

# Violence and Complicity in J. M. Coetzee's Works

ANNA IZABELA CICHON

*University of Wrocław, Poland*

Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Instytut Filologii Angielskiej  
ul. Kuźnicza 22 50-138 Wrocław, Polska  
ici@promat.com.pl  
iza.cichon@vp.pl

**Abstract.** The aim of the paper is to examine J.M. Coetzee's treatment of violence in his fiction and to trace the strategies he applies in his books. The perspective of over three decades of his writing that we now have makes it possible to discern an evolution of his representations of atrocities and his rendition of and response to the problems he has formulated in his critical essays on violence published in *Doubling the Point*. A recognizable feature of Coetzee's fiction is the theme of complicity of those who are not directly involved in the actual crimes committed by others but who, on various levels, have their share in the oppression and who must cope with their sense of guilt and shame. The works discussed in the paper – *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Age of Iron* and *Elizabeth Costello* – do not exhaust the complexity of Coetzee's explorations of aggressiveness but they seem to illustrate important transitions in his oeuvre. The transformations include both modulations of thematic concerns related to violence and modifications of textual devices applied by Coetzee.

**Keywords:** J. M. Coetzee; violence; complicity

In "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State" (1986), one of the essays in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992), J.M. Coetzee interrogates the problem of representing violence in literature. He observes that many South African authors, including himself, reveal "a dark fascination" with tortures and he contends that there are two reasons for their enthrallment. The first is that "relations in the torture room provide a metaphor [...] for relations between authoritarianism and its victims" (Coetzee 1992: 363). Here brute force, unlimited power, "legal illegality," operates to destroy the prisoner and to break his resistance. Deprived of any rights, the detainee is utterly vulnerable to