic of Bach's sacred music: the attention is turned inward to the individual soul, to readying oneself for death. She is not uncritical of this tendency, however: "The country smolders, yet with the best will in the world I can only half-attend. My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body" (Coetzee 1990: 39).

* * *

The sheer inventiveness and prodigious intelligence at work in every phrase of a highly complex and intellectual style that is capable nevertheless of pathos, drama, exuberance and other forms of considerable expressivity (Said 2007: 250).

In the early 1990s, at the time when he had just written *Age of Iron*, Coetzee said that he thought of his prose as "hard and dry" (Coetzee 1992: 208). The description I have just quoted – actually Edward Said's assessment of Bach's style – seems to be just as apt for the virtuosity of much of Coetzee's prose. Consider Mrs Curren's description of Bheki's friend John:

I did not like him. I do not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any trace of feeling for him. As there are people to whom one spontaneously warms, so there are people to whom one is, from the first, cold. [...] A simplified person, simplified in every way: swifter, nimbler, more tireless than real people, without doubts, without humor, ruthless, innocent. [...]

I remember a cat I once nursed, an old ginger tom whose jaw was locked shut by an abscess. [...] Around this boy I now felt the same wall of resistance. Though his eyes were open, he did not see; what I said he did not hear (Coetzee 1990: 78-79).

Even truncated like this, it is possible to see the way Coetzee links ideas across paragraphs, using repetition and holding ideas across time, like a keyboard player holding countervoices in the fingers. Elsewhere there are homonyms, assonances, half rhymes, echoing musical sequences and motifs; and always the musical rhythm of his prose invites reading aloud.

Mrs Curren is finally moved to pity when the boy John is taking refuge in her servant's room awaiting his martyrdom. "Poor child! Poor child! From somewhere tears sprang and blurred my sight". The police arrive. She cries "Wait [...] wait [...] wait [...] he is just a child!" (Coetzee 1990: 151-152). She tells them she has cancer: "*Cancer!* What a pleasure to fling the word at them!" (Coetzee 1990: 155). Rousseau writes, "In order to move a young heart, to

² See my article "Hades this place, and I a fugitive shade": Classical Languages and Cultures in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*" for a discussion of the interplay of Christian with other cultural references in this novel.

repulse an unjust aggressor, nature dictates accents, cries, complaints" (Rousseau 2000: 294). Cries and complaints are her only recourse against the obduracy of the young warrior and the implacable power of the police. The orchestration of these few pages, with Mrs Curren's desperate cries and complaints ringing out above the unmoved, four-square efficiency of the police – "all in a day's work" (Coetzee 1990: 154) – is like a musical lament sung against a ground bass. A lament will not change the singer's plight, but she bears witness by voicing her complaint in repeated, anguished cries. "I am watching you", Mrs Curren says. "I am watching everything you do" (Coetzee 1990: 153). Her powerlessness in this situation is her only power, and although she can neither move John's heart nor repulse the police her voice rings out from the pages of Coetzee's novel.

"Nature dictates accents, cries, complaints", Rousseau says: "The most ancient words are invented in this way, and this is why the first languages were tuneful and passionate before being simple and methodical" (Rousseau 2000: 294). Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* might have been the source for the contrarian David Lurie's opinion that "the origins of speech lie in song"³. It may be perverse to take this belief of a character like Lurie, many of whose other opinions are clearly at odds with those of *Disgrace's* implied author, as some kind of manifesto from Coetzee himself. Nevertheless, I believe that one of the clues to Coetzee's enduring popularity is the musical quality of his prose which sings itself from the page directly into the reader's mind and soul.

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Gillian Dooley is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow in English literature at Flinders University, and a Visiting Fellow in Music at Southampton University. Her research interests include the works of Jane Austen, Iris Murdoch, V. S. Naipaul and J. M. Coetzee, as well as the life and work of British navigator Matthew Flinders, and she has published a number of books and essays on these topics. She was the founding general editor of the journal *Transnational Literature* and is the coeditor of *Writers in Conversation*.

gillian.dooley@flinders.edu.au