

## SELF-(DE)CONSTRUCTIONS IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DUSKLANDS*

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The Nobel Prize-winner South African author, J. M. Coetzee in his debut novel, *Dusklands* (1974), allows the reader to take a look into the astonishing worlds of vulnerability and violence through the juxtaposition of two locally and temporally discrepant narratives, whose fictional world is dominated by authority. This paper attempts to explore the collapse of the individual identity of the narrators, along the prevailing literary discourses around the time of the novel's publication, with special regard to the changing concept of the self in post-modern works and to the manners of rewriting its Cartesian concept.

*Keywords:* Cartesian self, post-modernism, narrative, authority

### 1 Introduction

The density of the syuzhet of J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974) does not only explicitly derive from its undeniably complex narrative proceedings, but also from those components of its (meta)fictional reflections which engage in dialogue with current and apparently obsolete philosophical trends. Provided that one makes inquiries about the etymology of the word *humanism*, the corresponding definition might be found in dictionaries: it is the "belief in the mere human nature of Christ" (Onions et al. 1966, 451). Though the concept is slightly older than two hundred years (first applied in 1812 by Coleridge), the signified it refers to traces back into the fifteenth century. Humanism, being one of the prevailing conceptions in the Renaissance era, has redirected the attention of many artists, scholars and philosophers to focus on the human as an individual. It was the prominent theoretician of modern philosophy, René Descartes (1596–1650), who first determined himself and human beings as independent substances: "From that I knew that I was a substance [...] so that this 'me,' that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body, and is even more easy to know than is the latter; and even if body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is" (Descartes 2003, 23). Although Cartesian philosophy has received a special significance through centuries, it has also been partially degraded in the postmodern era, together with its definite dichotomy of the object and subject, and

with the possibility of getting to know the only truth. Furthermore, the humanistic epistemological world view in the centre of thought since Renaissance has started to lose its significance along with its Christocentric concept of the human being.

Immediately at the beginning of his monumental psychoanalytical study, Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) proclaims his detachment from the philosophy deriving from the *Cogito* (Lacan 2005, 1). Despite this declaration, Lacan frequently refers to Cartesian philosophy in his works, mostly with undisguised criticism. For Lacan,

‘I think, therefore I am’ (*cogito ergo sum*) is not merely the formula in which is constituted, with the historical high point of reflection on the conditions of science, the link between the transparency of the transcendental subject and his existential affirmation. (Lacan 2005, 125)

Lacan has reversed the meaning of this statement as follows: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (Lacan 2005, 126). This reinterpretation of the Cartesian *credo legitimates* scepticism related to knowability and to the mere dichotomy of subject and object.

The characterisation of postmodern literature has become a central issue for a multipolar theoretical debate and a considerable amount of literature has been published on this, two of which are presented briefly in this study. On the one hand, the theoretical work of Ihab Hassan, who compares the features of modern and postmodern literature in a multiphasic table; and on the other hand, the study of Linda Hutcheon, who argues—among others—that the poetics of the postmodern tends to be more concerned with post-colonialism and feminism (Hassan 1982, 267–268; Hutcheon 1988). These studies together provide important insights into the changed self-determination of postmodern works, contrary to the methods of modernism:

Postmodern texts like *The White Hotel* or *Kepler* do not confidently disintegrate and banish the humanist subject either, though Eagleton says postmodernism (in his theoretical terms) does. They do disturb humanist certainties about the nature of the self and of the role of consciousness and Cartesian reason (or positivistic science), but they do so by inscribing that subjectivity and only then contesting it. (Hutcheon 1988, 19)

In general, therefore, it has commonly been assumed that the self can be defined differently in postmodern literature: it is marginalized, destabilized, and it has been shifted from its central position. The self has become an equal being among the other entities of the world, in which the subject is not able to identify himself/herself anymore.

This paper attempts to show that Coetzee in his debut novel, with multifarious manifestations of self-(de)construction, dismantles the Cartesian concept of the self through different narrative techniques applied in the novel. In particular, this essay seeks to examine three main research questions: firstly, in what ways the

narrators of *Dusklands* (de)construct their own selves; secondly, how Cartesian philosophy (dis)appears in the novel, and finally, how the creed of Descartes has been transformed into 'I doubt, therefore I am', which in itself resonates with certain literary discourses on postmodernism.

## 2 The Elimination of the Author

Along with the epistemological turn prevailing after modernism (McHale 1987, 3–11), similar issues had emerged in literature, including the changing function of the author. This is quite relevant in the discussion of Coetzee's *Dusklands*, as in both of the two temporally and locally separate short narratives<sup>1</sup> the name of the author is born by one of the characters; furthermore, in the second narrative, Jacobus Coetzee is the protagonist of the story.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such questions as 'How should an author and its text be related?' were replaced by others, which offered an essentially different point of view, for example, 'What is an author?' or 'How could an author be characterized as a substance independent from the text?' Preliminary work on the contentious status of the author was undertaken by Derrida and Foucault (among others), as in the basic theories of deconstruction, then post-structuralism and postmodernism, the marginalization of the subject had become a starting point in literary reception (Derrida 1976, Foucault 1998). Those discourses of deconstructionist philosophy which proclaimed the death of the author were judged by several critics; however, they probably misunderstood the "non-existent position" of the author, as it undoubtedly does not follow that its function can be abandoned. It does not mean either that the author would not exist. What this "position" refers to is the complete separation of the author and the text, the elimination of an authentication process based on the text in relation to its author (and vice versa), and the fact that the additional meaning deduced from the association of these two ceased to be a part of literary interpretation. It is only the text which stands in the centre,<sup>2</sup> more precisely, the text and its speaker do "not refer, purely and simply, to a real individual since it

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<sup>1</sup> In Coetzee literature, they are mostly referred to as narratives or "novellas," see (Head 2009, 38; Danta, Kossew and Murphet 2011, 37; Know-Shaw 1996, 107). In fact, the entire text is hardly longer than a "novella," though its immense complexity fully justifies its status as a novel. Narrative is the usual term, though this is problematic at various levels—if for nothing else, then because "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" consists of four narratives, or texts.

<sup>2</sup> See Derrida's famous line, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," i.e. 'There is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida 1976, 158).

can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals” (Foucault 1998, 216).

The current study was not specifically designed to demonstrate a theoretical analysis on the function of the author in *Dusklands*, although on the above basis it may be inferred that the characters named Coetzee in the narratives are in no way equal to the author or his biographical data. Additionally, there are some softly pulsating hints in the text around the character of Coetzee, which are the inconspicuous comments of the narrator, and engage in dialogue with current literary theories. To quote some of these: “In Coetzee I think I could even immerge myself, becoming, in the course of time, his faithful copy, with perhaps here and there a touch of my old individuality” (Coetzee 1983, 31), or “Coetzee hopes that I will go away. The word has been passed around that I do not exist” (1983, 32). These can be interpreted (with caution only) as hidden reflections of the author, and the identity crisis of the narrator, Eugene Dawn, at the same time. With the gesture of indicating that he, as a subject, is present in the fictional world of the novel, Coetzee subverts the procedure specific to fiction in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which resulted from the literary turn detailed above. Concomitantly, Jane Poyner draws attention to the fact that “by placing himself as a character in his novel, J. M. Coetzee makes self-ironizing claims to authenticity (in this case via the genres of documentary, travelogue and historical document).” This authorial gesture has agglutinated with the genre of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988, 105–123; Kohler 1987, 1–41), which overtly attempts to undermine the reliability of historical sources or facts, to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, while it also forces the reader “to sift through the narrative for elements of truth” (Poyner 2009, 17).<sup>3</sup>

### 3 Narrators and Narrative Techniques

In 1972, Gérard Genette published his book, *Narrative Discourse*, in which he demonstrates his own categorization of narrative techniques, types of narrators, focalization etc. and which has become a standard work of literary analyses focusing on narration. This work of Genette provides the theoretical basis of this section,

<sup>3</sup> In her essay Teresa Dovey has reflected on Peter Kohler’s 1987 paper, as he had failed to recognise *Dusklands* as a critique, and not an undertaking of the historiographical project (Dovey 1987, 16). Dovey also argues that all of Coetzee’s novels incorporate a critique of a particular sub-genre (e.g. the pastoral novel, colonial travel writing, historiography, or various canonical novels [Coetzee and Barnett 1999, 293]) of white South African writing (16). Head (2009, 39), Knox-Shaw (1996, 107–119) and Parry (1996, 37–65) have also stated that Coetzee’s tools for operating his critique are irony and parody, that is why it is so difficult to reconcile them with the horrors of imperialism.

the examination of the different types of narrators and techniques in *Dusklands*, which have a significant impact on the self-constructive processes of the characters.

The story of the “Vietnam Project” takes place during the last years of the Vietnam War, and this narrative includes a longer theoretical piece of writing about psychological warfare against Vietnamese soldiers, which has a decisive significance in dismantling the self (see in detail in section 4). “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” chronologically occurs earlier, thus it could be concluded that the disruption of linearity may be another aspect of deconstruction. “This structure allows us to read the novel from front to back (starting with ‘The Vietnam Project’), or from back to front (starting with the Deposition), in order to provide an answer to the ontological query, ‘I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am,’ situated at the novel’s centre” (Dovey 1987, 17). In contrast, Dominic Head suggests that the extraordinary arranging of the narratives is a conscious contribution to the “cumulative process of reading” (Head 2009, 39). The narrator of the “Vietnam Project,” Eugene Dawn, is a first-person autodiegetic narrator, so Eugene himself is a participant of the story he tells. “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” is much more complicated, as its title page informs readers that it was “Edited, with an Afterword, by S. J. Coetzee, Translated by J. M Coetzee” (1983, 51). So, it features three Coetzees in three different ages: the character in the original narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, an editor and even a translator with the same surname. Furthermore, at the end of the novel in an Appendix, a translation of Coetzee’s official 1760 deposition is given, in which Jacobus is referred to as the “Narrator.” Even though he is reporting his own experiences, he is a heterodiegetic narrator. Therefore, it is expedient to involve the concept of “middle voice” in the analysis.

The literature focusing on Coetzee’s self-reflexive writing circumstantially discusses the author’s unique narrative strategy, applying the term “middle voice” (Macaskill 1994; Dovey, 1998). Coetzee himself wrote numerous essays addressing this issue and characterized middle voice as a morphological possibility of interpreting “to write” depending on the threefold nature of active, passive and middle verbs (Attwell, 1992; Coetzee 1984, 94). For Coetzee, “[t]o write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do writing) with reference to the self” (94). This revelation appears to be relevant in understanding the type of narration in the “Appendix.” Jacobus is the agent of the acts narrated by him, although the actual writer is not Jacobus. In a technical sense, the *Appendix* was not written by Jacobus, as it is clearly stated in the first lines of the 1760 “Deposition” that the narrative was noted down by councillor Rijk Tulbagh; furthermore, Jacobus being illiterate, he authenticates the noted “Deposition” with an X instead of his signature. How is it possible then to read the “Narrative” as his own intellectual property, originally written in Dutch in the first person? Angelika Reichmann

suggests that the authenticity of the source text (on which the translation is based), the translator and Jacobus himself are contentious in several ways, so the “Preface,” the “Narrative,” the “Afterword” and the “Appendix” aggregately represent a complicated metafictional metaphor of the translator, the author and the narrator (Reichmann 2020, 46–55). The fictional world of the novel is sorely complex in its integrated fusion of contemporary literary criticism and philosophy and in the juxtaposition of precarious narratological methods. Additionally, Macaskill consistently describes Coetzee’s middle voice as a “speculative” phenomenon, and draws the final conclusion in the analysis of *In the Heart of the Country* that “Coetzee’s fiction as a doing-writing [...] takes place in the median between ‘literature’ and ‘theory’” (Macaskill 1994, 471), which ascertainment might be extended to the whole oeuvre, including *Dusklands*. The results of the correlational analysis can be compared in this table below:

	<b>Narrator(s)</b>	<b>Type of narration</b>	<b>Voice</b>	<b>Narrative technique</b>	<b>Grammatical category</b>
<b>“The Vietnam Project”</b>	<i>Eugene Dawn</i>	<i>1<sup>st</sup> person</i>	<i>Eugene Dawn</i>	<i>autodiegetic</i>	<i>Singular</i>
<b>Translator’s Preface</b>	<i>J. M. Coetzee</i>	-	<i>J. M. Coetzee</i>	-	-
<b>“The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”</b>	<i>Jacobus Coetzee</i>	<i>1<sup>st</sup> person</i>	<i>Jacobus Coetzee</i>	<i>autodiegetic</i>	<i>Singular/Plural</i>
<b>Afterword</b>	<i>S. J. Coetzee</i>	<i>3<sup>rd</sup> person</i>	<i>S. J. Coetzee</i>	<i>heterodiegetic</i>	<i>Singular</i>
<b>Appendix: Deposition of Jacobus Coetzee</b>	<i>Jacobus Coetzee</i>	<i>3<sup>rd</sup> person</i>	<i>“middle voice”</i>	<i>heterodiegetic</i>	<i>Singular</i>

Fig. 1. Dimensions of narration in J. M. Coetzee’s *Dusklands*

This table is quite revealing in several ways. Most importantly, it demonstrates that the narrators tell their stories in the first person, although the grammatical categories are not obviously the same, which indicates, of course, a huge difference in interpretation (see later). Secondly, it highlights that the “Narrative” was written in the first person, whereas the “Appendix” in the third person, and these two separate parts narrate the same journey with the Hottentots. Thirdly, neither in the “Afterword,” nor in the “Appendix” does the narrator give an insight into the thoughts of Jacobus, ensuring a more personal tone for the first-person storytelling. The following sections of this paper primarily examine the two novellas and their narrators.

#### 4 Self-(de)constructions in the Narratives

Coetzee scholarship is meticulously diversified, and a certain part of these writings has focused on the manifestations of the self in his novels. Carroll Clarkson's monumental theoretical study includes detailed literary analyses of *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Homage* etc.; however, it lacks the detailed discussion of the self-constructions in *Dusklands*. W. J. B. Wood's contribution to Coetzee reception is more unobtrusive than Head's or Clarkson's; nevertheless, the analytical part of his paper is quite convincing in offering various aspects of and transparent reflections on the "I" crises of *Dusklands'* main characters ("I" can stand for intellectual, individual, identical, or inner), often based on their relations to authority (Wood 1980, 13–23). Canepari-Labib in her analysis applies the Lacanian concepts of language and identity, reaching the conclusion that in Coetzee's novels "identity, understood as the Cartesian notion of a fixed meaning or a fundamental truth about the individual, does not exist" (Canepari-Labib 2000, 122).

The following two sections attempt to elaborate on the self-constructing procedures of the narratives in *Dusklands*. Both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are struggling with their own self-crises and the reader can get a close insight into this misery from the narrators' first-person point of view. Firstly, the theoretical work of Eugene Dawn is worth mentioning, in which he sets up a plan of psychological warfare against the Vietnamese. The key for the mental weakening of Vietnamese soldiers, Dawn states, is a total grinding down of team spirit, as Vietnamese determine their own selves as members of a community. "It is the voice of René Descartes driving his wedge between the self in the world and the self who contemplates that self," (1983, 20) writes Eugene, and while elaborating this strategy, he renders a new perspective for the creed of Descartes by rewriting it: "I am punished therefore I am guilty" (1983, 24). Concomitantly, he raises this non sequitur or (to apply Lyotard's terminology) this "paralogy" (Lyotard 1984, 60-67) as the basic premise of the psychological warfare. At the same time, Eugene is struggling with self-identification and trying to find answers for the circumstances of his existence: "I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am" (Coetzee 1983, 49).

Further, self-constructions seem to be more complex and multi-levelled in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee." Right at the beginning of the narrative, Jacobus reveals his own superiority over Hottentots ("The Hottentots are a primitive people," [1983,71]), although he talks in first person plural, so he places himself as a member of a group of higher order: "There are those of our people who live like Hottentots..." (1983, 57), "The one gulf that divides us



from the Hottentots is our Christianity” (1983, 57). Jacobus presents the way of life in Hottentot and Bushman tribes from his own point of view, and here it is quite relevant to evoke the content of those discourses of orientalism and imperialism whose cardinal starting point is the restricted perspective of the European, “civilized” man. These studies on orientalism claim that everything that can be learned from literary works about the Eastern world is just one perspective, not a complete representation of reality, simply “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1979, 3). Otherness is always grounded on quality, and certain qualities opposing each other are established by the group in hegemony, in this context, by western culture and ideology. Coetzee places his main character into an 18<sup>th</sup>-century South-African setting, into a world in which he (Jacobus Coetzee) is able to identify himself only in terms of power relations.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this, the configurations of the narrator’s self-image have an instructive significance, aside from the subordinate relations. Having spent a long time among the Hottentots, Jacobus finds that his unwavering self-image represented at the beginning of the journey (“They saw me as their father. They would have died without me.” [Coetzee 1983, 64]) has been transformed into an uncertain identity<sup>5</sup> seeking his own limitations:

With what new eyes of knowledge, I wondered, would I see myself when I saw myself, now that I had been violated by the cackling heathen. Would I know myself better? Around my forearms and neck were rings of demarcation between the rough red-brown skin of myself the invader of the wilderness and slayer of elephants and myself the Hottentots’ patient victim. I hugged my white shoulders. I stroked my white buttocks, I longed for a mirror. (1983, 97)

Lacan developed his remarkably complex philosophical theory about the mirror stage, which does not lack some crucial elements of personality and developmental psychology. According to Lacan, the moment when a human infant realises his/her own reflection in the mirror is the starting point of an identification process, during which the subject identifies himself/herself as an independently existing individual (Lacan 2005, 1–6). This inference has gained interdisciplinary attention and opened new avenues for literary criticism, as well. From the literature of the antiquity to today’s postmodern tendencies, the mirror has generally been interpreted as an overarching metaphor: looking into a mirror is a special act of facing or confronting

<sup>4</sup> According to Head, Jacobus’s revelation that “I am a tool in the hands of history” may be understood as Jacobus being the current representative of all-time aggression and the violence of white men over the indigenous culture (Head 2009, 41).

<sup>5</sup> In relation to this passage, David Atwell suggests the concept of a “chimera-like identity” (Atwell 1989, 515).



ourselves, as well as the (re)cognition of a particular reality. Narcissus and his mythological story is a significant example of self-identification, which also remained prominent for (re)interpretation in the post-modern era, e.g. in Kristeva's reading of Narcissus in *Tales of Love* (Kristeva 1987, 103–121). Indubitably following her own conceptual apparatus bound to intertextuality, but also integrating Lacanian terms of the mirror stage to her work, Kristeva has also pointed out the *raison d'être* of the mirror metaphor in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary interpretation. Reflections on Lacanian terms of the mirror stage can also be noticed in *Dusklands*. Jacobus Coetzee is not able to circumscribe his subject, instead he is trying to grab those after-images which remind him of his life so far, which can be described by such words as power, white skin, penetration and superiority. It might add another perspective to the analysis of self-deconstruction to note that gradually from the beginning of the "Narrative," where Jacobus stands unshakeably in the centre of his own reality, he seems to lose his confidence regarding his position, as the declarative sentences referring to him as an invader slowly fade into the background and they are replaced by interrogative ones: "To these people to whom life was nothing but a sequence of accidents had I not been simply another accident? Was there nothing to be done to make them take me more seriously?" (1983, 98).

## 5 Reflections on the Self

The final section draws upon the entire thesis, tying up the various theoretical strands in order to support the idea of the changed self-defining methods of post-modern fiction as exemplified by *Dusklands*. This section is focused on three key themes: 1) *The 'dark' and the 'bright self'*, 2) *The 'inner' and the 'outer' self*, and 3) *The 'superior' self*, categories which may be the broadest to point out the different self-(de)constructions in the two narratives and which seem to disrupt the Cartesian concept of the self.

### 5.1 *The 'Dark' and the 'Bright' Self*

Eugene Dawn has serious dilemmas about himself regarding his place in the world. He tirelessly attempts to find such existing categories in the surrounding world which enable him to locate his thoughts and acts, and he finds out that the self is not unified but split into two pieces: a dark and a bright one: "The self which is moved is treacherous. [...]. The dark self strives toward humiliation and turmoil, the bright self toward obedience and order. The dark self sickens the bright self with doubts and

qualms” (1983, 27), or “I speak to the broken halves of our selves and tell them to embrace, loving the worst in us equally with the best” (1983, 29–30). This theory is adopted when Eugene is hospitalized at the end of the narrative because he has stabbed his own son with a knife: “I was not myself. In the profoundest of senses, it was not the real I who stabbed Martin” (1983, 44). But this explanation does not seem to be the right answer to the questions stated, as he is confused and unstable: “Eugene Dawn?’ My name again. This is the moment, I have to be brave. ‘Yes’, I croak. (What do I mean? ‘Yes?’ ‘Yes?’)” (1983, 40). Eugene strongly longs for an answer which helps him to get to know his own nature, the causes of his acts and the origin of the chaotic thoughts in his mind, that is the reason why he appreciates his doctors’ toils (“They have my welfare at heart, they want me to get better. I do all I can to help them”) (1983, 43).

## 5.2 *The ‘Inner’ and the ‘Outer’ Self*

The other interesting self-type is seemingly the same as the Cartesian body and soul, but in *Dusklands* the inner and the outer parts are not in line; moreover, they contradict each other.

A meaningful realisation of this encounter is Eugene Dawn complaining about Coetzee’s indifference. He says “[Coetzee] cannot understand a man who experiences his self as an envelope holding his body-parts together while inside it he burns and burns” (1983, 32). This duality of the self is somewhat different from that of the dark and bright pair in the previous section, as it obviously severs the body’s physically perceivable part from what is inside. Harmony is not available between inner and outer self, and the I remains imperceptible: “There [inside] I seem to be taking place” (1983, 30).<sup>6</sup>

In the “Narrative,” Jacobus Coetzee also reflects on this dichotomy while thinking about his death: “the undertaker’s understudy will slit me open and pluck from their tidy bed the organs of my inner self I have so long cherished” (1983, 106). Jacobus here refers to the organs of his body, implying a physical nature of the inner self. But how is it possible to cherish our organs? One is more likely to do this with one’s mind or soul, so it indicates here a multi-levelled interpretation of the inner and the outer.

Recalling that episode in which a Hottentot child stands by Jacobus’s bed, the reader could discover another aspect of the inner self in the text:

<sup>6</sup> The Hungarian translation provides a perfectly accurate illustration: “Valahol ott benn történekm én” (Coetzee 2007, 48).

It had no nose or ears and both upper and lower foreteeth jutted horizontally from its mouth. Patches of skin had peeled from its face, hands and legs, revealing a pink inner self in poor imitation of European colouring. (Coetzee 1983, 83)

This passage deserves special attention from two perspectives. Firstly, Jacobus refers to this child with the neuter pronoun “it,” as if the child was not a human being; thus, the enthralling authorial bravura of describing power relations appears not exclusively in the plot, but also on the microstructural-grammatical level of the text. The other aspect connects the scene to the inner self, which is, in that sense, covered with skin and the peeling of the upper layers allows the viewer to identify this “poor imitation.”

It is clearly stated in the first page of the “Narrative” that the quality by which Jacobus distinguishes between “us” and “them,” which also determines subordination, is religion: “We are Christians, a folk with a destiny. They [Hottentots] become Christians, too, but their Christianity is an empty word” (1983, 57). Skin colour is another distinctive mark which makes it impossible for Hottentots to be treated as equal. Consequently, religion as principally intellectual in nature, and skin colour as a physical characteristic of a human, together can be interpreted as the inner and outer self of a subject, whose existence is irreversibly predestined according to the discriminative judgement of the narrator.

### *5.3 The ‘Superior’ and the ‘Inferior’ Self*

Authority has a great impact not only on the elephant hunter’s but also on Eugene’s life. Eugene’s (supposedly) arrogant boss, Coetzee, who is introduced in the first few lines of the narrative, is a “powerful, genial, ordinary man, so utterly without vision” (1983, 1), and Eugene clearly says that he is afraid of him: “Here I am under the thumb of a manager, a type before whom my first instinct is to crawl” (1983, 1). Being in a subordinate position, he wants to work even harder to prove his talent in writing: “In Coetzee I think I could even immerse myself, becoming, in the course of time, his faithful copy, with perhaps here and there a touch of my old individuality” (1983, 31). So much so that his job becomes his obsession, and this leads to injuring his own son.

It is worth noting that authority receives more emphasis in the “Narrative,” as Jacobus is only able to construct his self as a creature being superior to all primitive people, he is the “tamer of the wild” (1983, 77) and the “[d]estroyer of the wilderness” (1983, 79). Jacobus has a quite materialistic statement about the gun’s role in constructing the self: “The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself” (1983, 79). On the one hand, this shows another aspect of demolishing the

Cartesian concept of the self, as Descartes proclaimed that substances (including the self) are independent from every other thing, and are autonomous entities which do not require anything to maintain their own existence; therefore, Jacobus's dependency theory can rather be linked to the philosophy of materialism (Descartes 2003, 23). Further, continuing his meditation on the essence of being, Jacobus draws the final conclusion that "Savages do not have guns" (Coetzee 1983, 80), meaning that they do not have the "mediator" which links their existence with the world. In other words, from the perspective of a European "destroyer," they do not exist. As he is spending more and more time among Hottentots, he gets into the maze of his own theories (the longer passage quoted at the end of section 4 mirrors his confusion) and tries to convince himself about the only certainty he could accept: "Hottentot, Hottentot, / I am not a Hottentot" (1983, 95). Jacobus is longing for a mirror (another material) to see who he is. This materialistic, self-constructing function of the mirror is presented in the "Vietnam Project" as well: "I see my face in a mortifying oval mirror. To this dwindling subject I find myself more or less adequate" (1983, 36).

Lacan in his theory of identification differentiates the "idealised I" and the "I idealised," ideas which are closely related to the mirror stage. Antony Easthope clearly points out the fundamental contrast between the two in Lacan: the former occurs at "that point at which he<sup>7</sup> desires to gratify himself in himself" (Lacan 1977, 257) and the latter at "the point [...] from which the subject will see himself, as one says, as others see him" (Lacan 1977, 268; Easthope 1999, 62). Both cases of identification are idealised: they involve the subject as he would like to see himself and as he would like to be seen by others. This is a transformation during which the subject builds his *imago* "from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (Lacan 2005, 3). In Coetzee's writing, both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee need a mirror to construct an ideal image of themselves, but for Jacobus, the Other<sup>8</sup> has a crucial role in this process:

I longed for a mirror. Perhaps I would find a pool, a small limpid pool with a dark bed in which I might stand and, framed by recomposing clouds, see myself as others had seen me [...]. (Coetzee 1983, 97)

The above passage suggests the appearance of the Lacanian "I idealised," as self-construction also depends on social factors and is determined by the Other to a large extent. Therefore, Jacobus (being able to characterize himself only in terms of

<sup>7</sup> Easthope explains in a preceding section of his study that "'subject' has to be 'he' and 'his' because it translates the French '*le sujet*'" (Easthope 1999, 59)

<sup>8</sup> Here I rely on the Lacanian concept of the Other as explicated by Easthope: it should be understood as one's surrounding, all of the signifiers and social factors that can have an impact on our identity (Easthope 1999, 59).

power relations) demands a mirror not for identifying himself as an independent subject, but for realising himself as a subject being identified somehow by other people. In this context, Jacobus's self-image changes according to his position in the colonial hierarchy. Experiencing superiority both in European and South-African communities, Jacobus appears to be more self-identical with his *imago* as an invader. Nevertheless, deprived of his gun, Jacobus describes himself similar to Bushmen, as "a retrogression from well set up elephant hunter to white-skinned Bushman" (Coetzee, 1983, 99). Ironically, in that same clause he evaluates this retrogression as "insignificant," whereas the traces of his inconvenient feeling of inferiority are constantly present in the "Narrative."

## 6 Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to determine those narrative proceedings which are possibly related to the protagonists' self-constructing methods in Coetzee's *Dusklands*. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that the protagonist and narrator of the second novella, Jacobus Coetzee, is only able to specify his status as a subject, when he belongs to the group in hegemony, more precisely, when he is in the role of the "domesticator of the wilderness" (1983, 80) equipped with a gun, the motif of power (which can be related to the post-colonial interpretation of the text). The present study provides additional evidence to previous analyses integrating Lacanian terms into the examination of Coetzee's oeuvre, especially *Dusklands*. Further, it reveals the deconstruction of the Cartesian concept of the self, as far as the protagonists of the narratives are not able to identify themselves as independent substances. The dichotomies related to the specific self-types in section 5 are intertwined in the text, with the binary terms contradicting not only their appropriate opposites but also the other self-types. It is now possible to state that in the first novel of the Nobel Prize-winner author, Cartesian knowability has been replaced by doubt; furthermore, the mere dichotomy of the subject and the object has been demolished.

Both Jacobus Coetzee and Eugene Dawn are explorers. In addition to the several staples that connect their destinies, an "exploring temperament" (1983, 31) may be the strongest. Eugene longs for a past two hundred years ago in the hope of having "a continent to explore" (1983, 32), whereas Jacobus, the explorer has a mission "to open what is closed, to bring to light what is dark" (1983, 106). Notwithstanding the exploratory nature of Eugene and Jacobus, neither in 1760, nor in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is it feasible to make the greatest discovery – to determine that "dwindling subject."

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