

Lose Yourself, Find Empathy: Narrative Perspective and Mirror Neurons in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*¹

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Abstract

Drawing on research linking empathy to mirror neurons, this paper discusses how J.M. Coetzee evokes empathy in the reader in his novel *Age of Iron* (1990). With reference to the interdisciplinary research of Fritz Breithaupt (2009) and Nadia Zaboura (2009), who have applied neuroscientific research to the field of literary studies and social sciences respectively, the focus lies on how narrative strategies guide the reader towards a more empathetic stance. The here presented approach further draws on the discussions of Preston and de Waal (mirror neurons as the neurological basis of empathy), Jan Decety and Daniel Batson (Perspective-taking and empathy), and Vittorio Gallese (the manifold theory). A close reading of parts of the first-person narrative of Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* demonstrates the extent to which its narrative structure is destabilized and thereby draws in the readers to empathetically engage with the characters.

Keywords: Empathy, perspective-taking, narrative, manifold theory, mirror neurons, J.M. Coetzee

¹ This article is a revised version of a chapter derived from the author's PhD thesis.

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł próbuje ukazać, w oparciu o badania nad zależnościami między empatią a neuronami lustrzanymi, w jaki sposób powieść J.M. Coetzee’go *Age of Iron* (1990) ewokuje empatię czytelnika/czytelniczki. W nawiązaniu do badań interdyscyplinarnych Fritza Breithaupta (2009) i Nadii Zabora (2009), którzy zastosowali teorie nauki o mózgu do badań literaturoznawczych oraz socjologicznych, odpowiednio, staram się zademonstrować jak techniki narracyjne wyrabiają u czytelników postawę empatyczną w procesie lektury tekstu. Zastosowane przeze mnie podejście odwołuje się również do teorii Stephanii Preston i Fransa de Waala (neurony lustrzane jako neurologiczne podłoże empatyczne), Jana Decety’ego (teoria perspektywy a empatia) oraz Daniela Batsona i Vittoria Gallesy (teoria różnorodności). Poprzez dogłębną lekturę narracji pierwszoosobowej Elizabeth Curren w powieści *Age of Iron* próbuję pokazać, w jaki sposób destabilizacja narracyjna wpływa na empatię czytelniczą.

Słowa kluczowe: Empatia, teoria perspektywy, narracja, teoria różnorodności, neurony lustrzane, J.M. Coetzee

1. Introduction: The Empathetic Reader

Diving into the emotional experience of others, readers of literature journey into the mind of an other. Egyptian author Al Aswany attributes his empathetic awakening to one sentence by Dostoevsky: “He, also, had a mother” (Fassler 2015). Aswany’s understanding of the empathy effect of literature hinges on the “also” that suggests a shared experience. Based on similarities, we as readers learn to understand the motivations underlying the actions of fictional characters. Al Aswany concludes: “Literature is not a tool of judgement – it’s a tool for human understanding. [...] Literature gives us a broad spectrum of human possibilities” (Fassler 2015). Since the 1990s the link between literature and empathy has received more and more attention. Martin L. Hoffman defined empathy as “an affective response more appropriate to someone else’s situation than to one’s own” (1984). In *Empathy and Moral Development – Implications for Caring and Justice*, Hoffman offers a broader definition: “[E]mpathy is the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible” (Hoffman 2008, 2). Hoffman marks

a sequence of modes of empathetic arousal, differentiating between “primitive cognitive modes” (mimicry, conditioning, direct association, which he qualifies as passive, involuntary affective responses) and “higher-order cognitive modes” (mediated association and role- or perspective-taking) (Hoffmann 2008, 5). Literature, and the novel in particular, presents prime examples of prompting such higher-order cognitive modes of empathy. This article provides an outline to how the cognitive science of empathy might be correlated with the use of narrative perspective in the case of Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*. A review of research on mirror neurons and empathy will highlight important cognitive mechanisms of empathy, followed by a close reading of passages of the novel to illustrate how these can be traced between the lines.

2. Literature, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy

A simple syllogism: If a) literature can evoke empathy, and b) mirror neurons are the neurological basis for empathy, then c) literature can trigger mirror neurons. The first premise most readers of literature will readily affirm. The second premise is supported by the research of Stefanie Preston and Frans de Waal (2002) and by more recent research in the field of neuroscience and mirror neurons. Much depends on how one defines the term ‘empathy’. Anita Nowak (2011) counts fifty-two definitions, and even this is just a selection. These definitions vary according to the discourse they originate from. To give just one example, Khen Lampert, educator and philosopher, offers a definition that links the concept to the much wider term *compassion*: “[Empathy] is what happens to us when we leave our own bodies [...] and find ourselves either momentarily or for a longer period of time in the mind of the other. We observe reality through her eyes, feel her emotions, share in her pain” (Nowak 2011, 16). Social neurosciences state more plainly: Empathy means the capacity to feel yourself into another being. And apart from the experiences we make with others in everyday life, literature offers myriad possibilities and nearly endless potential to promote our capacity to feel ourselves into others. The author J.M. Coetzee in his essay novels *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) reintroduces the romanticist notion of the sympathetic imagination through the author figure Elizabeth Costello, who praises the potential of literature and poetry in empathetically engaging the reader:

Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. [...] If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life (Coetzee 1999, 35).

The sympathetic imagination is a tool for engaging with the other. In the first instance the author employs it in the creation of his characters, who potentially employ it in their encounters with textual others, while the reader employs it in his experience of these characters. The sympathetic imagination represents a benevolent and hospitable attitude, a state of mind prepared and willing to engage with otherness. Sympathy is arrived at consciously; we decide to be sympathetic – or not. In the process of engaging with the other empathy can be triggered, the emotional basis for the sympathetic imagination to become effective.

Every story delivers at least one perspective to the reader. The identification with one character can already be an empathetic endeavour. However, by increasing narrative complexity, some authors achieve more. Coetzee is a master at destabilizing both narrative perspective and textual consistency, challenging the reader to go beyond simple identification and urging him – more than narratives commonly do – to reach beyond a one-way transference of his own perspective to that of a virtual literary character. For the purposes of this paper, a closer look shall be taken at Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), one of his more intimate and personal novels, comparable to *The Master of Petersburg* (1993). Before I present a close reading of sections from *Age of Iron* I shall outline the theoretical groundwork from the field of neuroscience.

2.1 Gallese: Empathy, the Shared Manifold, and Resonance Mechanisms

In his essay “The ‘Shared Manifold’ Hypothesis: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy” (Gallese 2001) Vittorio Gallese proposes that mirror neurons and empathy are instrumental for intersubjective understanding, concluding that “the neural matching mechanism constituted by mirror neurons [...] is crucial to establish an empathic link between different individuals” (Gallese 2001, 44). Gallese claims that empathy can be operationalized at three different levels: a phenomenological level (based on similarity),

a functional level (based on simulation routines), and a subpersonal level: “The *subpersonal level* is instantiated as the result of the activity of a series of mirror matching neural circuits. A dual mode of operation, an *expressive* mode and a *receptive* mode characterizes these circuits” (Gallese 2001, 45). Translated into terms of literature, we can conclude that the phenomenological level lays the foundation for an empathetic shared experience of others. The functional level can be applied to both the writing and the reading process, where either the author or the reader simulates models of others. The subpersonal level might serve to distinguish between the expressing (author) and receiving (reader) end of this process.

Gallese stresses our dependence on others in order to define ourselves. The mirror neurons enable our motor system to resonate with the observed agent (2001, 38). Such ‘resonance mechanism’ can be triggered only through the establishment of an intersubjective link (Gallese 2001, 47). Gallese links this to the Shared Manifold, which both “determines and constrains this intersubjective link” (2001, 47). Gallese adds that “explicit theorizing is the only strategy available when the embodied resonance mechanisms of the shared manifold are deficient, as likely occurring in the case of autism” (2001, 47). Literature is similar to such “explicit theorizing,” since it takes place in our mind and within the realm of language. Coetzee’s fiction shows how such theorizing can be augmented through techniques of literary embodiment and the strong focus on the mindworld of the protagonist and the intersubjective links established by her or him.

2.2 Jean Decety and Daniel Batson: Empathy and Morality

In contrast to Gallese, Jean Decety and Daniel Batson argue in their essay “Empathy and Morality: Integrating Social and Neuroscience Approaches” (2009) in more technical terms. They speak of meta-cognitive abilities that allow us “to infer or imagine one’s own thoughts or feelings in another’s situation, including the capacity to distinguish between one’s own thoughts and those of others, which is a key component of interpersonal interactions” (Decety and Batson 2009, 110). One statement in the essay of Decety and Batson resonates strongly with Elizabeth Costello’s claim about the sympathetic imagination: “One of the most striking aspects of human empathy is that it can be felt for virtually any target – even targets of a different species” (Batson, Lishner, Cook, Sawyer 2005; quoted in Decety/Batson 2009, 113).

Decety and Batson attribute crucial importance to perspective-taking:

Further, successful perspective taking has been linked to altruistic motivation (Batson et al., 1991). Using mental imagery to take the perspective of another is a powerful way to place oneself in the situation or emotional state of that person. Mental imagery not only enables us to see the world of our conspecifics through their eyes or in their shoes, but may also result in similar sensations as the other person's (Decety and Grèzes, 2006) (Decety and Batson 2009, 117; see also Decety 2005).

What Decety terms “mental imagery” seems to me a paradigmatic trait of literature, since a text offers hardly any visual stimuli, but instead relies almost completely on the reader's capacity for creating the appropriate mental imagery during the reading process. Decety's argument goes on to discuss how perspective-taking might be processed on a neurological level: “Interestingly, cognitive neuroscience research demonstrates that when individuals adopt the perspective of others, neural circuits common to the ones underlying first-person experiences are activated as well” (Decety and Batson 2009, 117).

Coetzee's *Age of Iron* can be seen as a demonstration of first-person perspective-taking, which could be correlated to both imagining-self and imagining-other. Like Gallese, Decety and Batson cannot help but think of how these findings might benefit society:

Further studies are required to increase our knowledge about the various factors, processes and (neural and behavioral) effects involved in and resulting from the modulation of empathic responses. This knowledge will inform us how empathy can be promoted to ultimately increase humankind's ability to act in more prosocial and altruistic ways (Decety and Batson 2009, 122).

Decety and Batson's comments on perspective-taking in terms of imagining-as-self and imagining-as-other will prove helpful in my discussion of *Age of Iron*.

2.4 Zaboura: The Empathetic Brain

In 2009, Nadia Zaboura related research on mirror neurons to the social sciences and the humanities, ultimately suggesting that there might exist a more complex network of different types of mirror neurons allowing for more complex functions than just mimetic

learning and adaptation. Although mirror neurons have been primarily found to respond to intention-directed actions, their involvement in more complex cognitive processes cannot be precluded (Zaboura 2009, 8). Zaboura, in her description of mirror neurons, employs a series of interesting word choices: “the observer is enabled to *symmetrically co-experience* what goes on inside the other” and “an *intersubjective shift of perspectives* takes place, from a third person to a first person perspective, which accordingly is titled simulation” (2009, 61; original emphasis).²

In the reading process, the reader is not reacting to an externally perceived action pattern, but instead to an imagined action pattern. We can imagine how bodies respond to a text, how a text can affect us, can make us symmetrically co-experience joys and worries of literary characters. The intersubjective shifts continuously prompted by Coetzee's fictions are of the second order to the intersubjective shift underlying the reader's primary social cognition.

Zaboura describes the opening of an *interpersonal space*, when it is informed by the internal representation and by collating the perceived with their own repertoire of actions: “This form of intersubjectivity is hence useful for actions of a higher social order, such as interactions mediated by symbols” (2006, 69). This *interpersonal space* is opened by the subconscious perception of gestures that indicate “meaningful” content. Applying this to fictional texts, the reader might respond to representations of bodily gestures in a way that involves an activation of mirror neurons.

Zaboura points out that around thirty percent of the mirror neurons discovered so far are *strict congruent mirror neurons*, meaning that they can be attributed to specific types of actions (such as grabbing hand etc.). The larger percentage (around sixty percent) represents *broad congruent mirror-neurons*, meaning that they respond to various and more general stimuli (2009, 70). Multimodal overlaps of different sense systems, as for example a tactile-auditory combination, are assumed to occur (Zaboura 2009, 74). Zaboura's larger argument proposes the possibility of far more complex interactions between mirror neurons than so far researched. She concedes that research on mirror neurons is at an early stage, but already researchers have identified “*audiovisual mirror neurons*, that not only discharge when perceiving or performing an action, but also when hearing the action, as when a paper is torn to pieces” (2009, 75–76). From here it is only another step – at this point scientifically a leap of faith – to imagining that mirror neurons could be activated by purely symbolic, i.e. literary representations.

² All quotes from Zaboura are rendered in my translation from the German original.

2.5 Fritz Breithaupt: Narrative Empathy

Also in 2009 Fritz Breithaupt published his study *Kulturen der Empathie*, which combines the research of mirror neurons with the literary analysis of narratives. In a wording resonating with Costello's statement about the unlimited potential of the sympathetic imagination, Breithaupt states:

We seem to possess the ability to feel ourselves into anything without limitations, in order to relate it to familiar schemes and thereby erect imaginary bridges between us and others, without having to think the actually dissimilar as dissimilar (2009, 20).³

Breithaupt assumes that the production of dissimilarity might strongly contribute to the process of empathy. Only a mechanism that reflects dissimilarity can guarantee the canalisation and focalization of empathy (2009, 21). Empathy (understood as a decoding of emotions, affects and actions of an other as other) requires the drawing of a borderline between me and the other – a borderline that is defined by empathy (Breithaupt 2009, 31). Breithaupt uses the argument for dissimilarity to achieve a transfer to the performing arts, in particular the drama: with our growing awareness of difference empathy grows too. Empathy becomes our medium to translate the difference in a way that allows it to remain different.

Breithaupt proposes a “narrative intelligence hypothesis” (2009, 115), implying that “narrative consciousness” means thinking in hypotheses and excuses. Breithaupt sees one central feature of narrative in the emergence of the alterity of characters presented. Breithaupt assumes narrative intelligence to be a fundamental aspect of our self-understanding and our construction of identity. More interesting than his basic assumptions are the conclusions he draws from them. The body and psyche of the other become the boom box (*Resonanzkörper* – resonating body) of our experience, our actions and emotions. Breithaupt postulates that narration can only take place if the unfolding events affect a body that allows us to share their suffering and their experience (2009, 145). Becoming other could be seen as the central goal in the fictions of Coetzee, and Breithaupt's descriptive analysis runs to the conclusion that our empathy is maximized if and when the perspective-sharing with the character is disrupted. While perspective-sharing

³ This and all subsequent Breithaupt translations into English are mine.

is the access point for any observer to experience empathy, only the disruption of this narrative perspective can bring about a maximum of empathy:

Only those who inhabit the perspective of an involved character can register and sense the significance of events. At the same time, the perspective of another person is only inhabited or shared when the result affects this perspective, damages it, corrupts it, destroys it. Therefore a perspective is adopted that will stop being one. Empathy in its most extreme augmentation is the form of identification that simultaneously suspends all identification. Empathy is the culmination of excitement with or close to the other, and it represents a cleansing of the excitement. Empathy is maximized shared suffering, which depletes itself in the moment (Breithaupt 2009, 147–8).

The ambivalence of perspective-taking, at once the facilitator of empathy and its inhibitor, is an essential part of Breithaupt's theory. As argued above, empathy only becomes possible through an awareness of difference.

Breithaupt's theory of narrative empathy is a vital link between the neuroscientific concept of empathy and the sympathetic imagination of Coetzee's fiction, bridging the gap between literature and neuroscience; narrative empathy explains the transformation of input into information via mirror neurons: "Only the filters of narrative empathy enable the coactive mirror neurons to produce information" (Breithaupt 2009, 187). Coetzee's sympathetic imagination uses narrative to create an intersubjective space, which allows a "hypersubject" (Breithaupt 2009, 73) or the "intersubjective manifold" (Gallese 2001) to come into being, which offers the perfect stage for the mirror neurons and empathy to play out.

3. Destabilizing Narrative Perspective in Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990)

The increased intimacy of tone in *Age of Iron* reflects Coetzee's thematic engagement with parental affiliation and filial remonstrance. *Age of Iron* began as draft of an epistolary novel in which Coetzee, writing from a first person perspective, addressed his mother Vera, who had died shortly before.⁴ Coetzee, however, decided to give up the autobio-

⁴ At a conference in Gießen in 2012, David Atwell discussed the early manuscripts of *Age of Iron*, now available at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Austin, Texas. See also Atwell *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015).

graphical perspective, and adopted the perspective of a mother writing to her daughter. In the finally published novel Elizabeth Curren narrates events in the past tense, but in close proximity to the events narrated, speaking of “[y]esterday” and “now”. (3) The suggestive immediacy of her reflections resembles a diary, or even a deathbed confession: “To embrace death as my own, mine alone. / To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me” (6). Curren conflates writer (I) and addressee (you), in the narrative herself and her daughter, beyond the narrative author and reader. Here Coetzee lets Curren comment on the singularity of death, which is always experienced individually; but the quote also hints at the self-reflexive nature of any address: in encountering others we find ourselves. The theme foreshadows Coetzee’s later autobiographical fiction *Summertime* (2009), which enacts a *post mortem* self-analysis, in this regard surpassing Elizabeth Curren’s *ante mortem* narrative.

Curren starts her writing after she has received a terminal cancer diagnosis, which gives her narrative voice a twist of Walter Benjamin’s *Erzähler*, whose death ends all narrative, but who also postulates death as a precondition for all narrative. In Curren’s words of a binary logic: “Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death.” (115–116) In her case the terminal sickness constitutes a beginning of sorts.

3.1 Children of the Revolution – Imagining Death

Elizabeth Curren develops an interest for the son of her house servant Florence, Bheki; later her interest shifts to his friend John. When Bheki and his friend have a bicycle accident, caused by a police van pushing them into a parking van, John suffers a head wound and bleeds profusely, and is taken to a hospital. Curren and Vercueil go to the hospital and find Bheki’s badly injured friend. While presenting to him “some fruit” (an apple and a pear) and receiving no sign of gratitude, she muses about his lack of charm: “I did not like him. I do not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any trace of feeling for him. As there are people to whom one spontaneously warms, so there are people to whom one is, from the first, cold. That is all” (78). She goes on to remember “an old ginger tom” she had been nursing, inviting a human-animal comparison: “Even when he was at his weakest his body was hard, tense, resistant under my hand. Around this boy I felt the same wall of resistance. Though his eyes were open, he did not see; what I said he did not hear” (79). Curren discovers a similarity in the boy’s apparent distaste for white people: “Though it does me no good, I flinch from the white touch as much as

he does; would even flinch from the old white woman who pats his hand if she were not I" (80). Speaking of herself in the third person while maintaining her first-person position constitutes an instance of developing empathy.

When Florence tells Elizabeth Curren about trouble in the township Gugulethu and the involvement of her son, she drives Florence there. They find Bheki's dead body laid out in a burned-down school. For Elizabeth Curren this moment is an eye-opener in the most literal sense:

I was shaking: shivers ran up and down my body, my hands trembled. I thought of the boy's open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again (102–103).

Elizabeth Curren again makes an effort to imagine herself into the position of the other, now the dead boy Bheki. The repetition of "I thought" parallels her speechlessness. Note how the colon is dropped after the first phrase, as if thinking of the open eyes shifted her perception into a more immediate imagining of his position, yet still presented as thought. The colons used in the following attribute additional weight to every single phrase. Her forever open eyes mirror the eyes of the dead boy (that remain open until someone closes them for him).

Shortly after Curren's eye-opening moment she directs a comment at her daughter (the "you" in the address reaching out to the reader as well) on her limited narrative perspective, reminding both her daughter and the reader that she is the only point of focalization in this narrative:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. It is my thoughts that you think, my despair that you feel, and also the first stirrings of welcome for whatever will put an end to thought: sleep, death. To me your sympathies flow; your heart beats with mine (103–104).

This is a crucial moment in Elizabeth Curren's narrative. In terms of empathy this passage sounds like an instruction manual for Breithaupt's cognitive empathy. First: Approach

with caution in taking someone's perspective. Then: Give yourself up to it, but beware of getting too close and taking it for granted. Lastly: Allow the other perspective to affect you, to be embodied in you. Summarily: Allow yourself to inhabit the narrative, but never without caution. The face serves as primary site of encounter: "So why should I grieve for him [Bheki]? The answer is, I saw his face. When he died he was a child again" (125).

Her relationship with Bheki's friend marks yet another stage of her transformation. One night the boy John appears in her kitchen. Addressing her daughter she ponders her feelings for the boy:

I do not love this child [...]. My heart does not accept him as mine: it is as simple as that. In my heart I want him to go away and leave me alone.

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

[...] I cannot find it in my heart to love, to want to love, to want to want to love.

[...] Therefore let me utter my second, dubious word. Not wanting to love him, how true can I say my love is for you? For love is not like hunger. Love is never sated, stilled. When one loves, one loves more. The more I love you, the more I ought to love him. The less I love him, the less, perhaps, I love you.

Cruciform logic, which takes me where I do not want to go! (136–137)

This passage constitutes another act of Elizabeth Curren's sympathetic imagination. She discourses about the movements of her heart, which "must love," but also realizes her strong resistance, her heart not being "full enough." She connects her capacity to love her daughter to her capacity to love this boy; not a scale with two sides to choose from, but rather a potential that can only be realized in application to both, and for all it matters, to anyone and everything.

She takes the boy in and feeds him. When the police comes looking for the boy at her house she realizes that he has lost the right to live. Helplessly she confesses: "I stand on the other side. But on the other bank too, the other bank of the river. On the far bank, looking back" (154). The police force Curren away from the door to Florence's room and the boy is shot. She imagines John's position at the moment just before he was shot, only

this time not inhabiting his perspective, but instead taking the position of a proximate witness (“beside him I stand and hover.” 175); just like we as readers are witnesses to the account she gives to her daughter in her letter:

His eyes are unblinking, fixed on the door through which he is going to leave the world. His mouth is dry but he is not afraid. His heart beats steadily like a fist in his chest clenching and unclenching.

His eyes are open and mine, though I write, are shut. My eyes are shut in order to see (175).

Note the emphasis on the embodiment of Curren’s sympathetic imagining and how the description of the body is utilized to indicate corresponding inner states, capturing the intensity of the moment. The shut eyes of Elizabeth Curren mark the act of imagining and point to the inwardness of the process that fuels her moral transformation.

3.2 Companionship Transformed – Dog Bodies and A Deadly Embrace

Elizabeth Curren embraces the contradictions of her own thinking, which at times assumes a position of knowing (in accordance with her teaching vocation), then again falters in the face of apparently incomprehensible otherness, which ranges from Vercueil over Bheki and John to her estranged daughter.

In the final sections of *Age of Iron* the relationship between Curren and Vercueil reaches a stage where contradictions become tolerable: “Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him” (130). This echoes her statement about her love for Bheki’s friend John and indicates her effort to struggle on, to preserve her soul in spite of her imminent death: “I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul” (130). The complexity of their riddled companionship remains and is not smoothed over into terms of simple friendship: “I give my life to Vercueil to carry over. I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him” (131). Elizabeth Curren is forced to admit that her supposed acts of kindness can hardly be seen as such by Vercueil, since they are tainted by a history of segregation which cannot be undone: “What I give he does not forgive me for giving. No charity in him, no forgiveness. (*Charity?* says Vercueil. *Forgiveness?*) Without his forgiveness I give without charity, serve without love. Rain falling on barren soil” (131; original emphasis).

Note how the bracket offers the reader a response of Vercueil as imagined by Curren. Elizabeth Curren speaks of herself as a paper being in this epistolary:

This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page. These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on. Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow toward her, may I live in you (131).

She hopes the words will enter her daughter and live on in her; but as paper being Curren will live on in the minds of the readers.

With Elizabeth Curren's death approaching she asks for the company of Vercueil's dog in her bed ("For the warmth."), and when Vercueil points out that the dog will not stay, she invites him as well.

He lay down at my back, on top of the bedclothes. The smell of his dirty feet reached me. He whistled softly; the dog leapt up, did its circle dance, settled between his legs and mine. Like Tristan's sword, keeping us honest (185).

How far their unlikely companionship has taken them! Ultimately, the approximation of their bodies has now come as far as possible. The bodies form the basis for enhancing their empathetic approximation, the condition *sine qua non*, even if Curren proposes a contrary thought: "This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses" (186). By now Curren has firmly established that her soul has just lately begun to rise from the ashes of a life spent in forgetful blindness: "Vercueil and his dog, sleeping so calmly beside these torments of grief. Fulfilling their charge, waiting for the soul to emerge. The soul, neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant" (186). Elizabeth Curren has undergone a transformation in the dying body and the reborn soul.

When they talk about how Vercueil "lost the use of his fingers" in an accident at sea, where "his hand was caught in a pulley and crushed" (189). Illustrating their intimacy, Curren shows no hesitation when she pinches his ring finger lightly to test whether he feels anything (in his finger), but the "nerves are dead" (187). Their intimacy now seems permanent, and also seems to have extended beyond their bodies, even if these remain the primary site of display for this intimacy:

We share a bed, folded one upon the other like a page folded in two, like two wings folded: old mates, bunkmates, conjoined, conjugal. [...] A dry creature, a creature of air, like those locust fairies in Shakespeare with their whipstock of cricket's bone, lash of spider film (189).

Ending her letter, Curren expresses how close Vercueil and she have become: "From the side of her shadow husband your mother writes. Forgive me if the picture offends you. One must love what is nearest. One must love what is at hand, as a dog loves. Mrs V." (190). Curren marks the end of the letter with a strange signature signalling her allegiance to her "shadow husband" Vercueil, thereby marking the distance to her daughter and completing the estrangement, granting Vercueil precedence over her daughter: "In this respect she relinquishes, at last, the sovereignty of the monologic 'I' that dominates the text; she overcomes her will to live and gives her life, literally, into Vercueil's hands – just as Coetzee, figuratively, relinquishes authority over his text in giving it to his reader" (Worthington 2011, 126).

After the formal closing of the letter follows an epilogue telling of her final departure. The release comes in the final paragraph. Elizabeth Curren's death coincides with the end of the narrative, but at the same time its announcement has marked its beginning, making death (by cancer) the alpha and omega of her narrative. In the very last paragraph, Elizabeth Curren notes how she does not smell Vercueil anymore; and surely his bodily odours have not vanished, but rather her distaste and heightened awareness of it has diminished to nothing:

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 and 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 (198).

The final embrace of Vercueil offers only the comfort of death and painlessness. Her unlikely companion, who remains with her in her final moments, who has listened to her long discourses on shame and love, has helped her soul bloom for a last time. For the most part he remained passive, active only in his resistance to submitting himself to her completely.

4. Conclusion: The Empathy Effect

In conclusion, the close reading presented here has demonstrated how Coetzee evokes empathy in the reader through the narrative destabilization of Elizabeth Curren's first-person narrative. Both her encounter with Vercueil as well as her confrontation with the death of the boy are marked by a constant shifting of pronouns, between 'I' and 'He', with Curren straining her sympathetic imagination to empathetically inhabit the other, once in the vagrant Vercueil, then in the dead boy. As readers we are forced to follow her on her uncomfortable journey, and in the process go through a process that hones our empathetic capabilities. I believe that during the reading of *Age of Iron* a complex system of mirror neurons is triggered in the reader and evokes feelings of empathy. This is supported by the arguments put forward by Decety and Batson (2009), Vittorio Gallesse (2001), Nadia Zaboura (2009), and Fritz Breithaupt (2009), who have all stressed the vital importance of perspective-taking for empathy to occur. Coetzee's fiction challenges the reader to accompany Elizabeth Curren's on her various exercises of perspective-taking, even to the point of imagining her own and another's death. The result in the reader of experiencing such a narrative is what I call the empathy effect.

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