e-ISSN 2499-5975

Il Tolomeo
Vol. 27 – Dicembre | December | Décembre | Dezembro 2025

Dehumanisation, Otherness and Animal Tropes in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Abstract This paper aims to investigate J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) from the perspective of the metaphorical connotations acquired by animal tropes in the narrative. It demonstrates how the elderly protagonist of the novel, Mrs Curren, uses animal imagery to define and categorise people she associates with otherness, particularly in relation to two groups: the racialised and marginalised 'victims' of apartheid, and the white supremacist 'perpetrators', including nationalist politicians and compliant white citizens. In both cases, these figurative devices contribute to a broader process of dehumanisation, highlighting the contradictions and limitations of the protagonist's liberal-humanist perspective and its entanglement with anthropocentric and Eurocentric biases.

Keywords Animal tropes. Victim. Perpetrator. Age of Iron. Apartheid.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-06-26
Accepted 2025-10-06
Published 2025-12-17

Open access

Citation Santi, L. (2025). "Dehumanisation, Otherness and Animal Tropes in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*". *Il Tolomeo*, 27, 119-138.

DOI 10.30687/Tol/2499-5975/2025/01/008

1 Mimesis, Symbolism and Literary Representation in *Age of Iron*

J.M. Coetzee's sixth novel, *Age of Iron* (1990), takes the form of a confessional narrative, a long letter, from an elderly white South African and former Classics professor, Elizabeth Curren, to her daughter, who now lives in the United States. In her account, Mrs Curren recounts the key events of her later years in apartheid South Africa: the discovery of her terminal cancer, her encounter with a homeless man named Vercueil, and her troubled relationship with two Black children involved in the armed struggle, Bheki and John. As she writes down her thoughts, she cannot help showing her discomfort with the current state of affairs. She describes the widespread violence that is tearing her country to pieces and the worrying subversion of traditional roles, as exemplified by the massive number of Black children who have taken up arms and mobilised against apartheid. At the same time, she rails against those who are leading South Africa into the abyss, the (white) nationalist politicians, whom she portrays as greedy and brutal, ready to use any means to maintain power and profiting by the white middle class's subservience and compliance.

Through Mrs Curren's narrative, the reader is plunged into a seemingly hopeless scenario in which the brutality of apartheid's last phases and its supporters is laid bare. *Age of Iron* is usually considered to be part of the second phase of J.M. Coetzee's literary career, referred to as the realist period. The novel moves away from the coded, ambivalent and allegorical modes of his earlier works – *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) or *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) – belonging to the so-called early/allegorical period, and engages directly with history and factuality, specifically the violent years 1986-89, which Sheila Roberts defines as "[t]he worst years of the State of Emergency in South Africa" (1991, 34). In this respect, Susan VanZanten Gallagher notes that *Age of Iron* marks a dividing line within Coetzee's long-standing career, as it testifies to the author's turn to a more realistic form that distances the novel from any of his previous works (1991, 193). At the same time, together with the internationally acclaimed *Disgrace* (1999), *Age of Iron* acts as a bridge to the final stage of Coetzee's *oeuvre*, often described as the late/autobiographical-metaphysical period, in which the author's focus shifts from specifically South African concerns to broader, globally resonant themes.

And yet, despite its realist-mimetic imprint, *Age of Iron* is nevertheless interfused with a symbolic language in which metaphors, tropes and intertextual references abound. Coetzee's realistic portrayal of late apartheid-era South Africa is intricately woven into a complex metaphorical framework, adding layers of meaning

that extend far beyond a straightforward depiction of contemporary historical events. As Emanuela Tegla points out,

> The disturbing dimension of the novel is generated not only by the narrative content […], but also, to a considerable extent, by the language used. (2012, 968)

Over time, numerous scholars have emphasised the symbolic and metaphorical component of the novel along with its intricate web of intertextual references. Tegla herself, for example, stresses the centrality of the cancer metaphor in the narrative, underlining how the disease eventually transcends the realm of physical illness to become a figurative cipher for a decaying society and the deleterious effects of ethnic strife and despotic rule (968). Similarly, Michael Marais claims that

> Mrs Curren's illness should be construed as a metaphor for the erosion of selfhood by the State's structure of power. (1993, 9)

Age of Iron therefore seems to be built on a metaphorical parallel between Mrs Curren's progressive decline, as she is consumed by her terminal disease, and the relentless collapse of South Africa under apartheid, seen as a collective cancer that is irreversibly dragging the country down into the abyss. At the same time, Marais reminds us that the novel's diegesis also rests on a palimpsest of befittingly reworked classical sources, such as the myth of the Gorgons, the Circe episode in the *Odyssey*, and especially Hesiod's references to the 'iron age' in his *Work and Days* (1993). On another level, Sheila Roberts (1996) and David E. Hoegberg (1998) note that *Age of Iron* appropriates some of the images and figures of Dante's *Inferno* to project them onto the nightmarish ambience of 1980s South Africa.

Against this symbolic and intertextual backdrop, this article delves into a relatively unexplored aspect of the novel: its use of animal tropes. Though rarely examined in depth, these figurative devices play a pivotal role in Mrs Curren's confessional narrative. Animal tropes and associations recur throughout her account, serving as a key lens through which she expresses and articulates her perceptions of those around her, particularly of certain forms of human otherness. Specifically, Mrs Curren directs these figurative vehicles towards two distinct groups of individuals: the racialised and marginalised 'victims' of apartheid; and the enforcers of the white supremacist regime, including white nationalist politicians and their accomplices among ordinary white South Africans – representative of 'perpetrators'.

Her use of imagery differs markedly between the two groups. When referring to the former group, animal tropes often emerge

as an almost unconscious, albeit extremely derogatory, mode of expression through which Mrs Curren processes her perceptions about certain individuals. In contrast, when applied to the latter group, the imagery is more intentional and critical, used as a tool to denounce the violence of the white supremacists and their cowardly accomplices by equating them with animals.

However, in both contexts, Curren's rhetoric involves a process of dehumanisation – a discursive strategy that strips individuals of their humanity and portrays them as non-human animals. Shaped by her position as a liberal white South African and as a supporter of the humanist creed, her language reflects a deeply anthropocentric worldview. In this context, animality is equated with debasement, lack of or loss of human dignity and a descent into a supposedly deplorable or brutal existence. When describing the non-Western victims of apartheid, this perspective intersects with an implicit Eurocentric bias, as her portrayals more or less unwittingly deprive these people of their human dignity by framing them as or 'other than' human, thereby reinforcing Western-centred racial hierarchies.

2 Dehumanising the Other

In the colonial world, animal imagery has long been used as a tool to dehumanise the Other. Colonisers have repeatedly portrayed the non-Western subject as not 'fully human', with a parallel resort to an animal imagery which was instrumental in depicting the latter as beast-like, cognitively underdeveloped, driven by instinctual impulses and physicality as opposed to reason, logic and self-restraint.

In his remarkable *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon already highlighted the central role of animal imagery in the coloniser's representation of the colonised ([1961] 1963, 42). More recently, Richard Barney has observed how

> In general terms, the category of animal life long served European colonialism, for the five hundred-some years of its history, as a way of articulating the drastic difference that had appeared between Westerners and the non-Western natives whom they encountered. (2004, 18)

In his insightful collection of essays *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, J.M. Coetzee himself outlined how, from the very beginning of Cape colonisation, parts of the Indigenous communities across South Africa – namely the Khoikhoi, re-named 'Hottentots' by the Dutch settlers – were expediently described as idle, lazy and essentially animal-like. He observed how

> The charge of idleness often comes together with, and sometimes as the climax of, a set of other characterizations […] What is common to these charges is that they mark the Hottentot as *underdeveloped* – underdeveloped not only by the standard of the European but by the standard of Man. (1988, 22; Author's emphasis)

Relying on a vocabulary packed with animal tropes, and a staunch rhetorical armoury, the European explorers and settlers set about projecting animal traits onto Indigenous peoples and addressing them as if they were not fully human, possibly a sort of missing link between the wild animal and the 'enlightened' man from the West.

Obviously, far from being neutral, the use of such a language is entangled in issues of domination. If it is true that "[h]uman classification through language is not value-free, indeed categorization […] is a function of power" (Goatly 2006, 30), then animal imagery historically played a key role in the process of othering colonised people and served as a tool to hold power over them. Helen Tiffin notes that

> The history of human oppression of other humans is replete with instances of animal metaphors and animal categorisations frequently deployed as justification for commodification, killing and enslavement. (2001, 33)

In a similar vein, the American philosopher Steven Best underlines how the dehumanisation, torture and abuse of Indigenous peoples by colonisers have always begun through linguistic discrimination,

> [w]ith the denigration of victims as 'savages,' 'primitives,' and 'mere' animals who lack the essence and sine qua non of human nature-*rationality*. (Best 2014, 10; Author's emphasis)

Portrayed as bestial beings and seen as incapable of conforming to the moral, rational and social standards of Westerners, non-Western peoples were actually approached by colonisers as animals to be exploited or slaughtered (Best 2014,10).

Clearly, the process of dehumanisation, or in our specific case the 'animalisation', of the Other emerged in the Western context long before the onset of colonialism. The roots of this derogatory attitude already lay in ancient Western civilisation, where animal imagery

was frequently employed to represent the perceived otherness of certain groups of individuals, including ethno-racial others.[1]

In the modern era, this logic was reinforced by the consolidation of humanism and its darker, Eurocentric undertones. During the European Renaissance, the refinement of this ideological paradigm not only solidified the 'cult' of the Western subject, but also systematically enacted the exclusion and dehumanisation of those perceived as outside of it – specifically, the non-Western Other,[2] progressively represented as non/sub-human and animalistic. This laid the ideological groundwork for colonial domination.

Several postcolonial scholars have shed light on this issue. Robert J.C. Young, for example, recalls Fanon's argument that there is a strong connection between the rise of Western humanism and the systematic dehumanisation of non-Europeans (2004, 161) – a logic that would subsequently inform colonial ideology in a profound way. Similarly, Achille Mbembe asserts that, despite presenting itself as a universalist project, humanism has historically concealed ethnocentric and Eurocentric assumptions. Consequently, it has contributed to the construction of a 'non-human' – and often animalised – Other, whose racial and ethnic identity contrasts sharply with that of the European self (2019).

The dehumanisation of the Other through animal imagery is a recurring theme in J.M. Coetzee's work, as his fiction is replete with animal tropes and desecrating rhetoric designed to fulfil this function. For instance, in the author's first novel, *Dusklands*, the Indigenous inhabitants of South Africa, the San (derogatorily called 'Bushmen' by the European settlers), are equated by the main character Jacobus Coetzee to "dogs" and "baboons" (Coetzee [1974] 2004, 58). Similarly, the barbarian girl incarnating unfathomable otherness in *Waiting*

1 Regarding the depiction of ethno-racial otherness in Greco-Roman antiquity, zoomorphic associations were typically meant to portray 'barbarians' and certain peoples beyond the Greco-Roman world as animalistic or savage, as evidenced by numerous historical, chronicle and literary sources from the period. In his remarkable *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Benjamin Isaac suggests that in ancient Greece "People were considered bestial if controlled by feelings and passions rather than rational processes, and thus indulged in unnatural behavior. This is thought typical of distant foreigners and of pathological Greeks". ([2004] 2006, 199-200). Likewise, Emily Allen-Hornblower maintains that "The attribution of bestial characteristics to barbarians is pervasive throughout ancient sources (and beyond); they often point up negative traits which the Romans associated with a lack of civilization and social organization, such as irrationality and related forms of savagery" (2014, 688).

2 In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality & Colonization* (1995), Walter Mignolo offers a reflection on the reasons and mechanisms by which Europeans began to systematically dehumanise non-European populations during the Renaissance, and in conjunction with the 'discovery' of the 'New World'. In doing so, he sheds light on the darker, more troubling, aspects of an era traditionally celebrated for its cultural and sociopolitical achievements.

for the Barbarians is compared to a "wild animal" (Coetzee [1980] 1999, 48) by the Magistrate, who hosts and intently scrutinises her in his home. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the protagonist, a non-white gardener from Cape Town (possibly a Coloured man) who decides to devote his life to a respectful stewardship of natural resources and sustainable agriculture, is called "monkey", among other things, by an Afrikaner farmer (Coetzee [1983] 2004, 87). In the same novel, the outcasts confined to the Jakkalsdrif relocation camp are described as "parasites" (90). Their fate, similar to that of others isolated in similar camps, is likened to "being shut up like animals in a cage" (88).

Parag Kumar Deka argues that such animal tropes in Coetzee's novels are often used by characters in positions of power, especially Europeans, to reinforce the stereotype of non-Westerners as bestial (2018, 66). This kind of rhetoric is clearly explained by Steve Baker in his reading of Keith Thomas's *Men and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (1983), when he remarks that certain societies, first and foremost the Western one, have appropriated the term 'human' and automatically relegated other ethnic groups to the status of inferior beings (Baker 1993, 79). If the Western subject would hold primacy over the realms of both nature and culture, the non-Westerner is conceived by the former as more instinctive, bound to the biological rather than the rational dimension.

And yet, while it provides useful insights, Deka's analysis could be expanded to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive interpretation. In Coetzee's novels, animal tropes are not confined to the rhetoric of overtly dominant or white supremacist figures; they also feature in the language of seemingly ordinary individuals who, knowingly or unknowingly, end up professing ethnocentric ideologies. One could argue that Coetzee uses these tropes to reveal the pervasiveness of a rhetoric of oppression that is deeply embedded in Western discourse. In this sense, it is no coincidence that such language constantly reappears in the utterances of white 'liberal' figures who ostensibly oppose the colonial status quo. Through this critique, Coetzee highlights the dangers inherent in Western, Eurocentric language, including its humanist strands, and fosters a sense of ethical awareness, urging readers to confront the epistemic violence inherent in animalistic labelling.

In *Age of Iron*, this dynamic is particularly evident in the character of Mrs Curren. A white elderly South African with a background in the humanities, Elizabeth holds firmly to liberal-humanist values. She thus strives to approach the reality of racial otherness in apartheid South Africa with empathy and intellectual depth. As such, the woman extends her sympathetic approach to Vercueil, the homeless non-white man who takes up residence near her home, treating him with genuine care. At the same time, she aligns herself with the young Black revolutionaries Bheki and John, who take refuge in her

house. In doing so, she positions herself in opposition to the police brutality she has witnessed firsthand.

Nevertheless, Mrs Curren's life trajectory is also testament to the contradictions inherent in her liberal-humanist ethical framework, along with the idiosyncrasies of the liberal subject living under apartheid, especially as far as the approach to otherness is concerned. Although she rejects the white supremacist state and frequently criticises the ethnocentric beliefs of her ethnic enclave, Elizabeth's actions appear to be deeply influenced by the social and cultural norms of the white world she inhabits – and which she never fully relinquishes. This becomes manifest when it comes to the language she uses. Throughout the narrative, the character frequently employs animal imagery to describe marginalised individuals from non-Western backgrounds, thereby perpetuating the very racist platitudes and clichés of contemporary white society she seeks to reject. This attitude highlights a contradictory tension between her liberal-humanist and supposedly universalist ideals and her concrete use of language, which seems to uphold ethnocentric and exclusionary ideologies. As such, it underscores the difficulty experienced by the liberal subjects – embodied here by the elderly Elizabeth – in fully emancipating themselves from their unwitting complicity[3] in the mechanisms of apartheid and colonial exploitation, thus preventing any genuine identification with the Other.

Among the first persons that Mrs Curren portrays by using an inherently denigrating language in her confessional narrative are precisely the young Black boys who, at this stage in the history of apartheid, are boycotting schools and mobilising *en masse* against the white regime. From the outset, Elizabeth emphasises the anxiety and fear of attack that these young Black South Africans provoke in her. To express her discomfort towards them, she resorts to animal tropes, comparing them to predatory sharks: "It is the roaming gangs I fear, the sullen-mouthed boys, rapacious as sharks, on whom the first shade of the prison house is already beginning to close" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 7). As is evident, this comparison serves to convey a sense of ferocity and voracity in a hyperbolic manner, dehumanising these young revolutionaries through zoomorphic allusions.

3 The theme of complicity, particularly in relation to the liberal subject, is central to *Age of Iron*. This motif appears primarily through the lens of the unequal relationships between white and non-white individuals within the context of apartheid, as well as between the rapacious and violent approach of humans to non-human animals. In this second sphere, *Age of Iron* anticipates the broader reflection that Coetzee would later develop in *The Lives of Animals* (1999), a metafictional, essayistic novella in which human complicity in the exploitation of animals, including mass slaughter in the food industry, is a pervasive concern.

e-ISSN 2499-5975

Interestingly, the perception of young Black South Africans as threatening, predatory creatures not only echoes the use of animal correspondences against non-whites often employed in colonial discourse, but also draws a direct link between Mrs Curren's internal anxiety and Frantz Fanon's concept of the Black subject as a "phobogenic object" (Fanon [1952] 1986, 151), a catalyst for uncontrolled and irrational fear among whites. Indeed, Mrs Curren's description reveals that she is in the grip of this kind of irrational fear, perceiving that any contact or confrontation with them could bring about harm or danger.

Mrs Curren's derogatory approach is particularly evident in her relationship with Vercueil, the homeless man who takes shelter in her garage. Throughout the novel, the elderly woman portrays this figure as oscillating between that of a quasi-supernatural being, perhaps an angel or a messenger sent by God – and, quite ambiguously, an almost animalistic creature. As Louise Tremaine emphasises, it is this second representation of the character that carries greater narrative significance (2003, 590). The animalistic portrayal of Vercueil is particularly significant for this analysis, as it eventually frames the homeless as bordering on a sub-human existence akin to that of a beast-like creature. As for the subject matter, immediately upon his arrival, Elizabeth casts Vercueil in pejorative terms, as a "derelict" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 3) who emits a disgusting smell. Elizabeth compares him to a carrion bird ("The first of the carrion birds, prompt, unerring", 5) and then proceeds to tar the whole population of the homeless with the same brush ("Flies, dry-winged, glazen-eyed, pitiless", 5). She thus equates Vercueil and people like him with scavengers, animals that feed on corpses. Such a metaphor recalls homeless people's forced habit of consuming leftovers and rotten food, so that their very nature appears to the woman as synecdochally rotten, as though they carried "contagions and infections in their blood" (5). Later in the novel, Vercueil is said to occupy one of the lower levels in the chain of being: "Not an angel, certainly. An insect, rather, emerging from behind the baseboards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs" (14).

As the narrative progresses, Mrs Curren persistently animalises Vercueil, fixating on his physical features. She describes his "horsy, weather-beaten face" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 6) and explicitly compares him to an "old horse" (75). She mentions his "animal eyes" (11), "bird-eyes" (22), "chicken-eyes" (113), and states that his "eyes opened once, alert, like an animal's" (162). On another occasion, Vercueil is animalised via a comparison with an "old tom" (48). Similarly, Vercueil's hair in Mrs Curren's dream resembles "ugly rats' tails" (167).

These repeated references gradually strip Vercueil of his human identity, adding up to the figure of a hybrid, animal-like being illicitly

roaming the human realm. Thus, in a society where people are rigidly and obsessively classified according to their skin colour, physiognomy and alleged degree of evolution, Vercueil – whose ethnic roots and demographic status are never specified – comes to embody a blurred quintessence of an animal otherness, of what white conformist society wants to ignore and hide, as suggested by the echoes of the Afrikaans word *verskuil* (hidden).

As these examples demonstrate, Mrs Curren's language reveals a subtle yet pervasive form of epistemic violence. Despite emanating from a presumably emancipated and liberal woman, the frequent use of animal metaphors when referring to non-Western individuals reveals an unwitting reliance on paradigms rooted in historical structures of dehumanisation. In this context, animal metaphors do not serve as mere descriptive tools, but become potent instruments of marginalisation, used by the Western subject to affirm their own humanity by denying it to those constructed as the Other.

3 The Beastly Face of the Perpetrator

In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren's use of animal tropes to dehumanise the Other is not limited to the victims of apartheid; it also targets the 'perpetrators', the members of white South African society. True to her liberal-humanist outlook, the elderly narrator employs these figurative devices as a rhetorical and critical tool to decry and condemn two groups within the ruling white oligarchy. The first group comprises nationalist politicians – the 'true' perpetrators – those who orchestrated the regime's violence and sanctioned the beatings, killings and the elimination of anyone deemed a threat. The second group comprises ordinary white citizens – their accomplices, whom Don Foster describes as the "onlookers", characterised by acquiescence, silent complicity, and systematic privilege, passively accepting and profiting from apartheid and its brutal machinery (10).

In the novel both of these groups are presented through a vocabulary revolving around the animal world. As such, they undergo a metaphorical transformation in which they are stripped of their humanity and take on a bestial guise. This process is aptly encapsulated in a line spoken by the character: "Metamorphosis, that thickens our speech, dulls our feelings, turns us into beasts" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 103) and which, although it is uttered in another context, strongly resonates with the theme at hand.

Needless to say, the depiction of white perpetrators as animals suggests a degenerative process in which these individuals are stripped of their humanity and take on dehumanised traits. From a humanistic perspective, this metamorphosis stands for a moral and existential decline – a fall from grace characterised by the loss of

human dignity. This process also echoes Aimé Césaire's assertion that colonisers undergo a form of symbolic animalisation when they unleash their intrinsic hatred and brutality on the colonised ([1950] 2000, 41).

However, this symbolic strategy also raises important ethical issues. While portraying perpetrators as animal-like figures is a familiar and rhetorically powerful trope in Western discourse, it ultimately reinforces an anthropocentric and derogatory worldview. Rather than offering an accurate etiological portrayal of animal behaviour, this strategy dehumanises individuals and devalues non-human animals by attributing negative human traits, such as cruelty and intrinsic violence, to the latter. It thus perpetuates harmful stereotypes, using animals as symbols of human moral failure and depravity.

Among the two aforementioned groups, the nationalist politicians are the primary targets of this imagery. Driven by an entrenched will to power and positioned as the main promoters of a racist war, throughout the narrative, these figures are increasingly portrayed by Mrs Curren as ravenous or ferocious animals. Initially, in an unsettling rhetorical twist, nationalist politicians are compared to *black* locusts:

> They with their fathers and mothers, their aunts and uncles, their brothers and sisters: a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives. (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 28)

In the context of the novel, the choice of this particular insect is clearly deliberate. Locusts are notorious for their destructiveness, being capable of devouring whole acres of farmland and causing widespread famine. In Western tradition, locust imagery is often associated with the idea of a divine punishment, recalling the ten plagues of Egypt. Indeed, in the Bible, a plague of locusts is sent by the God of Israel to punish the Egyptians for cruelly subjecting His people to their rule. Portrayed as greedy and relentless, the biblical locusts consume all the fruit of the land, bringing death and despair among the Egyptians. In parallel, locusts are also charged with paradigmatic significance in (post)colonial contexts. Evan Maina Mwangi has shed light on the subject, outlining how locust imagery is often used in African texts to refer to colonialists (2019, 102). For example, in David Rubadiri's 'An African Thunderstorm', the phrase "a plague of locusts" is thought of in connection with the disruption brought about by Europeans upon their arrival (Mwangi 2019, 116). Similarly, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the arrival of colonialists is metaphorically linked to a swarm of locusts (Mwangi 2019, 117).

Interestingly, locusts are a recurring motif in Coetzee's early literary work, functioning both as concrete, physical presences and as symbolic, metaphorical figures. In their literal form, they are repeatedly mentioned by Magda, the protagonist of *In the Heart of the Country*, to emphasise their destructiveness (Coetzee [1977] 1982, 83, 84, 116). Conversely, a reference to these insects is used metaphorically in *Life & Times of Michael K* to represent (colonial) state violence. The specific reference is to police activity in Jakkalsdrif, a fictional relocation camp where a significant number of "undesirable" individuals are secluded. The police are portrayed as moving menacingly between the internees' tents, like a "swarm of locusts" (Coetzee [1983] 2004, 90), spreading fear and chaos, injuring residents and leaving destruction in their wake.

In *Age of Iron*, the locust metaphor operates on two levels: the symbolic and the structural. On a symbolic level, the locusts recall the biblical plague and their historical association with colonisers, paving the way for a parallel between white nationalists and a divine punishment. Structurally, the metaphor serves to expose the nationalists' and the regime's unbridled greed and relentless pursuit of power, pointing to a system based on pervasive extraction, impoverishment and systematic violence. The ravenous consumption enacted by locusts turns into a synecdoche for the brutal logic of apartheid, compared here to a swarm that advances blindly yet purposefully, destroying everything in its path in order to preserve white dominance. Through this imagery, Mrs Curren delivers a sharp critique of the regime's violence, its socio-economic and political destruction, as well as the deep moral decay it has produced. Apartheid, forged on rigid racist foundations that are as unyielding as weapons made of iron and as devastating as a horde of starving insects, appears to have blotted out a pre-existent order of things and killed hope.

The nationalists' predatory nature is reinforced by another element: Mrs Curren frequently employs language associated with the semantic field of consumption, particularly devouring, when describing the regime. This highly symbolic imagery – starting with the image of the horde of locusts as constantly "munching", "devouring" anyone who stands in their way – resonates throughout the text via other vivid images. At one point she claims: "What absorbs them [nationalist politicians] is power and the stupor of power. Eating and talking, munching lives, belching" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 29). Politicians are subsequently compared to snakes lying in ambush for birds: "We watch as birds watch snakes, fascinated by what is about

to devour us" (29). [4] Finally, they are likened to "Boars that devour their offspring" (30). All of these images emphasise the relentless ferocity of nationalist politicians and their insatiable appetite for human life, reinforcing the portrayal of apartheid and colonialism as a perverse, vampire-like mechanism of greedy exploitation.

Like politicians, ordinary white South Africans are described with reference to the world of insects. Detached from the harsher side of reality, indifferent or blind to the suffering of others and obsessed with the pursuit of a comfortable life in a longed-for ethnocentric nation, they are actually reduced to a sub-human status. More specifically, Mrs Curren associates whites with grubs:

> Swimming lessons, riding lessons, ballet lessons; cricket on the lawn; lives passed within walled gardens guarded by bulldogs; children of paradise, blond, innocent, shining with angelic light, soft as *putti*. Their residence the limbo of the unborn, their innocence the innocence of bee grubs, plump and white, drenched in honey, absorbing sweetness through their soft skins. (7; Author's emphasis)

In a similar way, she claims that

> White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. (92)

Drawing on the classical image of the unbaptised dead in *The Aeneid*, the passage suggests that white South Africans, enclosed in their cocoon of apartness, surrounded by walls and fences and looking towards a sheltered life of comforts, seem to be living in a limbo, a place out of time where they ward off the struggles that are instead an only too common feature of Black life.

4 The passage in question contains a clear intertextual reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's novel, the protagonist, the sailor Marlow, reflects on his childhood fascination with maps. In particular, he recalls his interest in the so-called "blank spaces on the earth" – regions that had not yet been explored by Westerners – a definition deeply entrenched in Eurocentric colonial perspectives. Among these, Africa, described as a "place of darkness", particularly captured the boy's imagination. In the passage that Coetzee revisits, Marlow describes how, one day, he was drawn to a map in a shop-window, particularly the image of a winding, serpentine river in Africa. This vision aroused in him a strange, almost perverse fascination, which he later compared to the gaze of a bird fixated on a snake: "And as I looked at the map of it in a shop window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird" (Conrad [1899] 2005, 9). Marlow's sense of fascination, and his comparison of himself to a helpless bird mesmerised by the sight of a snake, closely parallels this passage in *Age of Iron*, where white South Africans – likened to birds – appear to be entranced by a hypnotic, almost fatal attraction to nationalist leaders, portrayed as snakes ready to devour them.

e-ISSN 2499-5975

According to Emanuela Tegla, the grub metaphor is imbued with a double meaning in the novel. On the one hand, it alludes to the pernicious effect that white South Africans produce on their host country, South Africa itself, which they are consuming from within (2012, 969). Much like grubs feeding on the casing that encloses them, white people can be seen as 'devouring' South Africa, taking its wealth and appropriating its resources. On the other hand, according to Tegla, the image reminds one of the still immature stage of moral development characterising the white community, acting more like children than adults (969). As for the latter, like Tegla, Michael Marais points out that "For much of the novel insect imagery is used to suggest the liminal state of death-in-life in which white South Africans exist" and to account for their "threshold existence" (1993, 17). As the narrative unfolds and Mrs Curren gradually comes to terms with her inherited position as a white South African, she begins to compare herself to a moth or a butterfly, which, in a further twist, is now seen as an objective correlative for a different (and redeeming) kind of metamorphosis. In fact, she thus foreshadows her attempt to atone for the guilt of a life of privilege which deceivingly turned her away from everyday atrocities.

The brutality of the nationalist leadership and the passivity of ordinary white South Africans is again highlighted in a later scene, in which animal imagery plays a significant role. Here, Coetzee contrasts perpetrators and accomplices through the juxtaposition of two animal images that embody very different traits in the collective imagination, wild boars and sheep:

> 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!" And, cruising among them, bumping them aside with their bristling flanks, lumbering, saw-toothed, red-eyed, the savage, unreconstructed old boars grunting "Death!" "Death!". (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 79-80)

The contrast between a ferocious group of boars and a submissive herd of sheep in this passage is strongly reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). In this well-known satirical fable, rich in animal symbolism and filtered through a political lens, a group of pigs seize control of a farm, only to betray their supposed ideals of equality and succumb to a despotic lust for power. Among their obedient and submissive servants are the sheep, the symbolic embodiment of unquestioning conformity. Similarly, in the passage, Mrs Curren deliberately plays on the almost total homonymy between the words 'boer' and 'boar', to initiate a process of symbolic transformation of

e-ISSN 2499-5975

the Afrikaner nationalists into (wild) pigs. Just as in Orwell's work, she thus re-creates a dialectic in which these domineering animals take on the role of tyrannical masters over passive, docile ones.

Nevertheless, the Orwellian undertones in this passage are accompanied by other conceptual frameworks that further inform its meaning. The depiction of a divide between a ruling élite of wild boars – embodying the white Afrikaner nationalists – and a passive herd of sheep – representing ordinary white South African citizens – also recalls pioneering studies on the figure of the leader and on crowd psychology such as those of Sigmund Freud, William Trotter and Gustave Le Bon.

The boars' assertiveness and drive to dominate the sheep mirror Freud's observations on the figure of the (authoritarian) leader. According to Freud, such a figure possesses "a strong and imposing will, which the group, which has no will of its own, can accept from him" (1921, 21). In the specific case of *Age of Iron*, the boars' aggressive movement through the herd and the brutality of their actions seem to be intended to dominate the sheep, mobilise them *en masse* and direct their behaviour towards a single goal.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud identifies a key connection between the persuasive authority of the modern leader-figure and the assertive role of the father-figure in the primal horde. In pre-literate societies, he argues, social organisation was structured around this primitive ancestral group – an agglomeration ruled by a powerful patriarchal figure who, embodying traits of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, exerted control over his children through strict authority and violence (Freud [1921] 1949, 93). Freud's conceptual framework, with its focus on the fraught dynamic between father and offspring in the primal horde, finds a powerful resonance in Coetzee's depiction of nationalist leaders as "Boars that devour their offspring" (Coetzee [1990] 2010, 30).

As is evident, the image of "Boars that devour their offspring" draws on the established semantic field of consumption, but it is also enriched with a multi-layered net of references. On the one hand, it evokes notorious episodes from mythology and religion, such as the Greek myth of Cronus, the son of Uranus, who, fearing his children might usurp his power, devoured them at birth; or the biblical curse described in the book of Ezekiel, in which God condemns the fathers of Israel to eat their own children as punishment for their disobedience. On the other hand, the image also evokes Freud's concept of the primal horde, and especially the perverse bond that existed between father and children in this ancient legion. In the horde, "all of the sons knew that they were equally persecuted by the primal father, and feared him equally" (Freud [1921] 1949, 95). Seen in this light, the relationship between white nationalists (as father figures) and their passive followers (as children) takes the form of

a disturbingly intimate and ambivalent familial bond, reimagined through a perverse, almost vampiric form of dependency.

Interestingly, the portrayal of perpetrators as animal-like figures, particularly those with pig-like features, resurfaces in post-apartheid South African art. In particular, this imagery is reflected in a 1996 visual artwork: Sue Williamson's *Cold Turkey: Stories of Truth and Reconciliation (De Kock Ready to Sing)*, which pivots around the gradual 'becoming beast' of apartheid crusader Eugene de Kock. Nicknamed 'Prime Evil', De Kock became world famous for the horrific tortures and murders he carried out as commander of Vlakplaas, a state headquarters created to sift, interrogate and ultimately eliminate Black revolutionaries. During the hearings coordinated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – the well-known non-judicial body set up by Nelson Mandela's government to shed light on gross human rights violations perpetrated in South Africa from 1960 to 1994 and possibly offer conditional amnesty in exchange for full disclosure (Mussi 2020, 2) – De Kock himself openly confessed to the atrocities he committed, fighting in defence of white supremacy.

In Williamson's work, a sequence of photographs of De Kock's face hanging on a photographic drying line is gradually joined by a close-up of a pig's snout. Through this figurative device, the perpetrator appears to lose his human connotations and take on beastly ones. Looking at the painting, the viewer is no longer able to distinguish between De Kock's humanity and inhumanity, with the oppressor being ultimately pervaded by a waft of animality.

In *Cold Turkey: Stories of Truth and Reconciliation (De Kock Ready to Sing)*, the artist symbolically showed how Eugene De Kock could epitomise the crushing cruelty of an apartheid regime only too ready to keep the mantle of leadership and thrive in psychological and physical violence. Echoing the transformation of nationalist figures into wild boars in Mrs Curren's account, De Kock's metamorphosis into a pig symbolises the perpetrator's descent into a subhuman condition as he unleashes his most violent and visceral impulses against non-white victims.

In contrast to the brutality of the nationalist leaders, ordinary white South Africans are portrayed by Mrs Curren as lacking individuality and unable to distinguish themselves. As such, they are symbolically represented as sheep. Their characterisation can be seen as embodying the key characteristics of a crowd mentality. Coetzee's use of the term 'herd' to describe ordinary white South Africans is particularly significant as it echoes key ideas from early studies on crowd psychology. In *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, Trotter uses the concept of the "herd" to argue that "the individual isolated will be of no meaning, the individual as part of the herd will be capable of transmitting the most potent impulses" (1916, 29).

Trotter thus emphasises the mimetic nature of individual behaviour in crowds and the sense of power they acquire by being integrated into a collective agglomerate.[5] Coetzee's portrayal is consistent with this viewpoint, as the white South Africans in the passage above seem to be completely depersonalised and to draw their strength from their homogenisation into a crowd, where collective interests prevail over the individual. As if subjected to what Le Bon terms "contagion" (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 7), they cannot help but imitate each other's behaviour.

Clearly, the sheep metaphor in the passage is far from neutral; it is imbued with a bitterly parodic tone. Through Mrs Curren's voice, the narrative actively dismantles white mythologies and apartheid narratives. In doing so, it delivers a scathing critique of white South Africans. Rather than hailing them as the worthy, civilised and enlightened masters of South Africa, as apartheid propaganda would have it, the narrative portrays members of the 'white nation' as submissive creatures incapable of acting of their own free will.

In this passage, Coetzee's symbolic choices underscore how, within the framework of the novel, even those complicit in the crimes of apartheid experience a loss of humanity. While metaphorically depicted as sheep – suggesting passivity rather than direct culpability for the regime's wolf-like atrocities – ordinary white South Africans are nonetheless implicated through their tacit acceptance of the nefariousness of its ideology and the brutality of a continued colonial domination. They are portrayed as obsessively preoccupied with preserving their privileged status, a fixation encapsulated by the repeated 'I' hypnotic mantra, a powerful cipher of their assertive selfishness and self-centredness. By suppressing their humanity, pursuing only their own interests and closing their hearts to the suffering of Black South Africans, they are ultimately portrayed as descending into a sub-human status.

4 Conclusion

In this analysis, I sought to demonstrate the pivotal role of animal tropes in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. Specifically, I examined how the protagonist, Elizabeth Curren, uses these tropes as figurative devices to convey and project notions of human otherness, identifying a dual phenomenology in this type of rhetoric. The first relates to

5 Similarly to Trotter, although Le Bon does not use the term 'herd' explicitly, he argues that individuals in crowds relinquish their conscious selves to enter a new collective mind in which the individual point of view is conveniently or forcibly erased ([1895] 2002, 2).

Curren's portrayal of racialised and marginalised individuals, particularly non-white victims of apartheid, as animalistic. Here, we encounter a form of instinctive, almost unconscious animalisation through which the elderly narrator articulates her perception of these othered figures. I would argue that this dehumanisation is not merely a remnant of colonial rhetoric, but possibly a derivative of some of the most controversial foundations of Western discourse, including its humanist strand. Elizabeth – an elderly, liberal, retired professor who upholds the ideals of humanism – is a revealing figure. Her language demonstrates that the Western humanist ideology tends to create a distinction between an assumed Western humanity and a certain form of non-Western ethno-racial otherness, possibly expressed through animalising tropes. The latter phenomenology relates to the use of animal tropes in Curren's portrayal of the white perpetrators. In these instances, the animal trope is clearly employed for critical purposes. Curren uses this imagery to expose the violence and moral decay of these figures, symbolically transforming them into animals to highlight their inhumanity. However, despite this shift in purpose, the strategy remains ethically problematic. By linking animality to moral corruption, this figurative device perpetuates an anthropocentric and derogatory framework in which non-human animals become symbolic repositories for all that humans wish to disown. Consequently, this process reduces animals to convenient rhetorical devices intended to be degraded in order to expose the moral depravity of certain individuals – in this specific case, the white perpetrators of the apartheid years and their accomplices.

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