



Writing the Cancerous Body and Reconstructing the Ethical Embodied Subject: the Body Narrative in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

Juhong Shi

Professor of English literature, School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University, China.

***Corresponding Author:** Juhong Shi, Professor of English literature, School of Foreign Languages,

Abstract: *The body in pain figures prominently in Coetzee's novels. It has been traditionally maintained that the body is used as a literary trope in Coetzee's novels to demonstrate that the substantial or the real represented by the body resists to be contained in the discourse, especially the dominant discourse. Based on a detailed analysis of the cancer narrative of Age of Iron, this paper, however, argues that scars, wounds, pain, and diseases are highlighted in Coetzee's oeuvre for other reasons. At the surface level, the body in pain is the living witness to the suffering inflicted on the body by the oppressive social system. Ontologically, the damaged bodies are described in Coetzee's novels to reveal the fact that the subject's existence depends on its corporal vulnerability to the other. In this way, Coetzee's body narrative challenges the idea of autonomous subject and probes for an ethical self-other encounter that might be made possible through cultivating an awareness of the inter-corporeal relation.*

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, cancer narrative, witness to the suffering, ethical embodied subject

1. INTRODUCTION

The body in pain figures prominently in Coetzee's novels. Most of the bodies in his novels are suffering from starvation, disease, aging, being tortured and disciplined. Michael K, the eponymous protagonist in *Life and Times of Michael K*, suffers from anorexia. Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* is afflicted by the unbearable pain from cancer. The bodies of the so-called "barbarians" are tortured by the "civilized" in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Friday, the black slave in *Foe*, has been mutilated and castrated. The story of *Slow Man* starts with an accident that deprived its protagonist of his legs.

Coetzee's ideas concerning the body expressed in his non-fiction writing also draw our attention to his body narrative:

"If I look back over my own fiction", I see a simple (simple-minded) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not "that which is not," and the proof that it is (original emphasis) is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure) (Coetzee, 1992, p. 248).

Obviously, Coetzee thinks that the body plays a special role in his novels. His concern of the suffering body, at least according to him, provides his writings with substantiality. Coetzee maintains that the pain inflicted on the body and felt by the body turns the body into "that which is not" and may counter "the endless trials of doubt." Coetzee's interpretation of the body in his novels actually is not so persuasive or logical, yet it has influenced so many scholars on their reading of the body in Coetzee's oeuvre. For instance, Alena Dvorakova argues that Coetzee's work is engaged in an implicit polemic with Nietzsche in that both privilege body over mind and jointly arrive at a point "where bodies are their own signs" (Dvorakova, 2010, p. 369). Dvorakova also points out that Coetzee and Nietzsche diverge over how to interpret the body, observing that "the body in Nietzsche acts as a spur to interpretation but of a different kind than that practiced in traditional philosophy: the body does not give way to the mind because the mind is not something foreign to the body, it is its tool," while the body in Coetzee "primarily puts a stop to interpretation" (Dvorakova, 2010, p. 369). It might be true that Coetzee's understanding of the body is different from that of Nietzsche's, the bodies in Coetzee's

novels, however, definitely are not “their own signs” but mediated in language. Brian May studies the body in Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and argues that the body in Coetzee’s novels resists any interpretation because it “insists on its own thingness” (May, 2001, p. 389). For May, the body is used as a literary trope in the two novels by Coetzee to protest against any grand-narrative that attempts to “colonize” the body or the real.

The study conducted by Dvorakova and May provides us with a new perspective to approach Coetzee’s body narrative, yet the rich meaning of the body in Coetzee’s writing calls for further and deeper exploration. Scars, wounds, pain, and diseases are highlighted in Coetzee’s oeuvre for other reasons. At the surface level, they are the living witness to the suffering inflicted on the body by the oppressive social system. Ontologically, the damaged bodies are portrayed to emphasize the subject’s corporeal vulnerability and the fact that, as Judith Butler argues, the subject’s existence depends on its “primary vulnerability to Other” (Butler, 2006, p. 21)¹ so as to challenge the idea of autonomous subject and probe for an ethical encounter that might be made possible through cultivating an awareness of the inter-corporeal relation. Focusing on *Age of Iron*, this paper will study the two functions of the body in Coetzee’s body narrative, to bear witness to the unhealthy body politic and to call for reconstructing the ethical subject based on corporal vulnerability.

2. WRITING THE CANCEROUS BODY: BEARING WITNESS TO THE DISEASED BODY POLITIC

As a receptor of social, political and cultural meaning, the individual body acts as a symbol of social body. It is observed by Douglas in *Natural Symbols* that the human body is the most readily available image of a social system. He suggests that ideas about the human body correspond closely to prevalent ideas about society. Denis Slattery observes that the body, especially the wounded body, is “the controlling metaphor for the work’s essential meaning” in literary works since “various forms of wounding or body attacks and distortions, body markings, even body murder suddenly open avenues of significance that would not be available through any other means” (Slattery, 2000, p. 17). It is true with the cancer narrative of *Age of Iron*. Mrs. Curren’s cancerous body and her writing of the cancer in an extended letter to her daughter who has moved to America serve not only as a living witness to the suffering in anti-apartheid South Africa in 1980s. They, as cultural texts, also suggest the malignancy with the body politic of apartheid South Africa. Cancer, a disease generally regarded as resulting from internal emotional inhibition and external living pressure, is an ideal starting point to investigate both the internal bitterness of an individual and the outward manifestations of a traumatic age.

Beginning with the diagnosis of Mrs. Curren’s cancer, the narrative of *Age of Iron* is occasioned by the cancerous body. Cancer becomes the driving force of the entire narrative since Mrs. Curren chooses to confront her cancer by writing about it. In her analysis of the cause of cancer, a broader picture of how the diseased body politic has impacted her health and induced her cancer emerges. In addition, in the process of fighting with the cancer, the visceral pain awakens her sympathetic attention to other suffering bodies around her. In this way, Mrs. Curren’s Cancer writing is the means to bear witness to the “age of iron”², an age ruled by iron-will and rationality, characterized by an

¹Butler argues that all subjects emerge as a result of attachment to and dependence on another just because we are born vulnerable. The primary vulnerability is embodied in the infant’s literal dependence on the care of the other for all its physical and emotional needs, but this primary relationality to the other is then repressed; it is, in psychoanalytic terms, foreclosed, though it continues to haunt the subject. It is lodged in the unconscious, and thus unamenable to conscious reflection. But as mortal beings, corporeal vulnerability is a constant reminder of our inter-dependence on the other, since the body implies “mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence” (Butler, 2006, p.26). The body is the medium of our relations with other bodies. It is a “porous boundary, given over to others.” As a consequence, the corpus is not just open to violation by those other bodies, but, it too, can violate: that is, the vulnerability of the other might elicit a violent response from us—we might desire to kill, maim or beat them (Butler, 2006, p.134-5). Bodily vulnerability, therefore, is the basis of ek-stasis: how we open to the other (ek-stasis is a Heideggerian term used to connote “a standing outside of oneself”). It is this porosity to other bodies, therefore, that “establish a field of ethical enmeshment with others” (Butler, 2006, p.25).

²The period covered in *Age of Iron* is specifically dated at the end of the letter: 1986-1989, an age that, in retrospect, saw the death throes of apartheid, which, as an officially constructed policy, was ended in 1994 when

acute lack of love, both filial and racial. By extension, the juxtaposition of the vulnerable body of the individual and the iron-will of the political groups in *Age of Iron* indicates a vision of replacing the concept of rational subject with that of the ethical embodied subject so that compassion and love, the missing elements in an age of iron, might be restored³.

Actually, the nature of Mrs. Curren's letter as love communication has been addressed by Derek Attridge who argues that the motive and function of Mrs. Curren's letter is to communicate love, her love for her absent daughter and the other figures of alterity that come into her life, such as Mr. Vercueil, a tramp who visits her house, and Bheki, the son of her servant. Attridge observes that *Age of Iron* is "imbued with what might be regarded as the spirit of epistolarity, ...of communication, above all the communication of love" (Attridge, 2004, p. 91). However, in emphasizing the "spirit of epistolarity" of *Age of Iron*, namely, its private nature, the political side of this novel has been under-addressed by Attridge. Mrs. Curren's letter is far beyond personal limits. Instead, it is loaded with the mission of baring the wounds and scars inscribed on the body, both on her body and the body of the other to the world, or in her words, the letter "is a baring of something else, but not of my heart" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 13). Obviously, what Mrs. Curren tries to bare is "something else" larger than kinship affection, something that she thinks could be transmitted only when the truth of the other's suffering is conveyed.

The testimonial nature of *Age of Iron* could be further confirmed by Mrs. Curren's words in the following:

"What did I want?" What did the old lady want? What she wanted was to bare something to them, whatever there was that might be bared at this time, in this place. What she wanted, before they got rid of her, was to bring out a scar, a hurt, to force it upon them, to make them see it with their own eyes: a scar, the scar of all this suffering, but in the end my scar, since our own scars are the only scars we can carry with us (Coetzee, 1998, p. 106).

Mrs. Curren here declares that the purpose of her writing is to bring the invisible into the vision of the police and the external world. She associates her scar and her illness with the scar of the era, the "scar of all this suffering." Believing that her cancer is resulted from the emotional trauma of witnessing too much pain inflicted on the robustly healthy body of the black youth by the state machine, she feels obliged to bare "whatever there was that might be bared" to her absent daughter and the external world. She feels it is immoral if she chooses to be blind to the suffering bodies, or in her words, "if I get over it this time I will never have another chance *not* (original emphasis) to get over it" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 126). Obviously, both the bitterness brought about by Mrs. Curren's personal illness and the ethical obligation to bare the truth of the suffering bodies, including hers and the others, are the driving force for Mrs. Curren to write the letter.

The manner in which *Age of Iron* tries to bear witness to the age of iron lies in Mrs. Curren's association of her cancer with the cancer that is biting its social body. She understands that the body is unavoidably constructed by the power structure of the state, and, therefore, she has a "profound dis-

Nelson Mandela was elected the President of South Africa. Although the apartheid government in the 1980s was in a desperate attempt to maintain its power structure, its reign, in hindsight, was undeniably in the terminal stage. And, therefore, we are justified to read Mrs. Curren's cancer as an apocalyptic prediction of the destiny of the apartheid government.

³ "Age of iron" is obviously an allusion to the Hesiod myth of the cycle of the ages of gold, silver, bronze and iron: "The age of iron, after which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth?" (50) Derek Attridge has conducted an in-depth analysis of the allusion and its implications for this novel. It is not the intention of this study to repeat what has already been discussed by Attridge. Suffice to note here that by naming her era the "age of iron," Mrs. Curren emphasizes that it is an age dominated by iron wills and rules, composed of callous authorities and armed children, while the softer side of life, compassion and love, even filial love, is missing. Understood in this social context, Mrs. Curren's, or Coetzee's, writing of the body aims to critique the concept of the rational subject and simultaneously to restore the capacity of compassion through emphasizing the subject's corporeal vulnerability, which, as Judith Butler argues, is the prerequisite of the corporeal being: "the subject's existence depends on its primary vulnerability to other" (Butler, 2006, p.21). In other words, Mrs. Curren's, or Coetzee's, narrative of the body probes for the possibility of reconstructing the ethical embodied subject through cultivating an awareness of the inter-corporeal relation.

ease" (Marais, 2009, p. 96) with her present condition: "From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared. And that doll is what I call I" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 96). The hollow "doll" left is, according to Mrs. Curren, the crab or the cancer that now sits inside her, eating her out⁴. The metaphor of the "theft" from the cradle suggests that although Mrs. Curren's cancer is diagnosed at old age, she believes that she, a conscientious white subject living in apartheid South Africa, is doomed from the beginning to suffer from cancer. Or in her words: "To each of us, fate sends the right disease" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 112). She understands her cancer as the punishment arranged by fate owing to various crimes committed in her name:

A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it. Like every crime it had its price. That price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 164).

She figures that she is doomed to live a shameful life and die a shameful death owing to the crime committed by her forefathers. Living in the social body eaten out by the cancer, anyone takes the risk of catching cancer. For instance, when the police attempted to clear up her house to murder John, a black boy who sought refuge in her house, she warned the police that their body might be punished with cancer: "I have cancer of the heart ... I caught it from drinking from the cup of bitterness ... You will probably catch it too one day. It is hard to escape" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 155-6). For Mrs. Curren, the social body of apartheid South Africa is constituted of cancer cells and anyone involved with it has the risk of being contaminated.

The hopelessness of the social body of apartheid is embodied not only in the cancerous or impotent bodies, it is also diagnosable from its cruelty to children and the cruelty of the children in turn. Children and teenagers, the group of people traditionally associated with the hope of a nation, have been turned into merciless creatures in the age of iron: "The new puritans, holding to the rule, holding up the rule. Abhorring alcohol, which softens the rule, dissolves iron. Suspicious of all that is idle, yielding, roundabout"(Coetzee, 1998, p. 82). The apathy of the children is shocking: "They kick and beat a man because he drinks. They set people on fire and laugh while they burn to death" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 50). After John, the friend of Mrs. Curren's servant, was shot by the police in Mrs. Curren's house, Mrs. Curren slept on the street in front of the City Hall to show her anger and protest. But what was ironic is that no one paid attention to her except three children who pushed a stick into her mouth to take out her gold teeth.

Although the cold-bloodedness of the children is disturbing, the narrative of *Age of Iron* emphasizes it is the diseased body politic that gives birth to these iron children: "But who made them so cruel? It is the whites who made them so cruel! Yes!" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 49) In addition, ruthless devices were employed by the white police to torture the youthful bodies of the rebellious teenagers. When Bheki and John, two black boys who were shadowed by the police for their participation in the black township violence, were hit by the police car and severely hurt near Mrs. Curren's house, Mrs. Curren noticed that Bheki's one trouser leg "was torn open and wet with blood" and his palm skin "hung in script." John was more seriously wounded and had to be hospitalized: "The flesh across his forehead hung open in a loose flap as if sliced with a butcher's life. Blood flowed in a sheet into the boy's eyes and made his hair glisten; it dripped onto the pavement; it was everywhere" (Coetzee, 1998, p. 62). "Rivers of blood," "sea of blood," and other similar phrases are repeated to emphasize the sharp contrast between the vulnerability of the young body and the iron-will of the state.

Later, when Mrs. Curren drove Florence to Guguletu where the rebellious black youth, including Bheki, were mass executed by the police, the narrative was still focused on exploring how Mrs. Curren was disturbed by the dead bodies and the heaviness of their thick blood:

Now that child is buried and we walk upon him. Let me tell you, when I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig irons floating under the skin of the earth. (Coetzee, 1998, p. 126)

⁴In her writing, Mrs. Curren does an etymological explanation of cancer which in Latin means "crab, a creeping tumour" (33), and she frequently uses the image of creeping crab to refer to the deteriorating cancer inside her.

These young bodies were buried, but they protested to be eradicated and forgotten, still floating “under the skin of the earth,” testifying to the brutal age of iron. They simultaneously waited to be properly mourned, to be written and to have a place in history.

The above analysis demonstrates that, although Mrs. Curren's letter is about her illness, it is far beyond a personal “survival strategy” (Bauman, 1992, p. 192)⁵ to transcend the limits of mortality, but a political writing motivated by her sense of responsibility to her world, bearing the spirit of all people's storytelling as observed by Arthur Frank:

All people's storytelling is informed by a sense of responsibility to the commonsense world and represents one way of living for the other. People tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide others who follow them. They seek not to provide a map that can guide others — each must create their own — but rather to witness the experience of reconstructing one's own map. *Witnessing* is one duty to the commonsensical and to others. (emphasis original; Frank, 1995, p. 17)

In terms of Frank, Mrs. Curren's writing witnesses her experience of reconstructing her attitude to life, death, and the other. In transforming the unbearable pain that attacks her body and the body of the other into words, Mrs. Curren's writing witnesses not just her personal suffering but also the pain inflicted on the body of the other by the diseased body politic of apartheid South Africa.

3. HIGHLIGHTING EMBODIEDNESS: RECONSTRUCTING THE ETHICAL SELF-OTHER RELATION BASED ON THE AWARENESS OF CORPORAL VULNERABILITY

Mrs. Curren's effort of translating the suffering of the black bodies into a coherent narrative is constantly impeded. Her impasse in representing the suffering of the black body is emphasized in a traumatic scene when she is called upon to name the crime committed in front of her eyes: the settlements in Guguletu were burning; the corpses of Bheki and other four black boys lay silently there. But when Mrs. Curren was asked by Mr. Thabane to retell the violence against the body that she has witnessed, Mrs. Curren found words fail to the task: “‘These are terrible sights,’ I repeated faltering, ‘they are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. To speak of this ... one would need the tongue of a god’” (Coetzee, 1998, p. 98). Saying these words does not mean Mrs. Curren is shirking the responsibility of bearing witness to the atrocity committed in front of her. These words just remind the reader that there exist unbridgeable distance between the scar of families that have witnessed the murder of their children in a mass police raid and Mrs. Curren's personal trauma at witnessing the atrocity. In other words, in her hesitation to speak for the murdered youth, Mrs. Curren refuses to reduce the suffering bodies to objects framed in the epistemic order of a privileged white lady.

Elleke Boehmerhas emphasized Coetzee's caution against the violence of reducing the corporeal beings into abstract signs: “As all Coetzee readers are aware, the writer has long been preoccupied with the epistemological problem of fully comprehending, of identifying with, extreme otherness, especially with the other's suffering body.” Boehmer maintains that in “dramatizing the stand-off between embodiment and reason” (Boehmer, 1993, p. 229), Coetzee aims at highlighting the “notion of embodying” (229). For Coetzee, the singularity of the embodied being should never be contained in a universal concept. He understands that in translating the physical suffering into words, the language might deprive the corporeal being of its sensuous life. Mrs. Curren's aporia in writing the violence committed on the body of the black youth indicates Coetzee's emphasis of the corporeality of human beings. Mrs. Curren's awareness of her cognitive limits forms sharp contrast with the God-like image of white colonialists in Coetzee's early novels, such as Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*, who believes his transparent eyes can see through the other's body. For Mrs. Curren, her skin and flesh expose her to the gaze of the other. Consequently, her seeing eyes are simultaneously being seen and reflected by

⁵People attempt to deny the finality of death through different ways which are termed by Zygmunt Bauman as “survival strategies.” Bauman observes that while religion traditionally serves the purpose of survival strategies, in modern society where religious survival strategies are relatively absent it is compensated for by a policy of “self-care” (Bauman, 1992, p. 18). These strategies focus not on the ultimate mortality of the body, but on how its specific and localized limits can be overcome through various body projects of keeping the body in a healthy and shapely condition.

the other. The powerlessness Mrs. Curren or Coetzee feels in representing the body of the suffering other suggests they are searching for a new way of relating to others, challenging the concept of Cartesian rational subject that has the immanent violence of containing the other's irreducible otherness into the self-same's consciousness as observed by Emmanuel Levinas⁶.

Actually, the other-oriented ethics in *Age of Iron* has been elaborated by Derek Attridge who observes that the overall theme of this novel is "trusting the other" (Attridge, 2004, p. 101). He patiently points out the details that could be held as the genuine yardstick for Mrs. Curren's respect and tolerance of Mr. Vercueil's otherness. It is true that Mrs. Curren's re-conception of her selfhood is closely connected with the presence of those figures of alterity in her life. Their presence opens a new direction for her life and makes her open to them too. But contrary to Attridge's judgment, Mrs. Curren's ethical response to Mr. Vercueil is not "achieved without great struggle" (Attridge, 2004, p. 101). Instead, her progression on her road towards acknowledging the other is fraught with difficulties. In addition, it must be pointed out that her strong awareness of corporeal vulnerability generated by the cancer, which is overlooked by Attridge, has played a decisive role in galvanizing Mrs. Curren's sense of sympathy and responsibility for the other. Levinas' analysis of the ethical meaning of physical pain may help us have a better understanding of the relation between Mrs. Curren's cancer and her ethical transformation.

According to Levinas, sense of physical pain might potentially generate one's ethical response for the other in that it cultivates one's awareness of corporeal vulnerability and denies one's will of self-determination: "Suffering is a mode of anonymous existence that betrays the autonomy and freedom of any person and results only in the anonymous existing that continues to haunt a hypostasizing (self-determining) self" (Levinas, 1997, p. 92). In other words, as the self tries to determine itself and its own qualities, pain is always there to beset it, never letting its self-determination reach fruition. In this way, physical pain reminds one of his or her passivity and vulnerability, or in Levinas' words, the passivity and vulnerability of the self lies in that:

The self is the living human corporeality, as a possibility of pain, a sensibility of which of itself is the susceptibility to being hurt, a self uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin. In its skin it is stuck, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability. Pain is not simply a symptom of frustrated will; its meaning is not adventitious. It is the painfulness of pain, the malady or malignity of illness, and in the pure state, the very patience of corporeality, the pain of labor and aging, an adversity itself, the against oneself that is in the self. (Levinas, 1997, p. 51)

As the "very patience of corporeality," and "the against oneself that is in the self," pain is an indication of one's embodiedness, the consequent "susceptibility to being hurt," and, furthermore, one's interwovenness with the other. In addition, the wretchedness brought about by pain might turn the existence of the sufferer into insignificant. And in the process in which the suffering self struggles to divest himself/herself of his/her own pain, it will come to him/her that the pain only becomes meaningful through responsibility for the other person's pain and suffering.

If we check Mrs. Curren's shifted attitude to her bodily pain during the process of her struggle with the cancer, we may discover that pain functions in Levinasian sense in Mrs. Curren's transformation from an egoistic subject to an ethical one. Cancer and pain turn Mrs. Curren's life from that of

⁶Levinas' discussion of ethics is based on his critique of Cartesian rational subject. For Levinas, the rational apprehension of the other and the world is attached to the subject's desire and power of mastering the universe and the other via knowledge. The desire to grasp the other and the world through knowledge has then turned the human subject into an egoistic as well as a manipulative subject. Thus, Western rational philosophy is a form of egoism. Levinas criticizes Descartes and rationalism since they simply reduce the subject to a rational conscious subject. More important, Levinas stresses that the problem of the Cartesian subject and the rational subject in general is its disembodiment: the ethical potentiality of the body cannot be recognized since the body or bodily sensation is treated as an "inferior material" that cannot offer a "stable material" for the subject's mind to manipulate. And therefore, Levinas conceives of ethics in terms of the meeting of embodied subjects and insists that one's sense of responsibility towards the other can only be aroused through one's empathetic bodily relationship with another fragile body. For Levinas's analysis of the epistemological violence of Cartesian concept of the rational subject, see Hutchens, Benjamin. *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Continuum, 2004. p. 36-54.

“imperturbable essence” to a disturbed one, a life frequently attacked by the acute pain, and thereby full of incessant questioning, denial, anger and envy. She feels angry with the fate and shouts to show her resentment and protest: “*How can this be happening to me?* (original emphasis) I think at the height of coughing: Is it fair? ... *But is this fair* (original emphasis)” (Coetzee, 1998, p. 132)? When she is lying sleepless on her bed and trying various means to quell the aggressive pain, she feels envious of Laurence and her kids for their healthiness and soundness: “I thought with envy and yearning of Florence in her room, asleep, surrounded by her sleeping children, the four of them breathing in their four different measure, every breath strong and clean” (Coetzee, 1998, p. 40). She is so preoccupied with her own pain that she expected to draw the attention of people around to her own painful body instead of the burning and homicide in the black township: “‘Look at me!’ I want to cry to Florence: ‘I too am burning’” (Coetzee, 1998, p. 39).

Pain strengthens Mrs. Curren’s awareness of being-in-the-worldness. The corporeal pain she suffers extends her attention to the pain of others. Facing impending death, Mrs. Curren begins to value life more and seeks for a subjective deferral of death through writing her body into a letter, and also through sheltering the suffering body of the other, including the vagrant Vercueil, Bheki and John whose lives are under the threat of violent state machine. When Vercueil first appears in the backyard of her house, she treats him as a burden. But she starts to reconsider her relation to Mr. Vercueil when she finds that Mr. Vercueil has actually become an indispensable companion of her diseased body. Reflecting on her dependency on him, she writes, “I have fallen and he has caught me. It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand, nor I who fell under his: we fell under each other” (Coetzee, 1998, p. 196). Her corporeal vulnerability finally makes it clear to her that no one is the other’s burden, yet they need each other. Her encounter with the dead bodies of Bheki and his comrades jolts her out of the frame of her own existence. She bodily identifies with the suffering displaced to show her sympathy with them: she chooses to sleep on the streets, urinating into her own quilt and being violated by street children. The bodily identification with the suffering other not only indicates the awakening of her compassion for the suffering other but also makes her writing about them visceral and reliable.

4. CONCLUSION

In struggling with her cancer, writing about her cancer, and analyzing the relationship between her cancer and the diseased body politic, Mrs. Curren provides a cancer narrative that bears witness to a violent and traumatic era named by her as the “age of iron.” Cancer functions at least at two levels in *Age of Iron*. First, as a political metaphor, cancer — with its negative associations of malignance, ravaging growth, abnormality, destructiveness, seriousness, and even fatalism — provides a fitting commentary on the South African situation during the Emergency years in the late 1980s that the novel covers. In this way, cancer, through metaphorically establishing a connection between the individual body and the social body of apartheid South Africa, extends the horizon of this private letter and makes it a political writing that bares the wound of an era to the world. Second, as a constant reminder of one’s embodiedness, cancer is highlighted in *Age of Iron* to cultivate the subject’s ethical responsibility for the other. To be specific, pain brought about by the cancer awakens Mrs. Curren’s attention to the pain and suffering of the other body. The awareness of “Being-Toward-Death” renders her to revise her selfhood and values. As a result, she transgresses the racial border, steps out of the privileged neighborhood of the white to witness the suffering of the black in the townships and care for the suffering bodies there.

5. FUNDING

This work was supported by **Humanities and Social Sciences Fund of Ministry of Education of China** (No.19XJA7520012020); by National Social Science Fund of China (No. 20BWW069).

REFERENCES

- [1] Attridge, D. (2004). *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- [2] Boehmer, E. (1993). “Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative.” *Novel* 26.3: 268-277.
- [3] Butler, J. (2006). *Precarious Life: the Power of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- [4] Coetzee, J. M. (1992). *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge: Harvard

University Press.

- [5] Coetzee, J. M. (1998). *Age of Iron*. London: Penguin Books.
- [6] Douglas, M. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: the Cresset Press, 1970.
- [7] Dvorakova, A. (2010). "Coetzee's Hidden Polemic with Nietzsche." In *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*. Eds. Anton Leist & Peter Singer. Columbia University Press.
- [8] Frank, A. (1995). *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [9] Levinas, E. (1997). *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. 1981. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- [10] Marais, M. (2009). *Secretary of the Invisible*. Rodopi B.V.
- [11] May, B. (2001). "J.M. Coetzee and the Problem of the Body." *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.2: 391-420.
- [12] Melville, H. (1967). *Moby-Dick*. Eds. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker. New York: Norton.
- [13] Slattery, P. (2000). *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Juhong Shi, is professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University, where she teaches English literature. Her main research interests lie in Postcolonial fiction, Comparative literature, and E-C Translation of English novels. Her recent publications include "A Doubtful Afrikaner": the Problem of Coetzee's Identity Affiliation" (*Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2022), "Susan's Substance and J.M. Coetzee's Ideas on Subjectivity", (*Foreign Literature Review*, 2016), and "Order in Chaos: Rereading Transparent Things and Reviewing the Two Chinese Translations", (*Journal of Lanzhou University*, 2013).

Citation: Juhong Shi. "Writing the Cancerous Body and Reconstructing the Ethical Embodied Subject: the Body Narrative in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 11, no. 1, 2023, pp. 11-18. doi: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1101002>.

Copyright: © 2023 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.