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Reading on the Edge of Oblivion: Virgil and Virule in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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11: Reading on the Edge of Oblivion: Virgil and Virgule in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

Gary Shapiro

NOT LONG AGO I taught a yearlong course on reading and writing for the last time. Last, because I have just retired from the university that sponsored the course and also because faculty, in their usual condition of mixed motives, aspirations, and agendas, have decided to discontinue it. I write then elegiacally, in memory of about twenty years of teaching a varying assemblage of so-called great books of literature, philosophy, religion, and even (occasionally) science, sprinkled with more-contemporary works (Toni Morrison, Orhan Pamuk, Adrienne Rich, and others), drawn from all continents (we may have missed Australia) and written any time from Homer to the 1990s.¹ The Core Course, as it was called, was required of all first-year students and taught in sections of about twenty by faculty from a wide range of disciplines (although mostly from the humanities). The books were not taught in chronological or geographical order but under a changing set of rubrics such as “order and chance” or “love and friendship.” The selection of texts also varied, with slight changes each year and a major recasting of the syllabus every five. The most constant fixture of the reading list was Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, which was an emblem both of the faculty’s ambition to challenge and of many students’ exasperation with the challenges. The explicit focus of the course was on reading and writing: reading important and often difficult books; writing responsive, analytical, and critical essays.

Given Core’s organization and shifting curriculum, the emphasis could hardly be on the development of traditions, the dimensions of genres, or immersion in a specific culture. We faculty too were perforce receiving an education in reading, since we were teaching at least some texts we were encountering for the first time. This led to lively discussions on the listserv. For example, we had a rather spirited exchange concerning a basic question in reading *Othello*: Do Othello and Desdemona ever consummate their union? Almost all the instructors assumed that they have, following Iago’s taunting of Desdemona’s father in the play’s opening scene: “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is topping your white ewe.” However, as

Stanley Cavell has perspicuously shown, the evidence for this acknowledged liar's claim is rather shaky. Othello is torn away from his first night with Desdemona by the demands of war and state; they travel then on separate boats to Cyprus, and further nocturnal interruptions ensue. In fact, the whole play becomes much more intelligible on what came to be called the "non-consummation" hypothesis, for a full wedding night would presumably have produced bloody evidence of the bride's virginity, a fact of which we are reminded both by the flowered red border of the disputed handkerchief and by the fact that Desdemona spends her last night on her apparently yet-unstained wedding sheets.² While the play seems to have been chosen for the syllabus to represent both "Shakespeare" and "multiculturalism" (Othello is "the Moor of Venice"), it offered other resources, perhaps most productively when students came to see that their teachers could read the same work quite differently, and marshal evidence in various ways, yet engage in a reasoned and cooperative attempt to make sense of a text.

During the same spring semester I realized that a number of our required texts for the year were populated by professional readers, as authors or characters or both. More specifically, there were four classicists, writers or textual figures who were committed to keeping ancient texts alive, meditating on their meaning, and interpreting them in the light of changing traditions and contexts. They formed an otherwise odd quartet: Augustine, Nietzsche, W. E. B. DuBois, and Mrs. Curren, the retired classics teacher of J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, dying of cancer, whose long last letter is identical with Coetzee's novel. Our course in reading, then, was punctuated by various acts of reading within the texts, as well as by thoughts and theories about what reading is or might be. Moreover, in this course that played fast and loose with canonical groupings and order, these readers had all been formed through a dedication to a finite set of ancient Greek and Latin texts, so there was a possibility of staging a kind of conversation among them. George Santayana would have called it a "dialogue in limbo," and Mrs. Curren, obsessed with the liminal spaces of the afterlife as she approaches her own death, could very well be its convener.³

I will eventually concentrate on Mrs. Curren (and through her on Coetzee), who reads *in extremis* "at the very edge of oblivion" (*Age of Iron*, 27), yet whose reading has now, finally, become so delicate that she is "careful to hold the letters of the word apart" (39).⁴ Mrs. Curren reads and misreads, muses on changing hermeneutics, searches between letters for anagrams, and perhaps, nevertheless, fails to read what is right there before her eyes. First, though, I hope to open up a perspective on what kind of reader and classicist she is by situating her in relation to the other three professors. Here I read "professor" not only in its limited professional sense but also as suggesting something like "edifying disciple," that is, one committed to teaching not merely a field, discipline, or area (even a technique of reading), but through it something that can help us to become better human beings

(better readers of texts, others, and ourselves). The disciple, of course, must be distinguished from such figures as the acolyte, the hanger-on, and the enthusiast (in Nietzsche's terms I am thinking of the *Jünger* rather than the *Anhänger*).⁵

Who, then, are these four readers, four classicists, and four professors? And how could they help us read each other and the text of the syllabus, which, with no conscious intent, had produced this complex tetrad? If the humanities are, at least in part, about making the great dead speak to us again, are they not concerned also with renewing the great exemplars of reading? Musing on these questions, I began to think of these four classics professors as types, representing four different species of teachers of our Core Course. Augustine was apparently a dazzling teacher of rhetoric, an academic star who rapidly ascended from the provinces of North Africa to the metropolitan center of Milan. In this respect, and others, Jacques Derrida perceptively detected an elective affinity with this professor in his *Circumfessions*.⁶ Augustine *confesses*, so he tells his readers and above all his directly addressed, explicit reader, God, the passions, shame, and ecstasy connected with his readings. So he tells God (and us), "I was forced to memorize the wanderings of Aeneas—whoever he was—while forgetting my own wanderings; and to weep for the death of Dido who killed herself for love, while bearing dry-eyed my own pitiful state, in that among these studies I was becoming dead to You, O God, my Life."⁷ As usual, Augustine deploys the devices of classical literature and rhetoric even as he denounces their finest products. The confessional mode is often adopted these days by those who have undergone a conversion, sometimes, as in his case, because they have responded to the call "Take up and read." The confessional Core teacher, whether enlightened by religion or her insights into race, class, or gender, employs the texts to teach the lessons of her new life, often relying on a new master text. For Augustine it's the Christian Bible in its "holy humility," but for some of my contemporaries and colleagues it might be the Book of Mormon, *Capital*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, or *The Second Sex*.

Like Augustine, Nietzsche gave up his professional appointment after about ten years. Both were admired teachers who had written a few works that sought and received some attention. Now that we are in possession of Nietzsche's lecture notes on rhetoric (Augustine's subject), we see that like many other young professors, he was adept at borrowing from others when he needed material for his classes.⁸ Nietzsche tells us that he was interrupted by an illness, one he later diagnosed as nihilism. His animadversions on the scholarly life of nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* suggest comparisons with Augustine's rejection of his career in rhetoric. Nietzsche's convalescence set him free for creative philosophy, and he, too (with characteristic irony and masking devices), called himself "the last disciple of the god Dionysus" (to whom he says he sacrificed his "first-born," *The Birth of Tragedy*).⁹ Nietzsche

sought to transvalue readings like Augustine's, returning to the exemplary texts of the tragedians, to the *Iliad's* description of the "unquenchable laughter" of the gods, and the sublime humor of Aristophanes. Europe, he thought, might one day exist simply in the form of thirty or so major books. As a Core teacher, Nietzsche would have reversed Augustine's comparison of the New Testament and the classic epics and tragedies. Unlike the solemn committees who designed our syllabi, he would have demanded places for comic authors like Petronius, Aristophanes, and Rabelais.¹⁰ Reading the classical and Christian texts with philological penetration, Nietzsche noted that they presuppose radically distinct and incompatible ethical categories, the "good and bad" of master-morality and the "good and evil" of slave-morality.

W. E. B. DuBois, who studied with William James and other turn-of-the-century luminaries at Harvard, also attended German universities where he got a good dose of the philological *Wissenschaft* from which Nietzsche had emerged a few decades earlier. If Augustine came to condemn the pagan classics, and Nietzsche opposed him in revering the very spirit of agonism and excess that were the objects of that condemnation, DuBois appears first as the pragmatist seeking to make the best use of the classical canon in the context where he finds himself. Taking the classical heritage into the backwoods country of the American South, DuBois sought to empower the children and grandchildren of slaves. As recounted in *The Souls of Black Folk*, he persuaded parents to send their children to school by "put[ting] Cicero 'pro Archia Poeta' into the simplest English with local applications, and usually convinced them—for a week or so."¹¹ (Cicero's highly accomplished speech was a defense of his own teacher, the poet Archia, who was accused of not being a legitimate Roman citizen, an "illegal alien" in today's unfortunate terminology.) Yet past the stage of elementary education, DuBois sees the classics as having a timeless meaning. Writing early in his career (1903), DuBois has no doubt of the eternal value of the classical curriculum, speaking rhapsodically of Atlanta University where the students

gather then, —here to follow the love-song of Dido, here to listen to the tale of Troy divine; there to wander among the stars, there to wander among men and nations. . . . Nothing new, no time-saving devices,—simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living. The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and is today laid before the freedmen's sons by Atlanta University.¹²

Augustine rejects "the love-song of Dido" and "the tale of Troy divine," while Nietzsche argues that Platonic eternalism masks an aversion to life,

time, becoming, and the body. Nietzsche drew inspiration from the epic tradition and Augustine attempted to comprehend Platonism by completing it with Christianity. Mrs. Curren, aged and terminally ill, returns to the *Aeneid*, not to Dido's story, but to its concern with death, burial, and the afterlife.

We do not hear much about the teaching career of Coetzee's Mrs. Curren; she simply says, "I was a teacher. I taught at the university." We do not know whether she was also a publishing scholar. Given the setting of the novel in 1986, during the crisis of South Africa's apartheid regime, we can assume that, like DuBois, she taught in segregated institutions; her students would have been white. Mrs. Curren resembles DuBois in another respect: like him, and unlike Augustine and Nietzsche, she believed that the philosophers, poets, and historians of Greece and Rome should be read and understood as constituting a unified curriculum; not only a pedagogical one, but what we might call a true curriculum vitae: a course of texts and wisdom that can be a guide for life. This professor's pantheon of classical authors includes at least Hesiod, Plato, Thucydides, Virgil, and Marcus Aurelius, and she derives lessons from all of these, especially Virgil, during her epistolary chronicle of death.¹³ I say she *believed* this (past tense) because she eventually comes to surrender a central guiding principle of her pedagogy and life, the Socratic dictum that "in his soul the honorable man can suffer no harm" (165).

One way of describing what happens to shatter the unity of Mrs. Curren's classical canon and curriculum is to say that she is no longer able to avoid the conflict between Hesiod and Plato. If this is indeed Hesiod's age of iron, in which all are plagued by envy, and men have lost the sense of shame, then the good man escapes suffering only by chance, for all the cards are stacked against him (I use the gendered form because Mrs. Curren does). The Socratic response is that no harm comes to him *in his soul*. The question is whether it is sufficient to simply refrain from doing what is dishonorable. Are there situations where one is called upon to do more, or where one incurs shame just by acquiescence, however minimal, in the prevailing order—as in 1986 South Africa? Mrs. Curren becomes a confessional classicist (as are the other three, in their own ways). She confesses to the derelict Vercueil (and through him to her daughter and to us). Vercueil appeared on the day of her terminal diagnosis; now she resembles him to a degree she could not have anticipated. Here she records her thoughts when unable to get up, lying in the clothing she's soiled, in deep pain from her cancer, beneath an underpass, after fleeing her home where police have just killed a young black insurgent who took refuge there, and after being assaulted by a youth gang seeking to rob her of gold teeth or other spoils:

Where did the mistake come in? It had something to do with honor, with the notion I clung to through thick and thin, from

my education, from my reading, that in his soul the honorable man can suffer no harm. I strove always for honor, for a private honor, using shame as my guide. As long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonor. That was the use of shame: as a touchstone, something that would always be there, something you could come back to like a blind person, to touch, to tell you where you were. (165)

When Mrs. Curren speaks of shame she must be thinking of *aidos*, a term that has no easy translation since it is intrinsic to a long-vanished ethical world. Various rendered as shame, reverence, respect, honor, and the like, the word suggests an attitude of sensitivity toward the norms, responses, and highest values of others. It is *aidos*, Hesiod tells us, that goes out the door in the age of iron; Mrs. Curren confirms this in the contemporary age of iron when she sees that her appeals to shame and honor fall on deaf ears, both those of the regime's police and its young enemies. Still, as she would like to believe, following Socrates, it is enough for the individual, even in dark times, to maintain her honor. But shame and goodness are not sufficient, Mrs. Curren adds, in "as full a confession as I know how":

What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good. For there are plenty of good people in this country. We are two a penny, we good and nearly good. What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism. A word that, as I speak it, sounds foreign to my lips. (165)

Mrs. Curren considers an action that might possibly be heroic. She plans for a time to be a suicidal car bomber, driving her automobile (which is dying like herself) into a flaming crash down a main street into a prominent government building. Eventually she decides this is pointless, because it would be dismissed as the idiosyncratic gesture of a deranged old woman. How, then, should she live? And what would be a good death? Mrs. Curren's answer to the first question seems to involve a radical hospitality, as she opens her house to the homeless Vercueil, to her domestic employee "Florence" and her children, including her fifteen-year-old son, Bheki, and Bheki's friend "John," who have become armed insurgents. In allowing all of these to stay, she not only welcomes the other but defies the strictures of the regime, which hunts down and kills "John." (It is part of the novel's general problematic of naming, reading, and translation that the black people Mrs. Curren employs or welcomes will generally divulge to her only the screen names that they use in relations with whites.)

How should one die, then, if honor is insufficient and the path of heroism is not available? This question becomes increasingly urgent as the clas-

sics teacher's pain increases and her sphere of activity narrows. The novel that we read is a very long letter to Mrs. Curren's daughter in America; while still living, she will not tell the daughter of her terminal illness, but the delivery of this last letter is imperative. What is left to Mrs. Curren, beyond honor and heroism, is being remembered, memorialized. It is here, we shall soon see, that she turns to and reads another strand of the classical tradition, making more explicit the Virgilian patterns that have inflected her story from the beginning. The task of delivery is entrusted to Vercueil. She has suspected Vercueil for some time of being an angel, or whatever the iron age's equivalent of an angel might be. He appears to Mrs. Curren to have been sent, arriving at the same time as her terminal diagnosis. Early in the novel she recounts reading Tolstoy's late tale "What Men Live By," the story of a poor shoemaker visited by an angel, an angel degraded to human form to learn the lessons of love. "How in our hearts," she exclaims, "we long for these sedate homes of ours to tremble, as in the story, with angelic chanting!" (14). Whether aware of his mission or not, Vercueil is the messenger who must deliver her testament. She will not delegate this task to a conventional intermediary (for example, an attorney or a colleague) because the very act of transmission must be an ethical one. Because Mrs. Curren wants to avoid provoking her daughter's anxieties, the letter cannot arrive before her death. The question, at the edge of oblivion, is whether trust is still at all possible. So Mrs. Curren constructs her entrusting of the papers to Vercueil as a "wager" on him and with him. The wager enters into the texture of the letter itself, so that if her daughter reads what we do, Mrs. Curren's death will be as meaningful as it can be in an age that is shamefully devoid of honor and yet in which honor is insufficient. She writes, "Because I cannot trust Vercueil, I must trust him. I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul" (130).¹⁴

It is this wager and mission that become the focus of an emblematic scene of reading in *Age of Iron*, one that raises questions for us about what reading can be in such a time. After rummaging about in Mrs. Curren's books, Vercueil asks "What is Latin?" and receives the reply "A dead language . . . a language spoken by the dead." This leads to a request for her (the dying one) to speak some of this language of death; she recites from Aeneas's journey to the underworld, a passage she describes as "Virgil on the unquiet dead":

nec ripas datur horrendas et rauca fluent
 transportare prius quam sedibus ossa quierunt.
 centum errant annos volitantque haec litora circum;
 tum demum admissi stagna exoptata revisunt. (*Aeneid* 6.327–30)¹⁵

In Dryden's magnificent seventeenth-century translation:

Nor dares his transport vessel cross the waves
 With such whose bones are not composed in graves.
 A hundred years they wander on the shore;
 At length, their penance done, are wafted o'er.

Vercueil asks, "What does it mean?" which leads to this exchange:

"It means that if you don't mail the letter to my daughter I will have a hundred years of misery."

"It doesn't."

"Yes, it does. *Ossa*: that is the word for a diary. Something on which the days of your life are inscribed." (192)

This is not the first time we see this classical reader engaging in odd or illuminating translations and etymologies. When Vercueil says that she could open up her home as a boardinghouse, she responds that there is no longer a spirit of charity in the country: "*Charity*: from the Latin word for the heart. It is as hard to receive as to give," but (she thinks to herself), "A lie: charity, *caritas*, has nothing to do with the heart. But what does it matter if my sermons rest on false etymologies?" (22). This prefigures the later (mis)translation of *ossa* as "diary," but not all of Mrs. Curren's etymologies are distortions. She is frequently occupied by the thought of stupidity and its various linguistic expressions (e.g., stupor, stupefaction). Thinking of the white rulers of South Africa as they speak on television, she realizes "after years of etymological meditation" that they "have turned stupidity to a virtue. . . . From *stupere*, to be stunned, astounded. A gradient from stupid to stunned to astonished, to be turned to stone. The message: that the message never changes. A message that turns people to stone" (29; cf. 63, 78, 164, 195, 197). The stupid are those who refuse to read other than to repeat and reinforce; their reading lacks any sense of futurity.

To begin untangling this complex scene of reading, it is necessary to recall the usual understanding of the passage in Virgil. As Dryden and other translators correctly have it, *ossa* indeed means "bones," although we can sympathize with and admire the metaphorical leap by which Mrs. Curren transforms the bones into meaningful inscription. In *Aeneid* 6, Aeneas consults the Sibyl at Cumae, and after seizing the golden bough, she leads him to Hades where he will eventually glimpse the shade of Dido and hear his father Anchises' detailed prophecy of his further adventures and of Rome's history down to the time of Augustus when the epic was written. With the aid of his divine mother and the Sibyl, Aeneas has entered Hades and gazes with wonder at the shore of the river Styx, thronged by "empty phantoms,"

“forms without bodies.” These are thick as autumn leaves or flocks of birds, and all demand passage across the river from the boatman Charon. Some of these are taken across while others are turned away; Aeneas asks what law governs this distinction, and the Sibyl explains:

You see the Stygian floods,
 The sacred stream which heav'n's imperial state
 Attests in oaths, and fears to violate.
 The ghosts rejected are th' unhappy crew
 Depriv'd of sepulchers and fun'ral due:
 The boatman, Charon; those, the buried host,
 He ferries over to the farther coast;
 Nor dares his transport vessel cross the waves.

The Sibyl's lesson is brought home to Aeneas when he sees his helmsman Palinurus among the unburied dead, and it is some version of his fate that Mrs. Curren seeks to avoid. Palinurus had fallen asleep, fell into the sea, struggled to reach land, where he was robbed and murdered by locals. While the Sibyl tells him that the law governing the unburied can have no exceptions, she also assures him that his body will soon be interred in a tomb with appropriate rites and that the place shall be named after him; his tomb and the place will be inscribed with his memory.¹⁶

In the *Aeneid*, the death of Palinurus is a sacrifice of one for the sake of many. Juno, patroness of Greeks and enemy of Troy, is bent on frustrating Aeneas's establishing himself in Italy and has provoked the Trojan women to set fire to much of the fleet in Sicily. Venus begs Neptune to protect Aeneas and his fleet from Juno's wrath, and so he promises, but notes that “one destin'd head alone / shall perish and for multitudes atone” (5.814–15). While the fleet sets out with confidence, Sleep (Somnus) takes on the human form of the Trojan Phorbos and offers to take the place of the helmsman Palinurus, to give him a needed rest. Suspecting deception, Palinurus resists, and the angry god puts him to sleep with a “branch in Lethe dipp'd, and drunk with Stygian dew” (5.854–55). Aeneas is alerted to the loss when the ship enters shoals, takes the helm himself, and laments that the corpse of Palinurus will lie unburied on an unknown shore.

Perhaps the most one can hope for in the age of iron is to be properly buried, that is, to be remembered and memorialized, rather than simply disappearing. “We embrace our children to be folded in the arms of the future, to pass ourselves on beyond death, to be transported,” Mrs. Curren writes in the first few pages of her letter (15). One's death must be marked, whether by an inscribed tomb or, as in Mrs. Curren's case, by the transmission of her diary or letter, the very text that we are reading. Derrida argues that my writing necessarily refers to my own mortality, because it has the possibility of surviving me. Mrs. Curren suffers the anxiety that this writ-

ing, the inscription of the days of her life, may not survive her. The closest approximation to classical immortality is to be read by (at least) the next generation.

The chain of genealogical inscriptions is necessarily fragile. Several times Mrs. Curren recalls her mother's earliest recollections, of a wagon trip into the backcountry, telling her daughter that such family memories provide her most significant sense of continuity and her hope for the virtual immortality of being remembered. This pattern of a maternal lineage from grandmother through mother to daughter is, of course, quite different from Virgil's patriarchal genealogy, with its history of war. Rather than pointing to the glorious future for his progeny foretold by Anchises, the line of epistolary memory that Mrs. Curren hopes for is a bet staked on an uncertain future.

Mrs. Curren's reading of Virgil, her last reading in the novel, recalls the series of readings, translations, and etymologies that punctuate and structure her story. She turned first to Tolstoy's late religious tales, which contribute to her wonders about angelic visitation (14); after witnessing the fire, carnage, and death on the Flats, she is haunted by the battle of Borodino as depicted in *War and Peace*. Mrs. Curren says that she lets the wind take her "night after night" to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and to Shylock's question "Do I not bleed like you?" with its obvious application to South Africa (40). She also reads and instructs as a teacher, invoking her professional authority. Visiting "John" in hospital, after the police have viciously knocked him off a bicycle, Mrs. Curren speaks of Thucydides, an author he will certainly not have read. In war, she teaches through Thucydides that our humanity is at risk because we no longer have the time and patience for mercy and the attempt to understand individual cases (80–81). Thinking of Marcus Aurelius, she reminds herself that life should be thought of as wrestling rather than dancing (a thesis that might be read as a response to Nietzsche, who said that he could believe only in a dancing god) (158).

The presiding text in *Age of Iron*, however, is the *Aeneid* and specifically the hero's descent to Hades. The reading Mrs. Curren offers Vercueil (and we have hardly finished explicating it and its repetition) is the culmination of a narrative that began on the very first page. There she starts the letter to her daughter by setting the scene of her discovery of Vercueil, reminding her, "There is an alley down the side of the garage, you may remember it, you and your friends would sometimes play there. Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot" (13). The association of dead leaves and human mortality is a *topos* that stretches at least from the *Iliad* to Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. In the *Aeneid* this figure takes a step toward literalization as the shades are "empty phantoms . . . forms without bodies, and impassive air" (6.292–93; comes tenuis sine corpora vitas . . . cava sub imaginæ formæ). These shades and specters waiting on the shore are thick as the leaves of autumn in the woods, or birds flocking to warmer lands in the winter. Vercueil is discovered as a derelict,

and like Palinurus, it turns out that he is a relict of the sea, a sailor whose hand was deformed in a maritime accident. The marginal, liminal area by the side of the garage is the modern suburban version of the banks of the Styx; Mrs. Curren's decrepit car plays the role of Charon's boat. In a series of automotive adventures, Vercueil is the one to get the old vehicle going and even, like the angel of death, offers to enable her suicide by sending her in it over a cliff. For a while she contemplates another version of her end, an *auto da fé* in which she would take the wheel and ride to her death in a car bomb aimed at a government building.

In the middle of the novel, as in the middle of the *Aeneid* (and of the *Odyssey*, whose pattern it reflects here), there is a descent into Hades, that is, into its South African equivalent. The telephone summons Florence, Mrs. Curren's domestic servant, to deal with "trouble" concerning her son Bheki. Together with Florence's young girls they drive off in the shaky car into a dangerous, dark, nocturnal landscape. The place is mysteriously empty and the resemblance to the approach to the underworld is marked: "Swirls of mist floated toward us, embraced the car, floated away. Wraiths, spirits. Aornos this place, birdless" (89). They encounter guards who demand explanations and they smell burning rubber. Mrs. Curren reflects that she and her privileged, passive, white kind should not be allowed entrance into the next world:

If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first threshold of the underworld. White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. White our color, the color of limbo: white sands, white rocks, a white light pouring down from all sides. Like an eternity of lying on the beach, an endless Sunday among thousands of our own kind, sluggish, half asleep, in earshot of the comfortable lap of the waves. *In limine primo*: on the threshold of death, the threshold of life. Creatures thrown up by the sea, stalled on the sands, undecided, indecisive, neither hot nor cold, neither fish nor fowl. (92)

The image of being abandoned and cast on the shore combines two forms of liminality, that of Palinurus lying unburied on the Velian coast, and his restless shade on the bank of the Styx. Vercueil, too, although not part of this journey with Florence, is also a creature thrown up by the sea.

Having picked up Florence's cousin, Mr. Thabane, they continue, reaching a point where they must walk in the rain. They wade through a pond, another reminder of the rivers of Hades, and as they go farther there are sounds like the moans Aeneas hears as he descends into darkness and nears the banks: "The noise we heard, which at first might have been taken for wind and rain, began to break up into shouts, cries, calls, over a ground bass

that I can only call a sigh: a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing" (94). It is a rainy night scene of confusion and violence with gunshots and incendiaries burning shanties. Mr. Thabane, another teacher, attempts to draw Mrs. Curren out, asking her to name the crime she is witnessing. She resists what she thinks of as "ventriloquism, the legacy of Socrates, as oppressive in Africa as it was in Athens" (98). The rejection of the Socratic conception of education, honor, and the soul is reinforced in this descent into South African Hades. Finally, the little group is led to a ruined building where they behold five dead bodies, including Bheki's, which is soaked and sandy, as was the corpse of Palinurus abandoned on the Velian beach. She records her thought that "their ghosts have not departed . . . and will not depart" (104). They will haunt the dying apartheid nation, and we can only speculate whether they will be avenged and memorialized in some way, as the Sibyl foretold of Palinurus. Perhaps the letter we are reading—the diary and bones of a dying classicist—will help to constitute a memorial inscription, a literary tomb. As Mrs. Curren asks herself the next morning, "Why can hell not be at the foot of Africa, and why can the creatures of hell not walk among the living?" (110). In this topography, the very act of walking makes her complicit, she thinks, with the restless souls of the dead who have not received full and proper burial: "When I walk upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking on black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them" (125).

It is as if Mrs. Curren's entire life as a reader and teacher has been preparing her for this revelation, in which she follows Virgil's underworld itinerary. Her world is populated by black youth gangs and privileged white children whose situations, deformations of childhood, leave them with stunted or permanently undeveloped souls, placing them both in "the limbo of the unborn" (7). She imagines the afterlife variously as a comfortable hotel lobby with good music (perhaps remembering Henry James's "The Great Good Place") or a crowded bus in Sicily (25, 30). Mrs. Curren sees her soul as readying itself for flight, shaking off its "dying envelope" (129). On the verge, toward the end of her letter, we read as her daughter is meant to read, that she is "standing on the riverbank" (179).

Given all that Mrs. Curren has read, we must ask what she has failed to read. She has been fascinated by words, etymologies, anagrams, and the spaces between letters. Names can be puzzles or screens, as in the cover names by which Florence and her family (except for Bheki) present themselves to the white world (cf. 101, "Now I was on ground where people were revealed in their true names").¹⁷ In medicated reveries Mrs. Curren muses on "Borodino" and other proper names. Yet one name seems to lead nowhere. The name of Vercueil, who simply appears on the same day as the medical prophecy of her death, never receives a genealogical or linguistic explanation:

"Who is this man?" asked Florence.

"His name is Mr. Vercueil," I said. "Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil. That's what he says. I have never come across such a name before. I am letting him stay here for a while." (37)

Subsequently only the first spelling is retained. If Mrs. Curren has any further thoughts about the name, we are not party to them, at least not directly.¹⁸ In a scene of reading when she recites Latin verses from the *Aeneid* to Vercueil, he, apparently with "the dactyl beating in him, with its power to move the pulse, the throat" asks whether she could teach him (192). She replies: "You would find Latin easy. . . . There would be much you remembered" (193). Having rejected the method of Platonic pedagogical *anamnesis* when practiced by Mr. Thabane, Mrs. Curren resorts to it herself, on the supposition that Vercueil can remember it. This suggests that she thinks of him as having learned Latin in a former life, so Vercueil is perhaps Virgil, both the poet of Aeneas's descent to Hades and of Dante's into the inferno. The unspoken suggestion hovers in the air, but Vercueil's nonresponse leads the teacher to wonder whether "the dog is the one sent, and not he?" (193).

Vercueil is a man of indeterminate quality. He is a homeless drifter whose minimal story is about a life at sea terminated by mishap. In apartheid South Africa we are never informed of his racial designation, although Mrs. Curren has seen his papers. That Bheki and his friend feel free to assault him suggests that he may not be white. Toward the end of her letter, Mrs. Curren struggles with the difficulty of representing him to her daughter: "He is not the kind of person who photographs well. . . . He is like one of those half-mythical creatures that come out in photographs only as blurs, vague forms disappearing into the undergrowth that could be man or beast or merely a bad spot on the emulsion: unproved, unattested" (193). Could this indeterminacy be the very sense of his name, a sense that has eluded Mrs. Curren throughout her narrative? In the spirit of her quest for anagrams and etymologies, let me suggest one additional layer to the linguistic palimpsest: "virgule." The virgule is the slash mark (/), from Latin *virgula* (stripe). The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains: "A thin sloping or upright line (/) occurring in medieval mss. as a mark for the caesura or as a punctuation mark (frequently with the same value as the modern comma)." Now it is typically used to designate the point of distinction (or the zone of indeterminacy) in such binaries as black/white, good/bad, and the like.¹⁹

The virgule "itself" cannot participate in the terms that it marks and contrasts. It is the bare minimum of structural opposition that makes meaning possible. Mrs. Curren has mused on the play of opposites throughout the novel, and of course the entire apartheid regime is one that insists on the possibility of contrasts and distinctions, even if it needs the designation of "colored" to include miscellaneous cases that do not fit elsewhere.

On certain conventional expectations, photography ought to be the clear record of what is there, the natural writing of light (*photo-graphhein*). We know that Vercueil's photograph is no such thing. Earlier, Mrs. Curren wrote to her daughter of a family photograph of 1918, including herself as an infant along with her late brother. It is not only the dead who haunt this photograph, but those who do not appear, those who tended the garden and perhaps snapped the picture. Photographs are now read in reverse, as negatives we might say: "*Dies irae, dies illa* when the absent shall be present and the absent present. No longer does the picture show who were in the garden frame that day, but who were not there" (111). There is also the yes/no of choice and decision. While the repulsive rulers of 1986 South Africa insist on firm definitions and orders, Mrs. Curren reflects that the entire framework of such thinking is questionable. She debates with herself whether to carry out her planned car bombing of a government building:

I meant to go through with it: is that the truth? Yes. No. Yes-no. There is such a word, but it has never been allowed into the dictionaries. Yes-no: every woman knows what it means as it defeats every man. "Are you going to do it?" asked Vercueil, his man-eyes gleaming. "Yes-no," I should have answered. (116)

Perhaps the ultimate binary in this novel—if there can be talk of ultimates in this context—is life/death. The Virgilian virgule operates with thresholds, limits, and mythic riverbanks, unburied dead and a figure whose life is a rapid movement toward death. Overwhelmed as she is with all this, it may be too much to expect Mrs. Curren to make one more linguistic discovery, the one that might clarify the very production and play of meaning. Vercueil or the virgule is situated on the border of domesticity and hospitality, life and death, presence and absence, white and colored, the legible and the illegible. Does Mrs. Curren remain focused on individual meanings rather than coming to terms with the production of meaning itself? With all her linguistic acuity, she renews her attempt to hear words within words, but despite her attention to "Borodino," "diconal," and other names, words, or combinations of sounds and letters, does she ever think (or hear) through Vercueil's name after her early uncertainty? Is Vercueil Virgil or the virgule, the guide whose acts and words are full of meaning or the bare structure of all meaning?

The conclusion of the novel and letter intensify such questions rather than answering them. Has the letter arrived at its destination? If so, was it through the action of Vercueil, several times referred to as the "deliverer"? Ostensibly Mrs. Curren writes of her own death there: "He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had" (198).

Yet one does not write after one's death, a death that is never, of course, just "one's" but your and my ownmost possibility, as Heidegger puts it. Vercueil might have added these words, or we may be left with something akin to the impossible "I am dead" of Poe's story. If meaning has been realized, it has required both a descent into Hades and the work of spacing and indeterminacy. As a reader of the classics, Mrs. Curren sees the infernal journey repeated with variations in all texts and events; as we and Coetzee read her reading, we follow the production and disappearance of the edges, boundaries, and distinctions of those stories, and, indeed, of ours. Thinking back to the Core Course that elicited these meditations, I wonder whether this should have been, and perhaps was at its best, the goal of all reading. Students tend to want definite meanings and fixed categories. They are disturbed (and we *should* disturb them) when we answer their questions seeking such stabilities with our own questions that confront them with a zone of indeterminacy. Finally, we want them to be able to dwell in that mortal region where meaning is produced, varied, and transmuted.

Notes

¹ The Core Course, Exploring Human Experience, was offered at the University of Richmond from 1990 through 2010.

² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979), 481–96.

³ Cf. George Santayana, *Dialogues in Limbo* (New York: Scribner's, 1948).

⁴ All subsequent references in the text to this novel are to J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1998). For helpful discussions of Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, I am indebted to Reingard Nethersole, Louis Schwartz, and David Leary; David Leary also provided exemplary leadership as the course's final director. A significant critical essay on the novel is Derek Attridge, "Trusting the Other," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), 91–112.

⁵ For Nietzsche's concept of the disciple (*Jünger*), see *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §§ 32, 99, 106.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Circumfessions," in *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993).

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), I.13 (p. 14).

⁸ See A. Meiers, "Gustav Gerber und Friedrich Nietzsche: Zum historischen Hintergrund der sprachphilosophischen Auffassungen des frühen Nietzsche," *Nietzsche-Studien* 17 (1988): 369–90.

⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), § 295.

¹⁰ I note with gratitude that the Columbia Humanities course that opened my eyes to reading, and which I later taught, included (and still includes?) such writers.

¹¹ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 68–69.

¹³ The range of classical references is even wider; for example, Florence is described as a Spartan mother (50), and John's clutching of a bomb is compared to Columbus's treasuring his compass as the instrument that will guide him to the Isles of the Blest (151).

¹⁴ Attridge, in "Trusting the Other," offers a perspicuous Levinasian and Derridean reading of this apparently impossible trust; see esp. 97–98.

¹⁵ This and subsequent references to the *Aeneid* are to book and line(s).

¹⁶ No discussion of Palinurus and the theme of loss should omit mention of Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Palinurus* (New York: Persea Books, 1981), published at first (1944) under the pseudonym borrowed from Aeneas's pilot.

¹⁷ On names and naming in *Age of Iron*, see Attridge, "Trusting the Other," 94–95.

¹⁸ Graham Huggan suggests that Vercueil's name may embody the French *ver* (worm) and *cercueil* (coffin) or the Afrikaans *verkul* (to cheat) and *verskuil* (to hide). "Evolution and Entropy in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 202.

¹⁹ See Virgil Lokke, "The Naming of the Virgule in the Linguistic/Extra-linguistic Binary," in *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places*, ed. Gary Shapiro (Albany: State U of New York P, 1990), 315–31.