

# Encounters and Silence between Fathers and Sons: G.T. Didial and J.M. Coetzee

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**Abstract:** *This article seeks to demonstrate how Cabo Verdean author G. T. Didial's O Estado Impenitente da Fragilidade and J.M. Coetzee's The Master of Petersburg revisit an ancient Western mythological tradition (Abraham and Isaac; Oedipus and Laius; Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents). I focus on and how, through a complex rewriting process, both narratives discuss not only the tense relationship between fathers and sons but also the complex relationship between contemporary literatures of post-colonial African cultural systems and the literatures of Western cultural systems.*

**Keywords:** Cabo Verde; South Africa; *O Estado Impenitente da Fragilidade*; *The Master of Petersburg*; Fathers and sons

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Over the course of his career, the Cabo Verdean writer João Varela (1937-2007) published under various names: João Vário, Timóteo Tio Tiofe, and G.T. Didial. Since the 1960s, Vário published a fragmentary poetic anthology titled *Exemplo(s)*, while Tiofe organized his work into three books, the *Livros de Notcha* (only two of which have so far been published). Didial's fiction includes the two-volume *Contos de Macaronésia* (1992 and 1999), the novel *O Estado Impenitente da Fragilidade* (1989), and fragments of the epic *Sturiadas*, which were published a year after Varela's death in the poetic anthology *Destino de bai*. Without losing their autonomy, each of Vário's, Tiofe's, and Didial's texts

invites transgressive readings when integrated into a broader context, and they can be productively read in dialogue and confrontation with other texts attributed to the same pseudo-heteronym, works authored by his pseudo-heteronymic counterparts, and those penned by other writers (Salgueiro Rodrigues “O Mito”; Silvestre). In this article, I concentrate on G.T. Didial’s first novel, *O Estado Impenitente da Fragilidade* (1989), reading it alongside J.M Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg* in order to tease out the former’s transgressive force. In particular, I focus on how both works address questions related to the breakdown of the relationship between fathers and sons.

*O Estado Impenitente da Fragilidade* narrates the life of D.T. Juga, a young Macaronesian writer who wanders in exile through several European cities, including Coimbra, Lisbon, Oslo, Helsinki, Stockholm, Florence, and Geneva. In essence an autobiographical fiction, the novel follows the narrator’s search for answers to two existential problems.

First, the novel focuses on the childhood trauma that drove Juga to leave his hometown of Micadinaia “durante as grandes fomes dos anos quarenta,” a time when the island had become a “vasto cemitério, batido pelo sol e o esquecimento, o pavor e o harmatão” (Didial, *O Estado* 15). Juga’s father had taken him to the top of a hill and there nearly murdered his son. Never fully understood by Juga, this event subsequently haunts his existence, making him wish for his father’s death and driving him to exile in Europe. Second, the novel narrates Juga’s troubled and lengthy experience writing his first book, the autobiographical novel *Diário de Isaac*. As the title suggests, the young author’s desire to understand patricidal violence drives his creative process. Juga’s novel opens up an intertextual dialogue both with the biblical myth of Abraham and Isaac and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. This creates a tension as the young author working within a new literary tradition struggles to situate himself in relation to his canonical precursors or (fore)fathers. *O Estado Impenitente* thus discusses a fundamental poetic and cultural issue through an ironic process of *mise en abyme*: i.e., Juga’s struggle stands in for Didial’s own complex confrontation with his own canonical fathers.

Micadinaia is in Didial’s fiction one of the capitals of the Archipelago of Macaronesia. In *Contos da Macaronesia*, Micadinaia and Macaronesia are clearly the structuring axes of the stories. In *O Estado Impenitente*, both are also the geographical *topoi* of the narrator’s wandering and questioning. Juga left

them for Europe as a young student. He returns years later, having finished the *Diário de Isaac*, and having understood that neither exile nor writing the book freed him from his childhood trauma or his father's shadow. All the narratives of this pseudo-heteronym of Varela are connected to the islands. As we will see, the importance of this connection to Macaronesia is related to the main themes of his work: the relation between the human/mundane and the divine/transcendent; violence and conflict; death and survival; the crisis of knowledge and language; the role of literature in the world; and intertextual and power relations between different authors and cultural systems in contact.

The toponym *Macaronesia* was created in the nineteenth century by the English botanist and geographer Phillip Baker Webb, from the Greek roots *makaron* (fortunate) and *nesoi* (islands). It designates the Atlantic region that covers the Azores, Madeira, Selvagens, the Canaries and Cabo Verde. As a geographical term, Macaronesia has a univocal meaning. However, in other discursive contexts (such as in Didial's fiction), the toponym becomes ambiguous. Its etymology echoes several ancient island *mythoi*, mapped beyond the Pillars of Hercules by the European and Mediterranean imaginary. Among these, are the *mythoi* of the Fortunate Isles, Atlantis, the Hesperides, Saint Brendan's Isle, and of Eden, which were appropriated by the communities of the Azores, Madeira, the Canaries, and Cabo Verde after the fifteenth century.

Didial's fiction never makes use of the toponym *Cabo Verde*. However, one should not read the *Macaronesia* of his texts as a version (and certainly not a scientific version) of all the islands of the Macaronesia region. In this way, Didial points to the possibility of an ambiguous reading of both *Macaronesia* and *Micadinaia*. One of the main questions Didial's fiction raises is precisely what he means when he speaks of *Macaronesia* and *Micadinaia*. Didial and Varela's other pseudo-heteronyms engage in a complex intertextual dialogue. This rewriting process helps us to find an answer. As we will see, the possibility of an ambiguous reading of just such a fictional universe is also present in Coetzee's work.

In Didial's fiction, the relevant complex and parodic rewriting of Cabo Verdean mythological tradition (particularly the Atlantis myth, a narration of the religious crisis between gods and humans) is added to other myths, like those of the Oedipal cycle or the myth of Abraham and Isaac. Didial's Macaronesian universe takes on an ambiguous meaning through the use of non-denotative

referential processes, particularly the symbolic language of myth. Thus, it can be read as a sign for the modern world, a world from which Varela never excludes the Creole islands. By referring to and representing Cabo Verde through Macaronesia, Didial offers up a discussion of both Cabo Verdean modernity and its relation to other modernities.

Both the question of modernity and an intertextual dialogue with canonical authors and texts serve as aspects of the complex relations that emerge from the encounter between fathers and sons. These are problematized both in *O Estado Impenitente* and in *Diário de Isaac*, the novel embedded within it. In both these works, the relations between fathers and sons operate at both the biological and familiar/affective levels, and they contain more or less explicit references to other processes of filiation and affiliation. These processes are particularly evident in the use of the symbolic language of myth and through an intertextual dialogue with the work of other Cabo Verdean writers and other cultural systems. Some of these filiation and affiliation processes include the transcendent relation between the human and the divine, fundamental in the myths of Atlantis, Eden, and Abraham and Isaac parodied in Didial's fiction. Accordingly, the aesthetic and poetic relation between authors from different periods of the same literary system as well as the tense political and cultural relations between former colonizers and post-colonial African writers are likewise examples of complex processes of filiation and affiliation.

Much like Didial's *O Estado Impenitente*, Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* blends history with fiction, past with present, and Coetzee's biography with the lives of fictional characters, either from his own or Fyodor Dostoevsky's works. As in Didial's novel, *The Master of Petersburg* presents a non-univocal fictional universe shaped by violence and power conflicts, chaos, exile, and wanderings. It depicts the fall into inhumanity, the inability to ground meaning and values, and the impossibility of a return to one's home. The action takes place in Petersburg between October and November 1869, the year of the violent protests headed by Sergey Nechayev and his anarchist group. At the time of the novel's publication, South Africa was itself gripped by the violence that had sprung from the official abolition of apartheid, and Coetzee was struggling with the violent death of his son, with whom he had had a troubled relationship (Civieri 73). It also includes historical Russian figures like Dostoevsky, Nechayev, Ivan Turgenev, Mikhail Bakunin, and Tsar Peter the Great with his

son Alexei Petrovich, whose tense and murderous relationship is closely linked to the founding of the city.<sup>1</sup>

Both Coetzee and Didial produce anachronistic texts in which different times and narrative voices are crossed, in a referential destabilization. In fact, the city of Petersburg mapped out in the 1994 novel has an allegorical character. Accordingly, the Russian master's return to the city of Neva, after his exile in Dresden, looking for the truth about the young writer Pavel's death, son of his first wife and with whom he has a difficult relationship of (a)filiation, can also be read allegorically. Both the city and the story of *The Master of Petersburg* are non-denotative representations of other worlds and other life stories, in particular of South Africa, or even to a certain extent, the life of Coetzee and other contemporary subjects, in the final decades of the twentieth century (Civieri 72).

*The Master of Petersburg* narrates Dostoevsky's investigations through the Russian city, through Pavel's manuscripts, through what is left of the affective and sexual life of his recently deceased son, and through the letters both exchanged. The master obsessively tries to reconstruct Pavel's drift in the time before his ascent and fatal fall from the tower at the Stolyarny Pier. In a similar way, Juga (in this case the son and not the father), in Didial's *O Estado Impenitente*, remakes the path up the hill of his island, this time with his father, to re-enact and exact retribution for the attempted infanticide during his childhood, now transformed into attempted parricide.

Through a transgressive and *contra natura* quest, in which Dostoevsky tries to emulate his son's path, the *master* finds his own guilt and the meaning of having a son or a disciple. He discovers Pavel's death is closely related with the obsessive and tense relation established between father/master and son/disciple. Starting from the title of the novel, Coetzee gives the statute of master to Dostoevsky, and follows his example. This stance is further strengthened by the character of Dostoevsky, the master of Pavel, as well as by Dostoevsky himself

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in the eighteenth century by Peter the Great with the aim of opening Russia to the West, Petersburg is closely linked to the dispute between the Tsar and his son Alexei Petrovich. Alexei was condemned to death by his father in the city, for conspiring to commit parricide (Nivat). Coetzee takes this as the founding image of the city, writing that "the tower on Stolyarny Quay has stood since Petersburg was built" (116) and suggesting the existence of a mythic and brutal force that envelops the city, spreading from there to all of Russia.

as an author that Coetzee, with this novel, includes in his own list of elective affinities, as he often does in the titles of his works. Nonetheless, Dostoevsky's exemplary stature thus created is also deconstructed in the novel, revealing the title's hidden sarcasm.

Coetzee deconstructs the image of the master of Western literature by portraying Fyodor on one hand as an absent father (in a sense responsible for his own son's death and later obsessed with the shadow of Pavel and with his own guilt) and on the other as a decaying author, incapable of writing, and who having ignored his son's writing now appropriates it. In this sense, Coetzee subverts the hierarchical relation between fathers and sons, masters and disciples, and between cultures of former colonizers and the previously colonized, highlighting the frailties of both, and the ignored continued dependency of the former on the latter. Nonetheless, Coetzee, as well as Didial, recognizes his own filial relation to and legitimate inheritance from Western literatures and cultures, as shown by his rewriting of Dostoevsky's texts in his own novel and his creation of a frail, profane image of one of the West's canonical writers. However, Coetzee does not lose critical distance from this tradition, and he actively works to define his own creative, cultural, political, and ideological place in the world.

Similar to Didial's work, Coetzee's fathers and sons are obsessive replicas of each other. In this way, both these African authors interrogate the possibility of the modern and supposedly post-colonial world escaping the spiral of violence brought forth by the encounter between subjects, authors and cultures. A master is, by definition, someone acknowledged as such by his disciples who mimic him, even when divergently. A son only exists because at his origin, even if subverted, a father existed. Fathers and sons do not always recognize this mutual and constantly tense interdependency. Didial's and Coetzee's novels show the possible consequences of this non-recognition and corrosive silence, both for fathers and sons. To an extent, then, these two exercises in literary (re)creation can be read as attempts to combat the neglect and silence their works denounce without issuing any edifying dogmatisms.

### *(Mis)Encounters between fathers and sons*

Both novels narrate stories of fathers and sons dominated by violence from which mutual aggressions are born, undermining the affections that still unite them, as

well as their lives. These fathers and sons are characters incapable of expelling and silencing their inner demons of regret, often mentioned by both authors. In fact, by attempting to silence those demons, they are condemned to mutual and individual annihilation at the end of both narratives. In *The Master of Petersburg*, Ana Sergueievna, “a conductress of souls” (139), states that speaking of “not always pleasant” family stories is fundamental (65). Ana knows that only after Fyodor “had brought the past into the open” by retelling it, could its demons be exorcized (65).

Coetzee’s and Didial’s fathers and sons only learn the true power of language once it is too late. They only speak when no one is “able to hear” (Coetzee 152-53). Coetzee’s novel ends with a city symbolically burnt at Nechayev’s orders, and with Dostoyevsky taken over by a “whirlwind” of hauntings and words in his deceased son’s room (Coetzee 246). This moment is a final anagnorisis: looking for a definitive encounter with Pavel but also with the inferno of his own soul, so that “for the first time ... he faces it squarely, not disowning it,” realizing there was “a war: the old against the young, the young against the old” (Coetzee 247). This war, in which Dostoevsky now actively and consciously takes part, finds expression in a suicidal profanation of the image of the son’s innocence. This profanation parallels Coetzee’s own writing strategy, in which the author appropriates what he has inherited from the Russian master, in order to know and recreate him.

Similarly, in *O Estado Impenitente*, an apocalyptic annihilation, already perceived in the grotesque descriptions of the ruin that plagues Macaronesia, is fully seen at the end of the novel, when Juga takes his father to the top of the island, where, thirty years earlier, the latter had nearly killed him. This scene presents a movement that closely resembles the encounter between Dostoevsky and Nechayev in Coetzee’s novel. That ironic ascent towards death leads the young author to an infernal Heaven and to an unexpected discovery: the final encounter will not take place between Juga and his father, because the latter is also a victim manipulated by divine arbitrariness. His father is a man who has already died inside and, therefore, is incapable of fighting that definitive confrontation. Juga’s final, and most violent, ungodly and ancient confrontation will happen before God.

Juga’s climb to the peak is a transgressive movement that can be read as invasive, in the same way Mikhailovich took over Pavel’s room. At the summit,

the twin narrators reveal that “o abismo escrevia uma frase bem singular: *aqui jaz a plenitude*” (222). This spatial note characterizes the paradox of the place. The peak is simultaneously the site of an abyss and the place where plenitude lies, an expression here read in its double meaning of tranquility and of the territory of a divine absolute although stagnant and dying in its self-centered passivity. It is, therefore, the territory of the father, where the young writer from Micadinaia, visited by divinity and visiting that holy territory, subverts the roles of ruler and ruled generally given to creator and created. Affronting God, Juga forces him to abandon silence and to speak in human language. Didial initially presents Juga as “subjugado e vacilante” (223). By the end of the novel, however, and after his divine epiphany, another image of the son will take over—one announcing the death of the human. Like Coetzee’s protagonist, Juga is portrayed as someone who profanes, affronting and deconstructing the canonically perfect image of God. In *O Estado Impenitente*, the author’s voice blends with that of the main character, who is both narrator and witness. As such, both give immortality and the power of life and death over humanity to the father. However, they also reveal the father’s frailty by presenting him as a figure tempted by Juga’s insistent questions that lead him to speak in a language intelligible to humans, even if only to proscribe the unrepentant condition of a son who defied him.

Didial’s novel, like Coetzee’s, ends with an ambivalent act of infanticide and parricide. It portrays an encounter triggered through a violent and noisy discourse that ultimately reveals the obscene face of God.<sup>2</sup> The same vengeful spirit that dominated Mikhailovich seems to take God over, revealing presumptuousness and insensibility in the face of human anguish:

Que fizeste dos meus sinais e dos meus ensinamentos? Não falei suficientemente de perdão, de contrição? Sim, não ignoro que te apegas ao teu desespero. Mas conseguirás, como diria o teu mestre [Kierkegaard], especar o teu eu satanicamente contra mim? ... Sei do que falas, mas não te ouço, não te quero ouvir, quando tens a boca ou a

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<sup>2</sup> Here, the etymological meaning of the word *encounter* is relevant. It points out the inherent paradox of the phenomena it describes: to be *in/with* someone, but also *countering*, facing him/her/it.



alma cheias dessa insuficiencia.... Sabes que o homem não é o melhor dos meus sonhos.... Vim apenas para acordar a origem ... não te vejo senão lá onde te coloco. (222-25)

Both authors show similarities in their depiction of human angst. In spite of the different contexts that separate Didial's son and father(s) from Coetzee's, their characters share a lack of repentance in frailty. They reveal a restless spirit of subversion. They suffer from despair. They face annihilating dismay and an inner conflict that devastates them. Juga portrays himself as:

abandonado, abandalhado, pequeno intelectual friorento, transido de pavor, pavor da morte e da solidão, roído pela penúria e a fadiga, atormentado pela luxúria e o tédio, sem laços afectivos, perdido nesta cidade, num Outono detestável, amargo, cheio de piedade de si próprio, sem casa, sem mulheres, sem amigos, sem . . . manuscritos prometedores, a quem já só a morte, que teme desesperadamente, pode, no entanto, tornar feliz. (23)

Coetzee's narrator portrays Mikhailovich as a father dominated by a similar fear of death and the same luxurious and grotesque "wandering thoughts" (128), such as his violent sexual desire for Ana Sergueievna near Pavel's grave, on the island of Yelagin. In a quote where we find similarities between Fyodor and Juga, Coetzee's narrator portrays the former in the following way: "The death of innocence. Never in his life has he felt more alone. He is like a traveller on a vast plain ... darkness multiplies, fold upon fold. Here is no shelter; if once he had a destination, he has long since lost it; the longer the clouds mass, the heavier they grow. *Let it all break!* He prays: what is the use of delaying?" (213).

Both narrators can in fact be read as two sides of the same coin: one side for the father and the other for the son, showing in their stories the difficulty of playing either of those roles in the contemporary world, independently of geo-cultural context. Incapable of resisting the force of attraction/destruction that leads them to one another, fathers and sons have a biased understanding of each other, and are tempted by an assassin's rage that Fyodor himself compares to the indomitable Maenads, images of that primitive violence that is able to reduce any one to a thing "torn and scattered like Orpheus" (152).

Both Didial and Coetzee create fathers and sons that by trying to annul the hierarchical differences they consider limits to the human condition end up dissolving all the interdictions and boundaries that define their own place in the world. In this way, they condemn themselves and their own bloodline to an uncontrollable confusion in which the Other, by coming closer to the self, emerges as a rival. This confusion creates an anguishing collapse in definition and leads both self and Other to an uncontrollable spiral of violence. In Coetzee's novel, this violence is symbolized by the spiral staircase of the "Shot Tower" which Mikhailovich and Nechayev painfully climb, re-enacting Pavel's steps. In Didial's novel, the two pilgrimages made by Juga and his father to the peak of their island represent it.

In both cases, a vertiginous path transforms known and loved faces, either of fathers or sons, into spectral images, narcissistically blinding and numbing. Fyodor (and in Didial's novel, also Juga's father and God) "forever . . . look[s] back" to the young and irreverent son, being "absorbed in [his] gaze" (54), and thus forgetting his own life with its own responsibilities. The son Juga (and also Pavel and Nechayev, in Coetzee) "não consegu[e] fugir à sua obsessão de ver pairar sobre si, a sombra do pai" (109).

Dostoevsky, obsessed with Pavel's image, becomes incapable of writing and keeps postponing his return home to his wife. Juga, for his part, writes and rewrites his novel over a period of ten years, until he decides to return home and kill his father. Only then is he able to finish *Diário de Isaac*. Although his novel is tremendously successful, it does not appease him. As the narrator puts it, "o romance não substituía nem curava a tentação primordial" (170).

The protagonists of both novels represent a modern areligious and complex subject. Deeply lonely, they find themselves increasingly lost either in the "labyrinth" of one's own possessed brain (Coetzee 126) or in the abyssal interior of a "body which contains its own falling and its own darkness" (Coetzee 234). They direct their lives to the questioning of inaccessible and unspoken truths, as well as to an obsessive and annihilating defiance of human limitations against a divine transcendence that imposed those limitations.

Fathers and sons become self-exiled figures, the "eternal lodger" (Coetzee 154) of rooms that are no longer theirs, gradually moving away from the family and community to which they belong. Suspending the dialogue that could have re-connected them with the Other-self, they deny the encounter that would avoid

disruptive chaos. In their exiles, the characters do not really seek an alternative asylum, a new home and family. Fyodor betrays and abandons Anya, later giving up his relationship with Ana Sergeievna, during his exile in his own hometown. Didial's Juga watches with fascination and compassion the grotesque death of the Jocastian figure of Eduarda (his lover and, in a certain sense, his mother) in Coimbra and, years later, refuses to marry Ethya. In fact, the journeys and attempted relations in both novels are ways of escaping filiations and original familial bonds. They are, above all, desperate and ineffective attempts to free oneself from the essential connection with family experienced, both by fathers and sons, as oppressive and a threat to personal survival and the realization of desire. Ultimately, with these attempted escapes, fathers and sons try to quiet in themselves the obsessive voices of those they deem to be either their parents or their direct descendants. As Fyodor states, regarding his own aspirations, fathers and sons search, in journeys and in exile, for a numbing abandonment that takes them "plunging down a long waterfall into a pool," whose waters (like those of the Lethe) may free them from their family responsibilities, as well as from their pain, resentment and, anguish (Coetzee 16).

In both novels, the imperative of the journey is not born from Sigmund Freud's taboo, which determines the interdiction on sexual contact between close relatives to ensure the survival of the clan, avoiding the ambivalent impulses of affection and hostility that characterize family relations (Freud 14). Mikhailovich and Juga's parting is not intended to and does not achieve the survival of their families. On the contrary, it is an attempt to destroy them and, therefore, a manifestation of domestic violence that, at the end of both works, will ruin fathers and sons, by disruption and implosion.

Apparently an escape from violence, this parting in search of silence, seems to ease up the confrontation. However, it is just an illusion. Physical distance between fathers and sons does not erase the sound of threatening voices from the family. There are diffuse voices that no one wants to hear because they speak of what is most monstrous and constraining in human beings. These are murmuring voices that infect a growing wound. They are present in spoken words that echo the memory of the exiled, for example, in the question that haunts Juga concerning the reason why his father wanted to kill him. These voices are also present as written words in the letters exchanged between Pavel and his stepfather. They are even present in the fictions created by fathers and sons and

that, in both novels, are presented as the possible enunciation of the anguish and violence that haunts those figures: Dostoevsky's fiction, Pavel's unpublished story, and Juga's *Diário de Isaac*.

In both *O Estado Impenitente* and *The Master of Petersburg*, exile and homecoming are paths that lead fathers and sons, without alternatives, to a definitive mis-encounter. The labyrinth of "dúvidas que tra[zem] há anos dolorosamente sem resposta" does not allow them to have a peaceful and redeeming encounter (Didial, *O Estado* 8). As Fyodor states, evoking Heraclitus, "there is no way back to before" (Coetzee 162), meaning it is impossible to correct the original fault and escape the limits of the human condition.

Incapable of forgiveness and redemption, fathers and sons, including Didial and Coetzee, live in a time in which the structuring boundaries and interdictions of the world have been weakened by the cutting of religious ties and the abandonment of the sacred rites that once structured lives in community. This time can be identified as a "liquid" and reflexive modernity, overtaken by chaos and ruin (Bauman; Beck, Giddens and Lash). For both Coetzee and Didial, following Friedrich Nietzsche, this time is born from the break of the relation between human and divine which is seen, in both novels, through God's ambiguous silence. This is the argument that Coetzee's Mikhailovich tries to make to Matryona in a sarcastically pedagogical tone: "God must be very old by now, as old as the world.... Perhaps he is hard of hearing and weak of vision too, like any old man" (75). According to Mikhailovich, this is the reason why God, not dead but evidently collapsing, could no longer help his creatures to recreate the language of innocence, forgiveness, and redemption, without which no dialogue could possibly be re-enacted, either between humans, or between the human and divine.

Coetzee's and Didial's main characters witness the formation of what Freud and René Girard call a sacrificial crisis, insofar as they abandon themselves to a feeling of being orphaned by God's silence. Both Freud and Girard argue that only by the reactivation of a purification rite can the destructive poison of emerging non-sacrificial violence be controlled. But in Coetzee's and Didial's novels, this becomes impossible. Fyodor finally acknowledges that he is "not Moses" and that his trance states no longer "provide illumination. They are not visitations. Far from it: they are nothing" (Coetzee 69). Juga, for his part, using a subversive parody of biblical discourse, negates the validity of any sacrificial

rite, as well as the possibility of finding a “lamb of God to take away the sins of the world” because his own purpose “was not to erase sin” as the sacrificial rite would do, but rather to “understand it” in a self-reflexive exercise, which is, therefore, modern (206).

Both novels reveal uncontrollable violence at the most intimate core of families. This violence also takes on a mythical dimension, through a return to the origins of civilization, either to the time of Isaac and Oedipus in *O Estado Impenitente*, or to the times of Herod in *The Master of Petersburg*. Violence is presented as lasting for eternity in both novels. In Coetzee’s text, Maximov points out to Dostoevsky that “perhaps it is just the old matter of fathers and sons after all, such as we have always had, only deadlier ... more unforgiving” (45). And in Didial’s novel, Jalanga explains to Juga:

Meu jovem amigo. Abraão não morreu. Todos nós o trazemos no fundo de nós. Se Deus te disser: mata!, tu matarás.... Nunca estivemos seguros de nós mesmos e a verdade é que, hoje, as nossas convicções nos assustam.... Seria necessário nascer de novo. Mas a terra já tem o ventre calcinado e a semente perdeu-se. O homem está só, velho e apressado sobre a terra; o mundo que o rodeia é triste e não há bocas para a alegria. (110-11)

Violence is present from the beginning of these encounters. In both cases, paternity is only fully taken on because of the death of the mothers and wives. Dostoevsky assumes the paternity of his stepson when Pavel is fifteen and his mother, Dostoyevsky’s partner, dies. Juga’s father is left alone with his son after the death of the wife during labor. This initial shock forces fathers and sons into destructive actions of self-protection, disgust and separation, of which silence is one of the most insidious manifestations.

As the bodies and social roles of fathers and sons become obsessively blended, this mis-encounter between the pair becomes ever more irreversible and poignant, until the moment of final disruption. It happens when fathers and sons understand they are each other’s “faded copy” (Coetzee 67) and that they can wear the same clothes. Fyodor puts on Pavel’s suit before he marries Anya, a young girl of Pavel’s age. Juga wears his father’s jacket during his pre-adolescence and, as an adult, becomes the lover of his friend Pedro’s mother.

Disruption happens when the characters understand their reflexivity and “a sua própria forma de andar na maneira de [um] levantar os pés e os pousar ... quando caminhava” (Didial, *O Estado* 217). Seeing each other as reflections in a mirror, fathers and sons find in their replica both the denouncement of their human frailties and a threat to their own identity and place in the world.

***Silence: the ambiguity of a corrosive language***

Maria João Mayer Branco claims that silence does not correspond to an absence of sound, but rather to the harmonious and commonly inaudible confluence of the sounds of the universe. Branco adds that one does not hear the silence simply because it exists, but rather because one makes a subjective choice to do so when, trying to control the sense of hearing, one refuses to be overtaken by the power of the sounds that crush the listener (21-29).

Didial’s and Coetzee’s characters wish for silence, even the total silence of death, and yet it is inaccessible to them. Not to listen to the words of the Other whose presence is threatening would be a manifestation of complete autonomy over oneself and the Other. This act is not possible, however, because the non-sacrificial violence that inhabits the characters forces upon fathers and sons a never-ending echo of words, either spoken or silenced. More than silence, characters obsessively listen to the noise or murmur of their apparently silent or silenced counterparts.

Fátima Silva argues that silence does not necessarily represent a void in communication, an idea that both Didial and Coetzee develop. Silence speaks in both novels, implicitly stating the urgency of escaping family ties. It denounces the limited nature of human speech. Indeed, for both Coetzee and Didial, there are no words capable of fully capturing the complex and sometimes grotesque human condition. This often excessive complexity is full of noise, both incomprehensible and unspeakable. Dostoevsky’s symbolic dream of himself transformed into a turtle (a symbol of slow wisdom), shows a father deprived of the ability to say anything meaningful while seeing the syllables of his discourse transformed into incoherent screams that pull him down to his son’s level, silenced by death. Juga gives the same anguishing weight to spoken and unspoken words “que nos esmag[am] a todos,” recognizing that a scream can “tornar ilegível” due to excess (76).

The characters of *O Estado Impenitente* and *The Master of Petersburg* attempt to escape from words. They look to silence for the erasure of what is prohibited (obscene family violence) or for what is impossible to understand and therefore unspoken (the ambiguity of feelings that connects fathers and sons). Renouncing the word means renouncing an essential part of oneself and acknowledging the loss of the human ability to avoid the divisive chaos that condemns the characters of both novels to death. Words play a particularly salient role in these character's lives, insofar as these characters—as writers and orators—attempt to take on the role of what George Steiner has referred to as “guardians and shapers of speech” (50).

In *O Estado Impenitente*, Juga tells Jalanga that “os homens nos ensinam a falar e os deuses a calar” (180). In *The Master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky acknowledges before his fall that if the language of silence belongs to God (227), the only language left to him, a human writer, is speech: the *verbum*. In spite of such statements, both novels denounce the modern banality of written or spoken language use, which has lost its sacred nature and the revelatory and recreational power it once had. Coetzee addresses this by having Fyodor evoke and identify himself with a new Orpheus deprived of both flute and lyre (13); and in a chapter significantly titled, “The Printing Press,” he does so by giving voice to Nechayev's recognition of the emptying, desacralizing mercantilism of the modern word. Stating that: “words are like the wind, here today, gone tomorrow” and that “no one owns words” (200), Nechayev echoes Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the ethical-artistic-political implications of the mechanical reproduction of art (19-25). Similarly, Didial's Juga considers how the ancient keepers of the *verbum* have been transformed into manipulators and have lost “a magia verbal” that the ritual word once had (205). Consequently, they are no longer capable of saving the human world from chaos and death.

Despite this, according to Pedro, the literary critic of Juga's novel, new poets can still exorcize their demons, but now with a new power—the “poder do Diabo” (199). The profanation of words is thus a “fatalidade: ela existe para sempre, é permanente no seu sulco” (Didial, *O Estado* 200). It can therefore not erase doubt, chaos, or silence. Didial portrays silence as a diabolic trap that increases the ambiguity in father-son relations because what is left unsaid requires guesswork. For Didial, silence is a biased form of communication that suspends verbal language, inhibiting subjects from creating a pure and precise

discourse that might take them to a higher truth. Through its ambiguity, silence strengthens the fragmentary and corrosive power that both novels attribute to the written and spoken word. The (modern) time discussed is that in which “every word doubles” (Coetzee 219), in which “all are provisional” (Coetzee 8), and in which all possible discourses now have two contradicting faces, like Juga’s father and Pavel’s portraits. This is a time when it is impossible to reach the truth because it is no longer possible to trust “that words could ... travel from heart to heart,” innocently, transparently and without “disguise” (Coetzee 195).

Juga’s and Dostoevsky’s wanderings lead them to see the collapse of human language and literature itself. Juga, the writer, sarcastically states that “nada podemos explicar; as nossas tentativas são apenas jogos ... de verosimilhança” (48). Dostoevsky recognizes that “nothing he says is true, nothing is false, nothing is to be trusted ... nothing to do but fall” (236) and in this way he acknowledges the manipulative and unethical dimension of writing.

Both Juga and Dostoevsky (and their African authors) feel abandoned in a violent and chaotic universe, in which word and silence have been overtaken by the noise that stands in the way of salvation. They are aware of their inability to recreate in the present the models of dialogue that existed before their sacrificial crisis. That crisis led both fathers and sons to surrender, with no taboo, to fragmentary fury and corrosive silence. Their speech and writings attest to a surrender to the excess of a language in ruins. Their surrender takes form in the chaotic disposition of the character’s texts (in Pavel’s diary and Juga’s autobiography) and in the novels’ at times inchoate structures. Both characters in the role of writers, and their authors, thus acknowledge the fragmentary condition of language.

For all of these subjects, what they write is their final statement. Valediction comes to the fore in episodes such as Eduarda’s deathbed speech, in which she tries to extinguish herself by an intense surrender to words and sexuality. They write a final scream that, deprived of moralist assumptions, although still nostalgic for an ethics of the pure and redeeming word, announces the death of both fathers and sons. In particular, it announces the death of all language, including the literary language that gives structure, fixes meanings, or is able to free humans from the devils that haunt them. Their metaphorical scream is a final attempt to keep the voice of fathers and sons alive, through the ruins of words, against the inexorable nature of death and time, but without forgetting that the



time of humans has passed. Unredeemed, fathers and sons acknowledge their own frailty in the modern world, and the failure of word and knowledge to shore up that frailty.

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