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Spiritual and material dimensions of home in J. M.Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

Abstract. The aim of the article is to analyse the living conditions presented in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* with reference to differences between the white and black communities of Cape Town in South Africa. It argues that differences in the conditions of living related to social and racial divisions are also reflected in the visions of the afterlife. The protagonist of the novel, Mrs Curren, portrays white people as living in comfort and dying in old age due to natural causes. The moment of their death constitutes a transition from earthly life to spiritual or incorporeal existence. In contrast, black people die young in apartheid fights. The dismal portrayal of the destruction of black people's housing corresponds to Mrs Curren's naturalistic descriptions of the dead bodies of young black activists. Their death does not involve a transformation into a spirit that has shed its body; death offers no relief, since their bodies and souls remain in "African hell".

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, home, house, spirituality, materialism, naturalism.

J. M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* from 1990 portrays the life of its main protagonist, Mrs Elizabeth Curren, who is an elderly woman living in Cape Town. An important theme in the novel is the problem of housing conditions and their differences between different social and racial groups. Georg Gugelberger classifies the novel as "the new fiction of the unhomed", which tackles important issues of homelessness and migrancy (Gugelberger 1995: 133). He stresses the close connection between "the homeless" and "the uncanny": the latter word "in the original sense of the German word *unheimlich*" means "*unbehaust*, without a home/*Heim*)", which "makes this novel so uncanny" (Gugelberger 1995: 131). The problem of homelessness may be discussed in a broader context of the presentation of homes and houses of different characters in *Age of Iron*. This article will argue that differences in the conditions of living related to social and racial divisions between Cape Town people are also reflected in the conditions of existence of their souls after death.

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Age of Iron uses first-person narration with Mrs Curren as the narrator. It may be classified as an "epistolary novel" (Woessner 2017: 154) or as written in an "epistolary mode" (Worthington 2011: 115): it has the form of letters from Mrs Curren to her daughter who emigrated to the United States. The letters describe what Mrs Curren witnesses at the end of her life in South Africa in the apartheid era. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist is diagnosed with terminal stage cancer. Shortly after the diagnosis, she meets a homeless man, Verceuil, who came to her garden and stays in her house. Mrs Curren employs a black servant, Florence, as a domestic help. Florence's son Bheki fights, together with John and some other friends, with apartheid soldiers. In one of these fights Bheki is killed, which is followed by John's apprehension by the police. The novel ends with an ambiguous scene that may be interpreted as the moment of Mrs Curren's death in her house.

As noted by Gillian Dooley, the title of the novel refers to Hesiod's classification of ages, in which the current Age of Iron is preceded by other ages: Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Heroic. Hesiod made no predictions concerning possible future ages after the Age of Iron (2016: 102-103). In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the Age of Iron is described as the present era, in which "men never rest from labour and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night; and the gods shall lay sore trouble upon them" (Hesiod 170, qtd. in Dooley 2016: 102). According to Hesiod, this age is characterised by suffering and injustice: "Strength will be right and reverence will cease to be; and the wicked will hurt the worthy man, speaking false words against him [...] [T]here will be no help against evil" (Hesiod 170, qtd. in Dooley 2016: 103). To some degree, this injustice is also reflected in differences in the conditions of living of the white and black people in South Africa, as well as in the protagonist's visions concerning their afterlives.

As pointed out by Olfa Belgacem, colonial literature usually describes the bodies of representatives of non-white races as either imperfect, ailing, or in some other way "marked". Consequently, black people's bodies are usually presented "as a foil to the superior, perfect" or idealised white body (Belgacem 2021: 29). Yet, as illustrated by Belgacem, this tendency is modified in post-colonial novels such as those exemplified by Coetzee's fiction, in which white characters also suffer from malformations of their bodies. This change in the representation of white bodies can be noticed in *Age of Iron,* in which the main protagonist observes morbid changes in her body during the final stage of cancer (Belgacem 2021: 33). It may be argued, however, that it is still possible to discern some contrast between the representation of the black and white races, yet it is shifted to differences between the conditions of their possible afterlives rather than their actual physical bodies. These differences are also reflected in housing conditions during the earthly lives of these two racial groups. It is possible to distinguish several categories of citizens whose conditions of living are described in the novel. These different categories include Mrs Curren, Vercueil and black people. Moreover, Mrs Curren often evokes

the idea of imaginary souls, whose conditions of existence also reflect differences in habitation between two distinct groups of people who were their earthly embodiment.

Mrs Curren is a representative of the white community of Cape Town. As pointed out by Carrol Clarkson, *Age of Iron*, just like *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, has a very highly specified location: the characters of these novels "are meticulously tracked in the recognizable co-ordinates of named towns, roads, and landmarks of South Africa's Cape regions" (2009: 133). In *Age of Iron,* Mrs Curren's house is located in the area of Breda Street, Schoonder Street and Vrede Street (Coetzee 1990: 145). Therefore, it may be inferred that her house is located in or near the Gardens district, the inner-city suburb in Cape Town. This is an affluent area, which is nowadays inhabited mostly by young professionals, with a plethora of chic restaurants, pubs, shops and art galleries (Minford 2018). In Mrs Curren's words, this area represents the history of the domination of white people in Cape Town:

> Did these things really happen? Yes, these things happened. There is no more to be said about it. They happened a stone's throw from Breda Street and Schoonder Street and Vrede Street, where a century ago the patricians of Cape Town gave orders that there be erected spacious homes for themselves and their descendants in perpetuity, foreseeing nothing of the day when, in their shadows, the chickens would come home to roost. (Coetzee 1990: 145)

Mrs Curren's house may be perceived as a symbol of the past but also as a shelter for people who come to visit her. Mrs Curren is a former Classics professor (Worthington 2011: 115), which is reflected in her frequent references to the past, Classical mythology and culture. Mrs Curren's house also gives shelter to Vercueil and young black boys. Her home is a pleasant place that offers comfort and illustrates "Mrs. Curren's daily habits of orderliness, cleanliness, and thrift", as emphasised by Derek Attridge (2004: 99).

The connections with the past and the atmosphere of peace which characterise Mrs Curren's dwelling place are also reflected in her images concerning her possible future afterlife. While contemplating life and death, Mrs Curren reveals her beliefs in the existence of both material bodies and spiritual souls. As observed by Jarad Zimbler, the "soul" is an important concept in the novel, since the word appears at least 37 times; only in three cases does its use seem idiomatic (Zimbler 2015: 173). The prevailing non-idiomatic occurrences often refer to "the transition from life to death", in which the soul "identifies that part of the self that survives" (Zimbler 2015: 173). Approaching her imminent death, Mrs Curren consistently identifies herself with her soul rather than her body. She perceives her material parts as merely tools that can be used as long as the body functions properly. The body seems to be something alien to her. She feels as though she was forced to take care of something that she does not truly identify with.

Consequently, she wonders why she should take her legs "to bed with [...] [her] night after night and pack them in under the sheets, and pack the arms in too, higher up near the face, and lie there sleepless amid the clutter" (Coetzee 1990: 11). Likewise, she feels disconnected from her internal organs and their processes: the abdomen "with its dead gurglings" and the heart, which seems to be beating for no reason (Coetzee 1990: 11). Her bodily parts are not integral to her but rather something distant, since she asks: "What have they to do with me?" (Coetzee 1990: 11). She feels betrayed by the body since it has developed cancer. As stated by Olfa Belgacem, Mrs Curren "experiences a certain alienation from her own body" (2021: 33). This is in line with another metaphor in the novel, in which Mrs Curren portrays her body as a house in which her soul lives. At the end of the novel, she says, "I will draw a veil soon. This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses" (Coetzee 1990: 170).

At the beginning of the novel, shortly after having been informed about the cancer, Mrs Curren tries to imagine possible destinations of souls. She compares heaven to everyday places, such as a hotel lobby and a crowded bus. The first image seems peaceful although it is simultaneously rather boring: heaven is a place of rest, in which elderly people are sitting around, listening to music, free of any pain:

> Heaven. I imagine heaven as a hotel lobby with a high ceiling and the Art of Fugue coming softly over the public address system. Where one can sit in a deep leather armchair and be without pain. A hotel lobby full of old people dozing, listening to the music, while souls pass and re-pass before them like vapours, the souls of all. A place dense with souls. (Coetzee 1990: 22)

Mrs Curren describes souls as immaterial, yet in her images they wear clothes, although of "an abstract kind":

> Clothed? Yes, clothed, I suppose; but with empty hands. A place to which you bring nothing but an abstract kind of clothing and the memories inside you, the memories that make you. A place without incident. (Coetzee 1990: 22)

This place is a kind of waiting room, although there is nothing to wait for, which makes it similar to "a railway station after the abolition of trains" (Coetzee 1990: 22). The souls lazily spend their time, contemplating memories of their earthly life: "Listening to the heavenly unending music, waiting for nothing, paging idly through the store of memories" (Coetzee 1990: 22). In "Perversions and Reversals of Childhood and Old Age in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*" Christiane Bimberg recognises in this scene "romantic-escapist" elements that characterise "a carefree zone" (Bimberg 2005/2006: 74). As argued by Emanuela Tegla, this vision of heaven corresponds to the lifestyle of affluent

social groups. Tegla enumerates several features of this vision which may be interpreted as congruent with the bourgeois viewpoint on life and afterlife. First, heaven is located in a hotel, which represents "holiday, rest, comfort, respite from real, everyday life" (Tegla 2012: 975). Second, the hotel lobby has "high ceilings", which are typical of "aristocratic houses" (Tegla 2012: 975). Third, armchairs are covered with leather, which symbolises financial prosperity and presumably "attention to style" (Tegla 2012: 975). Fourth, the classical music that is streamed in heaven can be associated with the traditional sense of style characterising wealthy people. Fifth, the souls in this heaven do nothing: they are "dozing" so they simply relax without any obligations or duties to fulfil. These circumstances create the image of heaven as "born from a bourgeois imagination, which indulges in wishful thinking for elements of bourgeois well-being and comfort in afterlife" (Tegla 2012: 975). Yet, these peaceful images of heaven do not make Mrs Curren forget about her real home on earth. She worries about what may happen to her material house after her death. She is concerned about its condition and its future inhabitants:

> Will it be possible to sit in that armchair listening to the music without fretting about the house closed up and dark, the cats prowling in the garden, unfed, cross? It must be possible, or what is heaven for? Yet dying without succession is – forgive me for saying this – so unnatural. For peace of mind, for peace of soul, we need to know who comes after us, whose presence fills the rooms we were once at home in. (Coetzee 1990: 22)

Later, when she sees Verceuil smoking a cigarette outside her house, she starts to imagine sexual contact with him, which fills her with disgust but also makes her consider a different vision of heaven, in which people would have close contact with each other. This idea brings to her mind a portrayal of heaven in which people would stand in a crowded bus. In this afterlife people would not have any privacy and would be forced to constantly touch each other, despite having been transformed into souls:

> Like travelling in a bus in Sicily, pressed face to face, body to body against a strange man. Perhaps that is what the afterlife will be like: not a lobby with armchairs and music but a great crowded bus on its way from nowhere to nowhere. Standing room only: on one's feet forever, crushed against strangers. The air thick, stale, full of sighs and murmurs: Sorry, sorry. Promiscuous contact. Forever under the gaze of others. An end to private life. (Coetzee 1990: 27)

As argued by Emanuela Tegla, this image is much less inviting than the first one. In this vision, boundaries between individuals become blurred and they all become just parts of a conglomerate. Tegla points out that the presence of others in the bus is so overwhelming that there is absolutely no privacy. Even though people in the bus are

strangers to each other, everyone is merely a "part of a crowd" (Tegla 2012: 976). There is no escape from the "suffocating presence of others" (Tegla 2012: 976). Tegla argues that this scene may symbolize the guilt and shame felt by the social group that is represented by Mrs Curren. In Tegla's opinion, white people in South Africa may feel collectively responsible for the discrimination of the black race. Just like their souls in the afterlife, citizens of the privileged class become fused and united in their responsibility for social injustice: "This holds true in real life as well, therefore the shame the protagonist feels, which derives from a sense of collective guilt" (Tegla 2012: 976).

Not only does Mrs Curren compare heaven to ordinary places, but she also makes reverse comparisons, in which buildings or parts of the empirical world are compared to possible destinations of souls such as spiritual realms described in mythology or religion. When Mrs Curren visits John in hospital, she can see other elderly people who are ill, which makes her feel uncomfortable and overwhelmed. She starts to feel oppressed and intimidated by the vast number of ailing people who suddenly appear in front of her eyes. The hospital seems a democratic meeting place for patients that represent both racial groups ("black and white") and both genders ("men and women"), which are united by the same condition: waiting for death (Coetzee 1990: 63). Yet, Mrs Curren, due to her privileged social status, is able to escape this place and go back to her own house, which offers comfort even when she is terminally ill (Coetzee 1990: 63-64). The protagonist believes that other patients can guess that she, just like them, is facing her death: she senses that they are "catching unerringly on [...] [her] smell of death" (Coetzee 1990: 63). Mrs Curren feels almost guilty that she does not have to spend her final days in hospital but can live in her house instead. People around her seem to look at her as an "impostor" who leaves the hospital at will; they seem to be jealous and eager to draw her back to the place of their own suffering. They seem to demand from her to suffer just as they do in this disheartening institution: "Don't you know the rule? This is the house of shadow and suffering through which you must pass on the way to death" (Coetzee 1990: 63-64). It seems unjust that she can come back to her cosy house whereas "none of the condemned flee back to the air, the light, the bounteous world above" (Coetzee 1990: 64). In Mrs Curren's eyes, the stay in hospital is an obligatory punishment for the terminally ill: "a term in prison before the execution" (Coetzee 1990: 64). Mrs Curren compares the hospital to Hades patrolled by dogs, "[o]ld hounds" resembling Cerberus (Coetzee 1990: 64). Finally, she manages to escape this dismal place and come back to her own part of town, which fills her simultaneously with relief and guilt: "Hades this place, and I a fugitive shade. I shuddered as I passed through the doorway" (Coetzee 1990: 64).

Soon afterwards Mrs Curren's comparisons become even more sinister when she witnesses the horrors of apartheid fights in South Africa. When she sees the dead bodies of Bheki and his friends, she fully realises the cruelty of the country she lives in. This motivates her to describe the entire African continent as hell or Hades. Instead of being

abstract realms, Hades or hell may have an actual realization in Africa. In her metaphor, her native land, with its naturally hot climate, is compared to the infernal place where people act in an evil way:

> Hades, Hell: the domain of ideas. Why has it ever been necessary that hell be a place on its own in the ice of Antarctica or down the pit of a volcano? Why can hell not be at the foot of Africa, and why can the creatures of hell not walk among the living? (Coetzee 1990: 101)

As argued by Belgacem, when Mrs Curren witnesses the crimes of the apartheid era in South Africa, it fills her with feelings of shame and guilt (2021: 99) since she belongs to the privileged white community. Mrs Curren often describes her neighbours and friends who are representatives of the white community as "full-bellied neighbors leading an easy life", which is juxtaposed against the difficult life of black people, including Florence and her husband, who have to work hard to earn their living (Belgacem 2021: 143). The white people are portrayed "in scenes pertaining to holidays" whereas the black citizens are described "in scenes of labor" (Belgacem 2021: 144). The white community's privileges manifest themselves not only in better conditions of living, but also in the circumstances of death: Mrs Curren dies as an elderly person due to a natural disease rather than in young age in an act of extreme violence like the black boys.

Age of Iron depicts significant differences in the conditions of living between white and black communities in South Africa. It may be argued that these differences are also reflected in Mrs Curren's images of the conditions of the afterlife of people belonging to these two different racial groups. On the one hand, white people enjoy affluent earthly life. Moreover, in her descriptions of the afterlife of people belonging to her own class, Mrs Curren reveals a spiritual orientation towards death, which is treated as a threshold to another, eternal existence. On the other hand, black people suffer dismal conditions during their earthly existence, which also finds its reflection in Mrs Curren's imaginings of what happens to them after death. In describing their death, Mrs Curren focuses on the crude, materialist aspects of their lives. She imagines that their afterlife will not offer any consolation since it will be a continuation of their earthly hardship.

In his monograph *J. M. Coetzee. Truth, Meaning, Fiction*, Anthony Uhlmann compares Mrs Curren and Verceuil's interactions with the black community to "Dante and Virgil entering hell" (2020: 119). However, Verceuil is not interested in being involved in the social conflict, so when Mrs Curren is asked by Florence to come to Guguletu, a black township near the city, Verceuil refuses to go with them so the women have to set off alone. When Mrs Curren leaves Cape Town to get to the black township, she leaves the affluent districts that are characterised by comfortable conditions of living. The passage between areas inhabited by white people and black people is a transitional area, which Mrs Curren metaphorically describes as haunted by "wraiths" and "spirits":

> Full of misgiving I drove on into the darkness. [...] The roadside, along which, at this hour, thousands of men would ordinarily have been plodding to work, was empty. Swirls of mist floated toward us, embraced the car, floated away. Wraiths, spirits. Aornos this place: birdless. I shivered, met Florence's gaze. (Coetzee 1990: 83)

In "'Where Is Hope?': Coetzee's Rewriting of Dante in *Age of Iron*" David Hoegberg describes this visit as "the most Dantean section of the novel" (1998: 30), finding various correlations between Coetzee's descriptions of the scene and Dante's *Inferno*. When Mrs Curren comes to the area of Guguletu, she portrays the ghastly destruction of black people's houses. Hoegberg points out that the novel refers to an actual historical event – "the destruction of squatter camps at Crossroads in May and June of 1986" (1998: 32). These squatter camps, called the "Crossroads complex", were "adjacent to the black township of Guguletu", and their destruction "resulted in the deaths of an estimated 100 people and in homelessness for about 70 000" (Cole 1987: 146 qtd. in Hoegberg 1998: 32).

In Guguletu as described in *Age of Iron*, black people live in shanties made of simple materials such as wood, iron and plastic. Their conditions of living are rough and uncomfortable, not providing enough protection against natural threats such as flood or fire. Mrs Curren describes the black people's area as a makeshift arrangement:

> The path widened, then came to an end in a wide, flat pond. On the far side of the pond the shanties started, the lowest-lying cluster surrounded by water, flooded. Some built sturdily of wood and iron, others no more than skins of plastic sheeting over frames of branches, they straggled north over the dunes as far as I could see. (Coetzee 1990: 87)

She witnesses the effects of the devastation of the area in apartheid fights. The shanties did not provide permanent protection or shelter since they could be easily damaged. They were burnt by arsonists during the fights:

> We were at the rear of a crowd hundreds strong looking down upon a scene of devastation: shanties burnt and smouldering, shanties still burning, pouring forth black smoke. Jumbles of furniture, bedding, household objects stood in the pouring rain. Gangs of men were at work trying to rescue the contents of the burning shacks, going from one to another, putting out the fires; or so I thought till with a shock it came to me that these were no rescuers but incendiaries, that the battle I saw them waging was not with the flames but with the rain. (Coetzee 1990: 87-88)

Mrs Curren compares the scene of the destruction of the shanties to a funeral ceremony. People who suddenly became homeless are looking at their destroyed houses with sorrow and grief that resemble the loss felt by mourners:

> It was from the people gathered on the rim of this amphitheatre in the dunes that the sighing came. Like mourners at a funeral they stood in the downpour, men, women and children, sodden, hardly bothering to protect themselves, watching the destruction. (Coetzee 1990: 88)

Hoegberg (1998: 31) argues that this passage illustrates clear analogies between the arrangement of the place and the people gathered there and the description of the circles of the Inferno and the sighing and crying of the souls in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The destruction of this provisional housing renders the situation even more dramatic for the black community in the township since they are not abstract souls condemned for their sins but flesh-and-blood humans who have to endure these poor conditions throughout their entire life (Hoegberg 1998: 31). These people have no chance to improve their circumstances due to apartheid rules that regulate "the complicated system of residency and employment laws" (Hoegberg 1998: 31). Hoegberg stresses that although the rough conditions of living might be interpreted as a punishment in itself, the destruction of the black people's shanties renders the situation even worse (Hoegberg 1998: 31-32). Therefore, Hoegberg claims that "[i]n this hell of human creation physical suffering is not an allegory of a future spiritual state but a brute fact" (Hoegberg 1998: 32).

Hoegberg also points out that Mrs Curren initially perceives black people's shouting and crying as though they were made by wind and rain, "as if the wide world itself were sighing" (Coetzee 1990: 87). Her first impression is that the sounds she hears are of a nonhuman nature. Hoegberg comments that "[f]rom a distance the sounds of black conflict and suffering" are for Mrs Curren at first "indistinguishable from the natural sounds of the storm" (Hoegberg 1998: 34). When she comes closer to the source of the noise she starts to "distinguish [...] sounds, as if a veil of naturalizing rhetoric were being drawn aside" (Hoegberg 1998: 34). It may be inferred that only a closer examination enables her to become fully aware of the human suffering.

Mrs Curren's naturalistic attitude intensifies when she examines black people's bodies. The dismal portrayal of the destruction of black people's housing corresponds to her naturalistic descriptions of the dead bodies of young black activists: Bheki and his friends. She gives a lot of details: concerning their clothes, the impact of weather conditions and the features of their faces, including the presence of sand in the natural bodily orifices. Their bodies are described as mere physical objects:

> The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. He still wore the grey flannel trousers, white shirt and maroon pullover of his school, but his feet were bare. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating on him for hours, on him and his comrades, not only here but wherever they had been when they met their deaths; their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth. (Coetzee 1990: 94)

Olfa Belgacem stresses that although the sight of Bheki's dead body makes Mrs Curren "outraged and sad", the protagonist is still capable of examining the corpse in detail (2021: 34). Mrs Curren is familiar with death herself, since she is terminally ill (Belgacem 2021: 35). Yet, the scene shocks the protagonist due to the brutality involved in the sudden end of the young boys' lives.

The account of the death of the black people contrasts with Mrs Curren's perception of how white people die. As stressed earlier, Mrs Curren envisions some spiritual transformation in the afterlife of white people, which she does not imagine in the case of black people. There are also differences in the circumstances of the deaths of people belonging to these two different racial groups. She admits that representatives of her own race usually die in old age, mostly due to natural causes, often due to diseases. Before their death, they become weak, thin or "papery" due to emaciation characteristic of senility, which makes them "burn well":

> 'I have not seen black people in their death before, Mr Vercueil. They are dying all the time, I know, but always somewhere else. The people I have seen die have been white and have died in bed, growing rather dry and light there, rather papery, rather airy. They burned well, I am sure, leaving a minimum of ash to sweep up afterwards. Do you want to know why I set my mind on burning myself? Because I thought I would burn well.' (Coetzee 1990: 114)

By contrast, in the novel black people die violent deaths at a young age. Mrs Curren metaphorically describes them as made of "iron or lead", which is the reason why they do not burn easily. She imagines that their unchanged bodies remain in the soil after their death, which explains why she can only imagine the materialist dimension of their death without any reference to a possible transformation into a spirit in their afterlife:

> Whereas these people will not burn, Bheki and the other dead. It would be like trying to burn figures of pig-iron or lead. They might lose their sharpness of contour, but when the flames subsided they would still be there, heavy as ever. Leave them long enough and they may sink, millimetre by millimetre, till the earth closes over them. But then they

> would sink no further. They would stay there, bobbing just under the surface. If you so much as scuffled with your shoe you would uncover them: the faces, the dead eyes, open, full of sand. (Coetzee 1990: 114)

After their death, black people's bodies still occupy some space in the ground, which Mrs Curren metaphorically understands as their inability ever to leave the African hell. In her conversation with Bheki's friend, Mrs Curren states that "Bheki is in the ground [...]. He is in a box in a hole with earth heaped on top of him. He is never going to leave that hole. Never, never, never" (Coetzee 1990: 131). Earlier, when she sees the dead bodies of Bheki and four other boys displayed at the school, she also describes the black people's spirits as strongly bonded with their bodies: "I thought of the five bodies, of their massive, solid presence in the burned-down hall. Their ghosts have not departed, I thought, and will not depart. Their ghosts are sitting tight, in possession" (Coetzee 1990: 96). Even after death their spirits do not gain freedom: they seem to be unable to escape the control of some other forces. The contrast between descriptions of the two types of bodies, black and white, is described in geographical or spatial terms, referring to different places and different dimensions. As noticed by Belgacem, Mrs Curren indicates different destinations for the bodies. The bodies of black people are associated with the earth and "the land" to the degree that they "are pulled downwards by the law of the earth" (Belgacem 2021: 163). The bodies of the white people, by contrast, are "airy" as described by Mrs Curren (Coetzee 1990: 114) so their point of destination is "the sky" (Belgacem 2021: 163). Belgacem points out that in South Africa the body functions as a guideline that informs us "where to find and how to recognize" people of these two different races (Belgacem 2021: 163–164). Therefore, she argues that the body "is a reliable historical and geographical map that has an identitarian dimension" (Belgacem 2021: 164).

At the end of the novel, when Mrs Curren runs away from her house, which was invaded by the police, who were searching for John, she loses the sense of time and becomes delusional. She spends some time lying in Buitenkant Street, "amid the rubble and filth" and vagabonds walking in the streets (Coetzee 1990: 143). What may be significant is the etymology of the street name "Buitekant": Buitekant Street could be translated as "Outside Street" since "*Buitekant* is the Afrikaans word for 'outside', literally made up of *buite* (out) and *kant* (side)" (Hayes 2012: 159). As explained by Patrick Hayes in *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett*, this name comes from the fact that the street "formerly marked the boundary between what was then the Cape Colony and the rest of Africa" (Hayes 2012: 159). The name of Buitenkant Street may symbolise a place of transgression or even transformation. At this moment of degradation and confusion, when she is outside the comfort of her own home and experiences the roughness of life on the streets, she recollects Marcus Aurelius' idea of the cyclical transformations of universes, in which souls unite and dissolve to enter another cycle

of life: "How is there space in the skies for the souls of all the departed? Because, says Marcus Aurelius, they fuse one with another: they burn and fuse and so are returned to the great cycle. Death after death" (Coetzee 1990: 144).

Between the two strongly divided racial groups stands the figure of Vercueil. It is significant that this character is a homeless person. As argued by Georg Gugelberger, Vercueil is a "nomad" and "the threat of the unhoused which the order of the housed has to face" (Gugelberger 1995: 130). His semi-nomadic lifestyle reinforces his image of a messenger who is to send Mrs Curren's letters to her daughter after the mother's death. Although Mrs Curren is not sure if he will actually fulfil his promise, she sometimes symbolically juxtaposes him with a literary or mythical figure of a messenger travelling between different realms. When she refers to his habit of disappearing from time to time and leaving only his dog in her garden, she states that he is "[n]o Odysseus, no Hermes, perhaps not even a messenger" (Coetzee 1990: 128). She describes him as a "circler-around" or "ditherer, despite the weatherworn front" (Coetzee 1990: 128).

What is also important in the context of South African racial divisions is the fact that Verceuil's race is actually never specified in the novel, as noticed by Attridge (2004: 87, 95) and Worthington (2011: 116). What can support the idea that he actually may be white is that the black boys who come to Mrs Curren's house, and Florence's daughter Hope, are hostile towards him (Coetzee 1990: 41-42) and he refuses to visit Guguletu. Mrs Curren describes his eyes as "strange green eyes: unhealthy" (Coetzee 1990: 6). Yet, although the green colour might also make it more natural for him to belong to the white race, this colour may be interpreted in metaphorical terms, for instance as reinforcing his "animality" or closeness to nature, also noticed by Mrs Curren when she describes his eyes as "alert, like an animal's" (Coetzee 1990: 147). It may even have a purely symbolic meaning of hope that he embodies as being involved in sending the letters to the Western World to inform it about the atrocities of the war in South Africa.

Verceuil is an elderly man who spends a lot of time with his dog, living on the street until he finds refuge in Mrs Curren's house. When she sees him for the first time in her garden, Mrs Curren notices his shabby appearance and resemblance to an animal: he is "tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs" and he wears "a baggy grey suit and a hat with a sagging brim" (Coetzee 1990: 3). She recognises him as a man who lives on the streets, as "one of the derelicts who hang around the parking lots on Mill Street, cadging money from shoppers, drinking under the flyover, eating out of refuse cans" (Coetzee 1990: 3). Now he has made for himself a provisional shelter in Mrs Curren's garden in the form of "a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting" (Coetzee 1990: 3). Verceuil is unemployed, dirty and smelly, and a drunkard. His homelessness is associated with the general repulsiveness of his appearance. Since Verceuil is a homeless man, he does not have proper protection against the cold, so he may perish easily. Mrs Curren speculates that he will die just as he lived – on the street. Even after death,

his body will not have its own place – he will most likely be cremated without any special ceremony:

> One winter's night, sooner or later, when the artificial fire in his veins is no longer hot enough to preserve him, he will perish. He will die in a doorway or an alley with his arms hugged across his chest [...]. They will cart him off [...] and that will be the end of that. No arrangements, no bequests, no mausoleum. (Coetzee 1990: 29)

Literary critics interpret Verceuil as the representation of "the other" (cf. Attridge 2004: 101; Vice 2010). Verceuil continues to be an enigmatic figure until the end of the novel: he "remains unknowable to the end, and in that end fuses – or is fused in Mrs. Curren's mind – with the equally unmodifiable otherness of death" (Attridge 2004: 101). In his interview with Coetzee, David Attwell describes Verceuil as Mrs Curren's "Angel of Death" (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 250), whereas Coetzee in his response uses the term "a herald of death" (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 340). Verceuil's special role is noticeable in Mrs Curren's attitude towards the unexpected visitor (Attridge 2004: 34). Despite her doubts concerning his ability to fulfil his promise to send her letters, she describes him using religious terms. As pointed out by Attridge (2004: 34), she perceives his appearance at her home as an "annunciation" (Coetzee 1990: 4) and thinks of him and his dog as "fulfilling their charge, waiting for the soul to emerge" (Coetzee 1990: 170). The most telling sign that she creates an image of him as an angel is her wondering at the end of the novel when he is carrying her in his arms: "When would the time come when the jacket fell away and great wings sprouted from his shoulders?" (Coetzee 1990: 146). Yet, Attridge poses a question concerning the allegorical reading of the novel since various allegorical interpretations are possible, and in fact any interpretation of the novel, including moral or political ones, is in a broad sense allegorical (Attridge 2004: 35; cf. Wilm 2017: 121). It remains true that Verceuil, without a permanent address or a clearly defined status in life, escapes definite classifications due to his enigmatic and obscure character.

To recapitulate, *Age of Iron* may be interpreted as indicating that people's posthumous habitats correspond to their earthly ones. The white and black people depicted in *Age of Iron* definitely differ in terms of their housing conditions in the real world. White people enjoy comfort since they are privileged socially and financially. Their houses function as a legacy of the past and occasional shelter for less prosperous people. By contrast, black people's housing is very primitive, so it does not provide proper protection against natural disasters. Thus, materialist dimensions of home in earthly life are different for these two racial groups. The difference in the material dimension of home corresponds to differences in the protagonist's images of the posthumous habitats of these two different populations. The contrast between these two communities stems from Mrs Curren's different imaginings of their deaths: the bodies and souls of white people separate in

the moment of death, whereas the bodies and souls of black people do not. Mrs Curren portrays white people's death as a transition from earthly life to spiritual or incorporeal existence. White people's bodies are imagined to be a temporary house for the soul, which it sheds or leaves for a better place at the moment of death. The soul's destination is heaven, depicted as an ordinary place such as a hotel lobby or a bus. In contrast, black people's death offers no relief, since both their dead bodies and souls remain in African hell, in which they have already spent their entire earthly life. Therefore, the spiritual dimension of home is also portrayed differently depending on race.

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