

# Imagi(ni)ng Ageing: Old Women in J.M. Coetzee and Virginia Woolf

Mrs Curren and Mrs Dalloway

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## INTRODUCTION

In an exchange between Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco, Calvino wrote a dedication to the theorist that reads “To Umberto, *superior stabat lector, longeque inferior* Italo Calvino.” The critic and semiotician claims that, if taken literally, the dedication “was making a major statement and was paying homage to the role of the reader”; if not, it was meant to be ironic (Eco 1995: 2).

Similarly, William Golding unleashed the reader’s power, when he wrote “I no longer believe that the author has a sort of *patria potestas* over his brainchildren. Once they are printed they have reached their majority and the author has no more authority over them, knows no more about them, perhaps knows less about them than the critic who comes fresh to them, and sees them not as the author hoped they would be, but as what they are” (Golding 1965: 100).

Relying on this potentiality for the reader – that Calvino was undoubtedly echoing from Roland Barthes’s idea of the death of the author and the birth of the reader (Barthes 1967) – I would like to appeal to Julia Kristeva’s principle of intertextuality, in order to propose a comparative reading of J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990) and of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). This intertextuality is not explicit in J.M. Coetzee, who has not made reference to that novel in his text. Rather, he has hardly ever

mentioned Virginia Woolf in his writings, nor has he dedicated critical comments to her works. Therefore, it might be possible to refer to Michel Riffaterre's concept of 'aleatory intertextuality', one that allows him to further claim that "the only requisite for [reading] may be a presupposition of intertext" (Riffaterre 1990: 26). In this essay, I feel I am in the position of a reader who is alert to the presence (however hidden) in the text of a foreign body which is the trace of an intertext. What follows is a reading of J.M. Coetzee's character of Mrs Curren through intertextual references to Virginia Woolf's women in *Mrs Dalloway*. The latter is not obviously a source-text, but rather live matter: absorbed, inherited, and transposed by a writer who inhabits the culture of letters of our World. 'Viscosity' is the euristic tool that, according to semiologist Cesare Segre, helps detect relations between texts. The intertextual game, no matter how loose references might be, is an aspect of that viscosity (Segre 1984: 109-110).

To begin with, one must admit that the most Woolfian character in all of Coetzee's fiction is Magda (*In the Heart of the Country* 1977). Magda claims she inhabits a green room: "My room, in the emerald semi-dark of the shuttered late afternoon" (Coetzee 1977: 1). We know from biographies, and particularly from the lately published volume *Virginia Woolf's Garden* (2013), that Virginia Woolf had painted her dining room at Monk's house green, where she created an atmosphere of submarine light. Woolf painted it in a lively green colour, Veronese green. Her sister, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant used to pull her legs for that. Green was her favourite colour, and Monk's House reverberated with it. In the sunny afternoons, the green creepers at the windows cast their shadows on the patches of sun on the walls. It looked like being in a submarine cave (Zoob/Arber 2013: 32).

Moreover, Magda looks at airplanes writing words in the air, – to which she answers by writing words piling white stones in the desert: "The voices speak to me out of machines that fly in the sky. They speak to me in Spanish." "Forming the stones into letters twelve feet high I began to spell out messages to my saviours: CINDRLA ES MI; and the next day: VENE AL TERRA; and QUIERO UN AUTR; and again SON ISOLADO." (Coetzee 1977: 126; 132) This is certainly and openly reminiscent of Septimus Warren Smith and Mrs Dalloway watching an airplane's acrobatic writing in smoke in the sky, advertising candies:

The sound of an airplane bore ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out whitesmoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! Marking letters in the sky! Everyone looked up. [...] But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? [...] the airplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y perhaps?" (Woolf 1992: 22)

All this shows that somehow Woolf was at the back of Coetzee's mind while forging the character of Magda.

## OLD WOMEN IN J.M. COETZEE AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

"I love walking in London," said Mrs Dalloway." (Woolf 1992: 6) Scholars have acknowledged how Virginia Woolf created the groundbreaking figure of a *flâneuse* in *Mrs Dalloway*. "I am hungry with love of this world" (Coetzee 1990: 18) – says Mrs Curren, protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, while contemplating False Bay from her car. The same love for their city and its landscapes moves the two women, the same love for life. Coetzee's protagonist, aged 70, crosses and maps the city of Cape Town for readers, as Clarissa Dalloway did, aged 51, with Central London in Virginia Woolf's novel.

LOVE FOR LIFE. "For Heaven only knows why one loves it so." (Woolf 1992: 4) Life is the object of this love, this *élan vital* that characterizes Mrs Dalloway. Similarly, Mrs Curren immediately resorts to affirming her love for life, as a reaction to her condition: "To live! You are my life; I love you as I love life itself." (Coetzee 1990: 6) Mrs Curren's love for life is declared through a metonym, the love for her far away, self-exiled daughter: "Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace death as my own, mine alone." (Coetzee 1990: 6)

David Attwell suggests that "while Coetzee's work is intellectually anchored in the cultural metropolises of Europe and the United States, it also belongs to a regional literature whose canons are barely known outside South Africa" (Attwell 2015: xxii). Mrs Curren becomes the suturing figure between the European tradition of *flânerie* – although re-adapted, – and the

insider's knowledge of Cape Town that we – as western readers – only acquire through her gaze. We can say that Mrs Curren flags the city of Cape Town on our map of World Literature.

As a homage to J.M. Coetzee's chiasmic style in *Age of Iron*, a style that has been exhaustively delved into in the essay "Cruciform Logic ..." by Johan Jacobs (2009), and with a leap of the imagination that in David Attwell's words might be defined a "quantum leap", I would claim (borrowing one of Coetzee's favourite linguistic 'tic')<sup>1</sup> that Mrs Curren *is and is not* Mrs Dalloway. A woman set loose on the streets of Cape Town as her predecessor was unleashed on the streets of London.

Besides being a *flâneuse* like Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Curren has absorbed some of her traits. In spite of the obvious macroscopic differences between the two novels, their characters, their time and setting, and their authors, I would concentrate on some affinities, echoes, suggestions that connect the two literary masterpieces and their female heroines.

Old age, illness, life and death, love for life and for a city, derelicts, and above all war coalesce in Virginia Woolf's dense pages of *Mrs Dalloway*. All these same topics inundate the pages of J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and the life of Mrs Curren.

OLD AGE. In spite of Mrs Curren being older than Mrs Dalloway, and her illness being more serious, it is worth noticing how the two women measure their ageing through the gaze of men.

In her first appearance along the street Clarissa Dalloway looks like: "A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her [...] a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright." (Woolf 1992: 4)

Similarly, once back home, Mrs Curren finds a man laying in her garden, watching her from his position: "He did not stir [...] inspecting the winter stockings, the blue coat, the skirt with whose hang there has always been something wrong, the grey hair cut by a strip of scalp, old woman's scalp, pink, babyish." (Coetzee 1990: 4)

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1 Johan Jacobs explains Coetzee's "familiar stylistic 'tic': a predilection for doubling meaning through reflection." (Jacobs 2009: 15)

Moreover, Mrs Dalloway tries to imagine her friend Peter Walsh asking himself whether she had grown older: “It was true. Since her illness she had turned almost white.” (Woolf 1992: 39) But then Peter Walsh remembers: “She has been ill, and the sound expressed languor and suffering. It was her heart, he remembered; and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life, Clarissa falling where she stood, in her drawing-room. No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried.” (Woolf 1992: 55) Mrs Dalloway “felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged.” (Woolf 1992: 8) While Mrs Curren complains and instructs:

What do I care for this body that has betrayed me? I look at my hand and see only a tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things. And these legs, these clumsy, ugly stilts: why would I have to carry them with me everywhere? (Coetzee 1990: 12)

ILLNESS. “She was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness.” After a few steps in Westminster, there she is, Mrs Dalloway, feeling silence, suspense, solemnity around her “(but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza)” (Woolf 1992: 4).

Mrs Dalloway has been ill, the mark of her illness is in her white hair. Her illness remains unnamed for a while, till it shapes itself realistically into menopause accompanied by a weakness of the heart. Fictionally, however, her illness is more ungraspable, it is a sort of existential malaise.

In her essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), Susan Sontag claims that from the 1920s cancer replaced TB and inherited most of its metaphorical apparatus:

The fantasies inspired by TB in the last century, by cancer now, are responses to a disease thought to be intractable and capricious – that is, a disease not understood – in an era in which medicine’s central premise is that all disease can be cured. Such a disease is, by definition, mysterious. (Sontag 1978: 5)

Mrs Curren inhabits the late twentieth century and her illness takes the shape of cancer in her old age, marked by “the grey hair cut by a strip of scalp, old woman’s scalp” (Coetzee 1990: 4).

Moreover, Susan Sontag goes on saying that cancer immediately becomes synonymous with death: “as today in popular imagination, cancer equals death.” (Sontag 1978: 7)

This was the day when I had the news from Dr Syfret. The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears. “Thank you for being frank.” “We will do everything we can,” he said, “we will tackle this together.” But already, behind the comradely front, I could see he was withdrawing. *Sauve qui peut*. His allegiance to the living, not the dying. (Coetzee 1990: 4)

Mrs Curren’s illness is therefore not less mysterious than Mrs Dalloway’s. Both women are vulnerable and fragile to a certain extent, but they also share a certain rigidity, straightforwardness, and uprightness: “She was like iron, like flint, rigid up the backbone” (Woolf 1992: 70), says Peter Walsh of Clarissa Dalloway, remembering the moment she refused his marriage proposal. “You are like iron too,” (Coetzee 1990: 75) says Vercueil to Mrs Curren, who refuses to call back her daughter. “If I were made of iron, surely I would not break so easily,” (Coetzee 1990: 75) Mrs Curren replies.

If Mrs Curren’s first appearance to Mr Vercueil’s eyes is characterised by her uneven skirt: “the skirt with whose hang there has always been something wrong” (Coetzee 1990: 4), the skirt that has to be mended is a gender mark, for it recurs in Woolf’s novel, too. First, Mrs Dalloway is portrayed while mending her own skirt:

Clarissa, plunging her hand into the softness, gently detached the green dress and carried it to the window. She had torn it. Some one had trod on the skirt. [...] She would mend it.

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall. (Woolf 1992: 41-43)

Later on Peter Walsh, who had interrupted Clarissa Dalloway in her sewing, notices how “the battered woman – for she wore a skirt – with her

right hand exposed, her left hand clutching at her side, stood singing of love” (Woolf 1992: 89).

DERELICTS. As soon as Mrs Dalloway crosses Victoria Street she exclaims within herself:

For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can’t be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. (Woolf 1992: 4)

This imagery, this icon, allows another leap of the imagination straight unto Mrs Curren’s encounter with Vercueil, a homeless and alcoholic, taking shelter – if not too literally on her doorstep – in her own private garden:

There is an alley down the side of the garage [...] Yesterday at the end of this alley, I came upon a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting and a man curled up inside [...] a derelict, one of the derelicts who hang around the parking lots on Mill Street, cadging money from shoppers, drinking under the overpass, eating out of refuse cans. (Coetzee 1990: 4)

Although the resonance between “dejected” and “derelict” is certainly not enough to justify a comparison between Mrs Dalloway’s early twentieth century condition and Mrs Curren’s reality in the Nineties, both heroines encounter a woman beggar. Woolf first provides a gendered portrait of derelicts in the figure of a female beggar at Regent’s Park Tube Station. At first she is just a voice, almost inhumane: “a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling [...] running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning [...] the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring sprouting from the earth.” (Woolf 1992: 88) Only later she becomes “the battered woman – for she wore a skirt – with her right hand exposed, her left clutching at her side, stood singing of love.” (Woolf 1992: 89) Subsequently, Peter Walsh “couldn’t help giving the poor creature a coin as he stepped into his taxi.” (Woolf 1992: 90) This beggar woman seems to incarnate the traditional literary figure of the old crone.

Similarly, Mrs Curren has to experience such an encounter in her own dining room, where Vercueil enters with a woman friend: “I saw that someone had followed him in. It was a woman, small, no higher than my shoulder, but old, or at least not young, with a leering, bloated face and livid skin.” (Coetzee 1990: 56) Mrs Curren’s only thought is to send her out of her house, and she even asks Florence to help her physically push the vagrant out. As a response, the woman produces “a rambling stream of obscenity,” “in a hoarse voice” (Coetzee 1990: 59) that resembles the voice of Woolf’s beggar singer. Mrs Curren’s resorting to an uncharitable gestures in this case, as opposite to Peter Walsh’s gesture of piety, is balanced by her own becoming a sort of homeless person, towards the end of the novel, when she is driven out of her house after a Police raid and she is compelled to sleep in a public park, side by side with Vercueil:

In Buitenkant Street, under the overpass, I sat down to rest. A steady stream of cars flowed past, heading for the city. [...] With my wild hair and pink quilt I might be a spectacle on Shoonder Street; here, amid the rabble and filth, I was just part of the urban shadowland. [...]

I wrapped myself tighter in the quilt and lay down. When I opened my eyes there was a child kneeling beside me, feeling inside the folds of the quilt. His hand crept over my body. [...]

Then something was sniffing at my face: a dog. [...] Was it Vercueil? [...] Everything grew remote: the smell of damp earth, the cold, the man beside me, my own body. [...] I lay face to face with him. (Coetzee 1990: 162)

LOST DAUGHTERS. Both Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Curren have daughters who are detached from them, almost lost, though in different ways and with more dramatic consequences for Mrs Curren. The first hint at Mrs Dalloway’s daughter is between brackets: “(but one must economise, not buy things rashly for Elizabeth).” (Woolf 1992: 5) Post-war London and its almost empty shop windows impose a certain austerity, and Elizabeth, differently from her mother, seems not to appreciate luxury items. While the mother had a passion for gloves and shoes, “her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for neither of them” (Woolf 1992: 12).

However, the real distance between mother and daughter is due to the girl’s infatuation for Miss Kilman, the Irish, catholic tutor in History, who has taken control of her life: “They were inseparable, and Elizabeth, her

own daughter went to Communion; and how she dressed, how she treated people who came to lunch she did not care a bit ... ." (Woolf 1992: 12)

Quite differently, and yet similarly, Mrs Curren's daughter is painfully and inexorably absent from her life. It is to her that Mrs Curren is writing the long letter which is the novel itself:

How I longed for you to be here, to hold me! I begin to understand the true meaning of the embrace. We embrace to be embraced. We embrace our children to be folded in the arms of the future, to pass ourselves on beyond death, to be transported. To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me. (Coetzee 1990: 5-6)

The addressee of Mrs Curren's letter is also the object of this feeling of longing: her own daughter. Later on in the novel Mrs Curren explains to Mr Vercuil: "I have a daughter in America. She left in 1976 and hasn't come back. She is married to an American. They have two children of their own." (Coetzee 1990: 11) Distance, anyway, is not the real matter: the aggravating factor is political and ideological, for the daughter had left the country right after the Soweto uprising and had sworn never to come back "until the current rulers are swinging from the lampposts" (Atwell 2015: 148). Mrs Dalloway misses her daughter Elizabeth too, but her rage goes against Miss Killman.

In Woolf's novel, Mrs Dalloway's daughter hardly ever stays in the same room with her mother. When Peter Walsh is visiting, she just enters the room to say hello and immediately disappears. In the evening, during the party as soon as Elizabeth makes her splendid appearance her mother dramatically and unnoticed leaves the room. In Coetzee's novel, the daughter lives in another continent and Mrs Curren longs to fly to her as a butterfly or as a spirit after death.

MOTHER'S BODIES. The body can become an incarnated metaphor of femininity, a corpo-real emblem of humanity. Both Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Curren are conscious of their body to the extreme, of their life and death too:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?

But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now. (Coetzee 1990: 9; 11)

Like Mrs Dalloway, Mrs Curren has passed the bridal and maternal age. She is conscious of her ill and decaying body:

Out of their withered bodies even the old try to squeeze one last drop. A stubborn will to give, to nourish. Shrewd was death's aim when he chose my breast for his first shaft.

What do I care for this body that has betrayed me? I look at my hand and see only a tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things. [...] we sicken before we die so that we will be weaned from our body. The milk that nourished us grows thin and sour; turning away from the breast, we begin to be restless for a separate life. Yet this first life, this life on earth, on the body of earth – will there, can there ever be a better one? Despite all the glooms and despairs and rages, I have not let go of my love of it. (Coetzee 1990: 8; 13)

Life and death, love for life and acceptance of death are common themes in the two novels and common concerns for the two women. To Mrs Dalloway's metaphor of life as being out at sea, adrift: "She had the perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone" (Woolf 1992: 9), answers Mrs Curren's comparing life in South Africa to a sinking boat: "since life in this country is so much like life aboard a sinking ship, one of those old-time liners with a lugubrious, drunken captain and a surly crew and leaky lifeboats." (Coetzee 1990: 22-23) Yet, this seems an echo of Mrs Dalloway: "As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship" (Woolf 1992: 85). Also, "Yet how hard it is to sever oneself from the living touch, from all the touches that unite us with the living! Like a steamer pulling away from the quay, the ribbons tightening, snapping, falling away." (Coetzee 1990: 73) And, once again, Mrs Dalloway: "all this fever of living [...] hard risen from the troubled sea." (Woolf 1992: 63)

Sea and air are two overwhelming elements in both novels: causing strong emotions of nostalgia, longing and melancholia. Mrs Curren provides an example:

In the mornings I come out of the house and wet my finger and hold it up to the wind. When the chill is from northwest, from your quarter, I stand a long time sniffing, concentrating my attention in the hope that across the thousand miles of land and sea some breath will reach me of the milkiness you still carry with you behind your ears, in the fold of your neck. (Coetzee 1990: 6)

This image of a woman sensing the wind, like a diviner, as a child would do, again quite loosely echoes Woolf's novel. Air, in the form of breeze, or solidified into mist, is not only the subject matter in the first two pages of Woolf's novel, but more literally, it makes birds and things float up and down, as a leitmotif: "Being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself." (Woolf 1992: 10)

In this passage the reference to the mist points back to the very opening of the novel where air was the protagonist: "How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window [...] looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling." (Woolf 1992: 3)

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY. Woolf keeps on writing about Mrs Dalloway: "somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there she survived, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there." (Woolf 1992: 9)

Thus, Mrs Dalloway is part of life itself, but she is also part of History. She knows only too well that post-war life in London is moulded by History: "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance, a perfectly upright and stoical bearing." (Woolf 1992: 10)

Mrs Dalloway "being part of the trees at home", but also "made into a well of tears" seems to match David Attwell's view of Coetzee's life in South Africa: "Deformation. [...] life as deformed, year after year, by

South Africa. Emblem: the deformed trees on the golf links in Simonstown.” (Attwell 2015: 4) Also Mike Marais’s essay “From the Standpoint of Redemption. *Age of Iron*” (2009: 95-128), insists on this same metaphor of a State that “deforms” the life of its citizens as related to *Age of Iron*.

Definitely, *Age of Iron* is a novel about mothers. Mrs Curren is a mother, and creates herself in words as connected to her beloved daughter and as ready to reach and re-join her dead mother. Florence, her black servant is also a mother of three children, envisioned in a dream as a new Amazon trailing towards the future hand in hand with her two daughters, Hope and Beauty, as an allegorical auspice for the new South Africa. David Attwell alludes to Coetzee’s own mother as a possible model for Mrs Curren. He writes:

there is Coetzee’s own shrewd sense that the female narrator is a strategic way of positioning oneself on the margins of authoritative traditions. The assertively feminine position in Coetzee’s writing is at times a proxy for a self-staging that has little to do with gender. Nevertheless, Vera’s perseverance would have shown the way. (Attwell 2015, 142)

After trying to persuade a black boy injured by policemen and now lying in hospital, Mrs Curren – being an old woman – is highly self-conscious of her marginal position and voice: “My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white.” (Coetzee 1990: 79)

Yet, the kind of self-trial Mrs Curren submits herself to is the same trial Coetzee imagines in order to present her with a verdict of innocence at the court of History. David Atwell writes: “Vera [Vehmeyer]’s death revived the problem of historical guilt.” Then, quoting Coetzee, he adds: “It [the novel] must be about innocence. Historical innocence. How my mother, belonging to her generation in SA, was nevertheless innocent.” (Attwell 2015: 144)

Mrs Curren seems to face the same dilemma, when she claims with the help of Thucydides:

I, a white. When I think of the whites, what do I see? I see a herd of sheep (not a flock: a herd) milling around on a dusty plain under the baking sun. I hear a drumming of hooves, a confusion of sound that resolves itself, when the ear grows attuned, into the same bleating call in a thousand different inflections: “I!” “I!” “I!” [...] 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. (Coetzee 1990: 79-81)

“If ever history were to become everything, we would all succumb to madness”, claims Robert Pogue Harrison. Luckily we have “our religious impulses, our poetic and utopian imagination, our moral ideals, our metaphysical projections, our storytelling, our aesthetic transfigurations of the real, our passion for games, our delight in nature”, he adds (Harrison 2008: ix). Our novels with their own aesthetic and ethical views provide an alternative, a correction to history, or “of rivalry with it”, says Dominique Head (2009: xi).

IMAGES OF WOMEN’S GIFTS. Both Mrs Curren and Mrs Dalloway provide similar images for gifts exchanged among women, to the point of creating a sort of gender bias in the discourse on gifts. Mrs Curren imagines her long letter as a gift of words to her daughter:

Day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old, fashioned and packed with love, the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard. (Coetzee 1990: 9)

In the quoted passage, Mrs Curren is speaking of a gift, a gift from a mother to a daughter, made of words, in fact, a letter to be sent to destination after her death. The semantic chain “words-sweets-drops” and “to take in-to suck-to absorb” evoke the metaphor of maternal nourishing. Moreover, words in spite of being immaterial, either written or pronounced, here become corpo-real, they come from a body, they speak of that body (illness) and must be swallowed, digested, metabolized by another body.

The nerve of the style of Woolf seems to pass to the lips of Mrs Curren: this gift from mother to daughter, this act of nourishment and communion echoes the gift that Sally Seton gave to Clarissa, when they were young:

Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down) she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling. (Woolf 1992: 39)

The kiss here becomes a present from a woman to another woman. The idea of a present of love and words packed and unpacked is substituted by a kiss wrapped up and then uncovered. Again, the lexical shift is too fragile to allow a comparison and nevertheless Mrs Curren seems to speak as if under the spell of that ground-braking Modernist female predecessor. Finally, to “pack the words into the pages like sweets” echoes a Woolfian predilection for such a simile, as in the portrait of the nurses chatting among themselves, in *Between the Acts* (1941): “rolling words like sweets on their tongues.” (Woolf 2012: 310)

STYLE. And, then, how similar is the idea of something consigned and kept almost inexorably by the two women: news about incurable illness and a gift of love! Let us compare the two pronouncements!

The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears. (Coetzee 1990: 4)

And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up and told just to keep it, not to look at it. (Woolf 1992: 39)

If lexicon is not proof enough of a lesson learned from Modernist female speech and thought, it is interesting to notice that Mr Dalloway’s interior monologue is characterized by a consistently frequent use of brackets. Mrs Curren has the same intimacy and intimation to what might be considered

“asides”: complicit, clarifying, almost theatrical augmented meaning for the reader.

With Woolf the parentheses are like asides, almost theatrical. Parentheses have various functions. First, they add meanings and missing pieces of information: “How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn (for a girl of eighteen as she then was)” (Woolf 1992: 3), as for instance the precise age of Clarissa, when she used to go to the seaside, at Burton.

The piece of information added in brackets is something the reader did not know and is told as an indirect confession, a piece of news broken almost secretly and in a whisper as if to the ear. When Mrs Curren describes the shelter of cardboard boxes and plastic sheets made by Vercueil, she mentions that “he produced a bag (AIR CANADA, it said) and zipped it shut” (Coetzee 1990: 5). Similarly, she describes his dog: “Why do I give this man food? For the same reason I would feed his dog (stolen, I am sure) if it came begging.” (Coetzee 1990: 7)

These asides characterize the type of mental speech that the stream of consciousness produces, it is another way of talking to oneself. Yet, when Mrs Curren explains her habit of standing in front of the TV when watching the news, she adds in brackets – not to herself but to the benefit of her daughter, the addressee of her letter – “(who would choose to face a firing squad sitting down?)”. (Coetzee 1990: 11) The implied reader in Mrs Dalloway, to whom the parenthesis add meanings, easily identifies with Mrs Curren’s daughter, in Coetzee’s novel.

THE TEXT’S SPINE. If Coetzee’s language is Woolfian, the architecture of his novel is doubly so. Scholars have debated the opposing symbolism behind Mrs Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. They respectively represent sanity and insanity, even though the borderline between the two categories is really thin.<sup>2</sup> They also represent the upper classes and the middle classes,

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2 “By implicitly stating her intention to show that the definitions of sanity and insanity in the postwar years had been skewed and that their definition (“study”) need be informed and altered, Woolf was postulating a relation between sanity and insanity that might only be appreciated by recognizing that the experience of survivors of the war (whether combatants or non combatants) could lead them

the female and the male sphere and the questioning of preconceived role models. J.M. Coetzee's novel also involves a man and a woman of quite different social *milieu*, the retired professor of classics Elizabeth Curren and the vagrant Mr Vercueil, yet both of them are disabled from the very beginning.

In *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf builds up a double structure, where two stories run parallel for a while, then meet and cross over at certain moments. If the meeting of Clarissa and Septimus happens roughly after ten pages for the reader, Mrs Curren encounters Vercueil in the very first page of the novel. The balancing of a female character and a male one provides a sort of DNA spine to the novel: structuring a dialogue and an opposition, a dialectic that is similar, for instance, to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, where a Roman general is paired to an Oriental queen, East and West are confronted, terrestrial and naval warfare, land and water, masculinity and femininity are explored. Maybe it is not a chance that *Antony and Cleopatra* is quoted four times by Septimus Warren Smith as one of his favourite readings, one that arouses his literary inspiration and possible talent.

WAR. In *Mrs Dalloway*, tragically, war affects mothers: "the War was over, except for some one like Mrs Foxcroft [...] eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed [...]; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed." (Woolf 1992: 5) Although War was over, its scars are everywhere. Post-war London is characterized by almost empty shop windows. Mothers are mourning their youths. Peter Walsh watches boys in uniform, carrying guns, who "marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff [...] But they did not look robust. They were weedy for the most part, boys of sixteen" (Woolf 1992: 55).

If it is undeniable that "the distance between civilian and combatant experience is explored in *Mrs Dalloway* where in postwar London the reality of a politician's wife, Clarissa Dalloway [...] is juxtaposed with that of a combat veteran, Septimus Warren Smith," (Levenback 1999: 47) in Coetzee's novel the combatant is Mr Thabane. He is a black activist and

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to despair (what Kierkegaard called 'the sickness unto death') and, possibly, suicide." (Levenback 1999: 46)

agitator, who by inciting the young black boys to (armed) action also justifies their death.

It is significant that when Thabane (black activism) is present, Vercueil (coloured idleness?) is absent. Moreover, Vercueil almost pushes Mrs Curren towards Thabane and the township of Guguletu, for he has to push her car to make a start in the middle of a rainy night. Consequently, Mrs Curren is plunged into the middle of a war of which she knows nothing:

Shooting in Guguletu: whatever Florence knows about it, whatever you know ten thousand miles away, I do not know. In the news that reaches me there is no mention of trouble, of shooting. The land that is presented to me is a land of smiling neighbours. (Coetzee 1990: 49)

Militancy costs the black boys their death, and they are just past their childhood. Thus, Mrs Curren is confronted with death on the front, something Clarissa Dalloway is spared:

The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. (Coetzee 1990: 94)

Here the mother figure, Florence, is not disconnected from the scene of her son's death in the trenches or, better, the ditches, as Mrs Flanders is, in *Jacob's Room* (1922), for instance, or as are the two mothers in *Mrs Dalloway*. For the black community is subjected to apartheid's persecutions and therefore it is compelled to witness, and live through death, day by day. This happens in the 1980s, during the years of the Emergency. Mrs Curren acknowledges this as "this... this war" (Coetzee 1990: 95), fought with bullets "made in South Africa. SABS Approved" (ibid), says Mr Thabane. It is not enough for Mrs Curren to leave the scene, she cannot avoid being haunted by those deaths. Nor is Mrs Dalloway freed from war.

SUICIDE. The suicide(s) Mrs Curren often plans, imagines, and almost enacts, asking for the complicity of Mr Vercueil, as well as the growing shame she feels towards her country can only direct her to seek freedom in thoughts of death or even in death itself.

Vercueil drove me down Breda Street and into Orange Street. Across from Government Avenue I told him to park. “I thought of driving the car all the way down the Avenue,” I said. “Once I am past the chain, I don’t see how anyone can stop me. But do you think there is room to get past?” [...] I closed my eyes and tried to hold on to my vision of the car, moving fast enough for the flames to fan out backward, rolling down the paved avenue past the tourists and tramps and lovers, past the museum, the art gallery, the botanical gardens, till it slowed down and came to rest before the house of shame, burning and melting. (Coetzee 1990: 113)

As happens with war, Mrs Dalloway does experience suicide only indirectly:

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party – the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself – but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party! (Woolf 1992: 201-202)

When Mrs Dalloway learns of Septimus through a narrative about his suicide, right at her party, she immediately retreats to her upper room. She absents herself from her party to the point that Peter Walsh and Sally wonder where she might be. “There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!” (Woolf 1992: 201-202) Mrs Curren, too, wonders how one could commit suicide: “But how hard it is to kill oneself! One clings so tight to life! It seems to me that something other than the will must come into play at the last instant, something foreign, something thoughtless, to sweep you over the brink. You have to become someone other than yourself. (Coetzee 1990: 119)

Immediately after receiving the bad news, Mrs Dalloway goes to the window, she parts the curtains and looks out. As mesmerized, she watches an old lady who lives opposite. Perhaps, Mrs Curren is not Mrs Dalloway set loose in the streets of another town, in another time and age. She is

rather the projection of that mysterious old lady, out of the pages of Woolf's novel:

Oh but how surprising! – in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed. And the sky. [...] It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was – ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. [...] There! The old lady had put out her light! [...] She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. (Woolf 1992: 204)

That old woman who had put out her light, almost her life, might be Mrs Curren in the very last scene of Coetzee's novel:

I slept and woke up cold: my belly, my heart, my very bones cold. The door to the balcony was open, the curtains were waving in the wind.

Vercueil stood on the balcony staring out over a sea of rustling leaves. I touched his arm, his high, peaked shoulders, the bony ridge of his spine. Through chattering teeth I spoke: 'What are you looking at?'

He did not answer. I stood closer. A sea of shadows beneath us, and the screen leaves shifting, rustling, like scales over the darkness.

'Is it time?' I said.

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that *embrace* there was no warmth to be had. (Coetzee 1990: 180; emphasis added)

Once again, lexically, Coetzee echoes Woolf. While Mrs Curren narrates the impossible: her own death, her own dying folded in an embrace, Mrs Dalloway imagines Septimus's suicide as an embrace by and in death:

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew

apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an *embrace* in death. (Woolf 1992: 202, emphasis added)

There is one more way in which the two texts resonate. The old woman appears twice in Woolf's novel, always at bed time. Therefore, it is not surprising that the vision of this iconic figure ends with the Big Ben striking the hour, as if in an ominous toll ("The Big Ben struck the half-hour." 139; "The clock began striking." 204). Although Coetzee's novel is not exactly as experimental in terms of the treatment of time as Woolf is, Coetzee's heroine alternates vigils and sleep, confusing time and rendering difficult to follow the development of both chronology and seasons. Yet, Mrs Curren often asks for the exact time, or looks it up on her alarm clock, as if there were a right time for Death to come and visit.

If "Woolf transformed the physical distance during the war into a physical proximity during the day in postwar London" (Levenback 1999: 47), as previously mentioned, Coetzee chooses the absolute physical proximity between Mrs Curren and the Other, the dizzy, alcoholic Mr Vercueil, in death. Mrs Curren not only witnesses a civil war, the war of the black young activists against the police in the townships, but she also fights a private war against her own dying body:

It seems hardly possible to believe there is a zone of killing and degradation all around me. It seems like a bad dream. Something presses, nudges inside me. I try to take no notice, but it insists. (Coetzee 1990: 119)

Writing is a way of postponing death, while also leaving an ethical testament. From the very beginning of the novel, Vercueil is identified as an Angel of death, for his arrival coincides with a bitter parody of the "Annunciation": the bad news of her terminal illness.

Their fatal union, their last embrace, might be read as a grotesque visitation of the myth of Love and Psyche. Vercueil has variously been described as an Angel, with wings, though not jet visible: "a man [...] who does not yet know how to fly" (Coetzee 1990: 197). Moreover, he only appears in Mrs Curren's house after sunset and at night:

Not an angel, certainly. An insect, rather, emerging from the baseboards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs. [...] I heard him [...] I wanted to whisper to him [...] but the fog in my head closed in again.

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. (Coetzee 1990: 14; 30)

Mrs Curren is old and physically disabled, yet intellectually and morally so lucid as to fight for civil rights to the very end. All through the novel, Mrs Curren has described herself as a butterfly, as a soul ready to take her flight from the cocoon of her decaying body. Flight and ascension towards the sky, to join her own dead mother, are frequently referenced in the novel:

Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings: that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse: my soul readying itself for further flight. A white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the figure on the deathbed. [...] All part of the metamorphosis, part of shaking myself loose from the dying envelope. [...]

The moth is simply what will brush your cheek ever so lightly as you put down the last page of this letter, before it flutters off on its next journey. (Coetzee 1990: 129-130)

This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses. [...] The soul, neophyte, we, blind, ignorant.

We share a bed, like two wings folded. (Coetzee 1990: 186; 189)

In both novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Age of Iron*, death lingers in the houses of the two women protagonists, but manifests itself more clearly in the outside world. The old woman observed by Mrs Dalloway at night, in Woolf's novel, slowly stepping upstairs, slowly getting into her bed, and blowing out the candle has no agency in the plot. On the contrary, Mrs Curren has an agency in Coetzee's work till the very end, she voices her dissent and dissident views in her long letter, she shouts against policemen and armed soldiers, she takes care of black boys in her house and goes visiting them in the hospital, she admits a vagrant into her house and life. However, both Woolf's old woman and Mrs Curren are described and represented with a slowing down of the narrative pace and in a sort of

close-up, in their final act of accepting repose, both affected by time (the Big Ben striking the hour; Mrs Curren's questioning the right time) in unison with their only imminent death.

When Mrs Curren started instructing Verduil on various subjects, she spoke to him about *caritas*, the Latin translation for the Greek word "agape", a form of love that is inclusive and not selfish, universal and not particular. Her relationship to him develops from repugnance to acceptance, to a form of love: "One must love what is nearest. One must love what is to hand, as a dog loves. Mrs V." (Coetzee 1990: 190) She learns to join him, descending down into his realm, under viaducts, in the streets, sleeping on the bare ground, before finally going back to her now destroyed house and bedroom, to exhale her last breath in his arms.

Mrs Dalloway empathically imagines herself in Septimus's death as well as in the old woman's final rest as if looking into a mirror. The clock inexorably, always strikes its leaden beats when the old woman is presented (Woolf 1992: 139; 204), as well as in the moment when Septimus jumps from his window (Woolf 1992: 149).

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