

## The Problematics of Silenced History in J M Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*

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J M Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* is a work of fiction that presents a biographical account of the renowned Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. The narrative commences with the central character's arrival in Petersburg, where his primary objective is to retrieve the personal effects and documents of his deceased stepson, Pavel, whose demise is shrouded in enigmatic circumstances. Dostoevsky, the renowned author, is currently evading his creditors and engaging in negotiations with the fearsome Tsarist police. This encounter involves the retrieval of his son's possessions, which notably encompass a collection of classified documents. To gather additional facts pertaining to his deceased son, the central character undertakes a visit to the abode previously inhabited by his offspring. The individual's frequent trips to this location result in the initiation of a romantic relationship with the landlady. Coetzee intentionally used the strategic manipulation of historical facts in order to advance his own objectives, frequently reconfiguring the authentic narrative that pervaded Dostoevsky's life. In contrast to the fictitious portrayal of Dostoevsky, the actual novelist was indeed survived by his son. The inclusion of this manipulation within the work serves a significant purpose. The novel *The Master of Petersburg* explores a range of historical characters and events, employing diverse techniques to present them in a manner that challenges conventional familiarity. Certain historical figures are shown in a subversive manner, frequently leaving the determination of their true nature in a state of uncertainty.

The novel revolves around the prominent historical revolutionary character Nechaev, whose presence and absence serve as important themes. The narrative intricately weaves together the involvement of Dostoevsky alongside Nechaev. Throughout the course of the novel, there are several fervent debates that transpire

between Dostoevsky and Nechaev, encompassing both the characters and themes that prominently feature in Dostoevsky's literary works. There are evident connections between the historical epoch in which the novel is authored and the temporal context within which its narrative unfolds. The story explores the historical events that occurred in Russia in 1869, which bear notable resemblances to the general elections that resulted in the victory of Nelson Mandela, the leader of the INC. The tumultuous periods consistently give rise to significant moral and psychological challenges for artists. Dostoevsky, being a proponent of Slavophilism, had significant concerns over any form of radical political ideology that he perceived as conflicting with the fundamental values and spirit of Russian society. The novel endeavours to examine the manner in which the author's society broadens its awareness in response to the socio-political forces of the era. Coetzee's novels aim to address a significant inquiry concerning the political efficacy of literary works and their capacity to engage earnestly with the topics they present. The creation of a literary composition entails a multitude of nuanced processes that are tightly intertwined with the writer's personal experiences. The primary focus of Coetzee's work revolves around the exploration of delineating the limits of self-imposed psychological constraints that impede the writer's ability to freely express themselves. Dostoevsky resided within a tsarist regime characterised by extensive censorship and a pervasive police presence, which imposed onerous expectations on writers to engage in duplicity. However, the writer's sense of freedom was also constrained by internal moral and psychological factors. The writer's position exhibits numerous general and pervasive implications. Frequently, this limitation arises from the writer's assumptions regarding the intellectual awareness of the prospective readership. In her analysis, Jane Poyner provides a comprehensive explanation of this particular point:

Through the interplay of the dialectical motifs of evading the censor and censoring the self, *The Master of Petersburg* endeavours to cultivate a critical and self-reflexive reading community. Coetzee is all too aware this is vital at a historical juncture of such magnitude, a time when South Africa for the first time becomes a fully postcolonial state. As Frantz Fanon presciently warned, all new postcolonial states are

susceptible to the “pitfalls of national consciousness” (neo-colonialism) whereby the new regime promises change but which in reality harbours the interests of the old. (130)

The primary objective of this paper is to examine the issue of self-censorship in relation to the psychological trauma that results in a condition known as selective aphasia. The primary argument is a connection between the writer's voluntary censorship and the distressing impact of sorrow and loss, which can render certain individuals unable to express themselves. The renowned author Dostoevsky encounters numerous internal challenges that must be surmounted in order to successfully create a literary work that eludes the constraints of censorship imposed by authoritative entities. Writers frequently find themselves driven to selectively resort to silence due to a profound lack of faith in the gravity and effectiveness of the dominant literary discourses. The strength of the link between the writer and the possible readership is characterised by a significant degree of unpredictability. Frequently, as evidenced by the portrayal of Dostoevsky's character in the novel, the author lacks any form of privileged epistemic access to the truth. Furthermore, the individual in question does not obtain their authority to engage in writing based on the presumption of possessing superior ethical principles. In Coetzee's perspective, the concept of an untouched and unfiltered world, assuming its existence, is frequently postulated as integral to a writer's consciousness. However, it is argued that this notion remains fundamentally separate from the psychological processes inherent in the act of writing. Writing frequently arises from the gaps that manifest during the writer's ineffectual attempts to navigate the enticements presented by life and the obstacles encountered on the journey towards distressing self-realization. According to Coetzee, writing is regarded as the second most significant outcome of existential trauma, following a state of self-imposed silence. In the writer's mundane reality, multiple strata of quiet accumulate and intertwine, ultimately manifesting in their written work. Writing does not emerge solely from a pristine mental state; the capacity to write proficiently is not hindered by the presence of immoral actions or thoughts.

The Master, entangled in a self-created intricate situation, experiences a significant lack of success in achieving a point of convergence between his private life and his creative achievements. Upon his arrival in Petersburg, potentially in a covert manner, the Master becomes inadvertently entangled in a complex web of personal, immoral, and political entanglements. The individual's challenges encompass various facets as he endeavours to acquire further knowledge regarding his deceased offspring. The individual displays a strong desire to unveil the enigma that envelops the demise of his offspring. The Master is burdened by significant financial obligations and consistently faces the risk of being apprehended by others to whom he owes money. However, this potential risk does not deter him from embarking on a journey to gather information regarding the events that potentially contributed to his son's enigmatic demise. The city of Petersburg during the latter part of the nineteenth century was characterised by a combustible environment that discouraged the expression of autonomous thoughts. The initial destination in his quest to locate his deceased son was the accommodations where he resided. The individual's regular excursions to the accommodations with the purpose of gathering additional information regarding the deceased offspring and his pre-mortem endeavours give rise to a series of inherently ludicrous circumstances. The parent who has lost his child experiences a heightened sense of grief due to the unsolvable enigma that shrouds the circumstances of his son's demise, surpassing the sorrow caused by the actual death. In the pursuit of veracity, the bereaved father ascertains that the prevailing belief and official stance held by law enforcement, which posits his son's death as a suicide, is improbable.

The circumstances surrounding Pavel's demise have evolved beyond a mere instance of self-inflicted death. In a state of agitation, Mikhailovich seeks out the police commissar Maximov in order to retrieve the documents now held by the police. Nechaev, the notorious revolutionary, explicitly notifies him that his kid has been ruthlessly assassinated. The authorities have a strong conviction that Pavel was associated with Nechaev's group and, as a result, decline to release all the documents to the father. With the emergence of an increasing number of narratives depicting various perspectives, Mikhailovich finds himself increasingly tormented by persistent

recollections of the strained rapport he shared with his son. The master's inability to reconcile with his son before his passing becomes a source of internal distress.

The introduction of Mikhailovich's visit to his son's residence imbues the narrative with a sense of melancholy. Upon presenting the photograph of his son, it is promptly identified:

‘It is Pavel Alexandrovich, Mama,’ whispers the child.

‘Yes, he stayed with us,’ says the woman. ‘I am very sorry.’ There is an awkward silence. ‘He was a lodger here since April,’ she resumes. ‘His room is as he left it, and all his belongings, except for some things that the police took. Do you want to see?’ (MoP 3)

The protagonist remains in Petersburg for an extended period in order to further investigate his deceased son, and he unexpectedly uncovers an increasing amount of information about his son that surpasses his existing knowledge. The purpose of his prolonged residence in Petersburg is to recreate his son's life in a manner that was previously inaccessible to him. The endeavour to reconstruct his son's life is intended to revisit the instances of love and affection that he previously withheld from his son. The futile attempt to recapture the past moments of affection leads Mikhailovich into a more consequential misadventure. Following the permanent departure of his stepson, the individual resolves to undertake the unfinished endeavours that his son had previously embarked upon. The individual has the belief that it is feasible to establish a connection between the substantial disparity existing between the realm of the living and that of the deceased. The individual's experience of sorrow leads him to explore the realm of the deceased, which exhibits various enigmatic connections to the realm of the living. Throughout his prolonged sojourn in Petersburg, it appears that all of his endeavours were focused on emulating Pavel. The master possesses exceptional writing skills and a remarkable capacity to immerse himself in the experiences of others, enabling him to intimately navigate the lives of unfamiliar individuals. The author who engages in transmigration is cognizant of the inherent risks associated with assuming the lives of others. Furthermore, they possess a deep understanding of the relentless inclination within this practice to push the boundaries of borrowed lives towards extreme perversions. The involvement of

Mikhailovich with his landlady Anna and his disturbing dreams regarding her daughter Matryona, who happened to be dating his son, highlight the dangerous outcomes that can arise from an unhealthy desire to be someone else and engage in creative writing. The Master is left perplexed and emotionally paralysed, whether due to sorrow or longing, by his exploration into the deeply intimate experiences of his son.

The author's inclination to experience emotions in their most intense manifestations leads him to profound states of sorrow that engulf him entirely, evoking a yearning for the cessation of life. He acknowledges his resemblance to a lifeless body and contemplates whether the entity he refers to as a demon is really a manifestation of his own tormented soul in turmoil. However, the current state of existence can be likened to a feeling of sickness. The individual expresses a desire for mortality. Furthermore, it might be argued that the desired outcome is not merely limited to being eliminated or eradicated but rather to being completely extinguished and obliterated. There is a perpetual allure to seeking to understand the subjective experiences of others and a particularly captivating fascination with attempting to get insight into the inner world of one's own offspring. However, it is an unavoidable predicament into which individuals may willingly enter with a significant amount of excessively cultivated deviance. The continuous exploration of Pavel's life's uncharted dimensions never fails to elicit excitement in Mikhailovich, who, once engrossed in this pursuit, rarely contemplates the preservation of his own soul. At several junctures, the reader is led to contemplate the possibility that the father had premeditatedly anticipated assuming his son's position. The ease and familiarity with which Mikhailovich assumes the role of his deceased son are remarkably authentic. The paternal figure harbours an insatiable need to explore and comprehend the elusive and indescribable aspects of existence. The author's inclination towards exploring taboo subjects is likely to culminate in a realisation that leads to self-destruction.

Mikhailovich's trauma is derived from a multitude of elements, encompassing the recognition of one's own base sensuality. The increasing encroachment of stillness in his existence does not impede his ongoing exploration of his son's character. Nevertheless, Mikhailovich actively engages in a state of denial over the demise of his

son, perhaps driven by his personal inclination to immerse himself in the void that his son's absence has created. The individual previously known as Mikhailovich has assumed the name Pavel and appears to have arrived with a deliberate intention to fulfil the role of his offspring. Upon his arrival in Petersburg, he assumes the identity of Pavel. The consummation of the deceased son's presence is fully realised when the individual develops a sense of aversion against any discourse that employs the past tense in reference to his son. Pavel, formerly known as Mikhailovich, is presently engaged in a process of reconstructing his personal narrative subsequent to experiencing amnesia. He endeavours to put together fragments of his past by gathering information from those who were previously acquainted with him.

It is likely that Mikhailovich had been anticipating this moment for a considerable period of time. In a fairly peculiar manner, he exhibits signs of grieving over his own demise rather than that of his stepson. The revival of the son can be facilitated by his intrinsic motivation to reclaim his identity. There is limited optimism for his personal well-being, as he has abruptly departed in an attempt to compensate for the absence created by his son. The work explores the process of Pavel's transformation and its significance, which is equally significant as the unravelling of the writer Mikhailovich. Coetzee's intention is to propose the notion that each instance of writing is tantamount to the metaphorical demise of the writing topic, in favour of prioritising the written subject. According to Coetzee, the process of transitioning from oneself to another is a fundamental aspect of writing, and it is also the most distressing and distorted aspect of the writing process. The process of completing a task requires a significant amount of discomfort and exertion; however, the point of acknowledging its completion is always within reach. Upon gathering sufficient fortitude to acknowledge the reality that his son's existence has been reduced to the circumstances dictated by Mikhailovich, the individual resolves to approach the authorities in order to retrieve his son's documents and possessions, which were previously seized by those authorities. Upon his arrival at the police station, the protagonist becomes aware that the existence of the Other, frequently representing the antithesis of the elderly father, is far more complex than initially perceived. According to the authorities, Pavel is suspected of having a covert connection with the

notorious anarchist Sergei Nechaev. The act of exerting influence over one's son, who possesses distinct political inclinations due to his youth and age disparity, proves to be a more challenging endeavour than indulging in thoughts about the romantic involvement of the son with a significantly younger female companion.

Within Pavel's collection of documents, law enforcement authorities have discovered a compilation delineating prominent figures within the state who were identified as targets for potential assassination. Mikhailovich gradually becomes aware that he has limited knowledge about his son and laments the dearth of communication that existed between them. The law enforcement authorities are still withholding the complete documentation from the deceased individual's father, as further investigation is required to ascertain the nature of Pavel's association with Nechaev. The paternal figure elects to postpone any action until the law enforcement authorities conclude their inquiry and return the seized documents. The absence of closure remains evident, prompting Mikhailovich to feel compelled to delve deeper into the clandestine existence of his deceased offspring. The individual is experiencing an increasingly intolerable level of emotional distress as a result of the loss of his son, whom he possessed limited knowledge about. The individual perceives that their lack of knowledge has created a gap in their life, which they must address in order to restore their sense of wholeness as a writer. The father expresses astonishment at the extensive knowledge, depth of inquiry, and potential for exploration surrounding the life of a young individual who tragically passed away while still in his adolescence. The conscientious writer residing within Mikhailovich urges him to proceed with this deliberately undertaken endeavour and to pursue it to its logical conclusion, if indeed such an outcome exists. He perceives politics as uninteresting and has effectively abstained from actively engaging in any political activities. His lack of sympathy for radical politics of any nature aligns with Dostoevsky's Christian perspective on life.

Nechaev is a prominent historical figure credited with the introduction of anarchism to Russian society, thereby amassing a substantial following primarily composed of young individuals. The father is perplexed by his son's political inclinations, particularly his interest in the extreme anarchists advocated by Nechaev.



This has led the father to feel astonished by the significant gap between his own understanding and his son's beliefs, highlighting the considerable effort required for him to bridge this ideological divide. The protagonist is consumed by an insatiable curiosity to fully comprehend the intricacies of his deceased son's existence, resulting in an unwavering determination. The emotional distress resulting from the experience of mourning is frequently eclipsed by a pervasive feeling of being victimised. The individual has a significant emotional weight in assuming sole responsibility for coping with the loss of his son, leading to a sense of overwhelming pressure and questioning of personal circumstances.

The arduous task of reconstructing the life of his deceased son is a profoundly distressing endeavour that significantly drains Mikhailovich of vitality. He possesses a keen awareness of the perils associated with undertaking this task with sincerity. The individual in question has chosen to conceal vital details about his son from his spouse, presenting a significant challenge in terms of disclosing this knowledge to her. The individual's endeavours to acquire further information regarding Pavel appear to yield no results, as they are preoccupied with a few intricate matters that they themselves are fixated with. He possesses limited knowledge regarding the appropriate manner in which to recreate his son's life. This situation engenders escalating perplexity as the individual becomes further entangled in the existence forsaken by Pavel. The individual is unable to determine the precise whereabouts of the metaphorically manufactured offspring. Mikhailovich endeavours to mentally reconstruct the visual representation of Pavel as he recollects their previous encounter. The exercise proves to be ineffective as it does not successfully manifest into a tangible image that he can grasp onto. To his chagrin, in each instance in which he endeavours to summon the image of his kid, it is Nechaev who materialises before him in a mystical manner. He experiences frustration due to his lack of agency over deceased individuals. The subsequent excerpt exposes his profound state of perplexity as he endeavours to compose a letter addressed to his spouse:

He writes to his wife: 'He is still here in his room. He is frightened. 'He has lost his right to stay in this world, but the next world is cold, as cold as the spaces between the stars, and without welcome.' As soon as he has finished the letter he tears it up. It

is nonsense; it is also a betrayal of what remains between himself and his son. (M o P 52).

Mikhailovich exhibits a degree of uncertainty over the method he has elected to employ in order to reconnect with his son. This technique entails reaching out to individuals who were acquainted with his son, engaging in interactions with them, and endeavouring to develop meaningful connections with each of them. The pursuit of reviving deceased individuals might be fraught with danger, as the general populace may not respond favourably to this endeavour with the level of empathy that the individual anticipates. The initial person from whom he seeks to obtain a highly personal and confidential piece of information is Anna Sergeyevna. This endeavour then evolves into a romantic involvement fraught with the potential for self-destructive consequences. The current trajectory of this relationship is unsustainable, yet it persists over an extended period due to motivations beyond just self-indulgent want. Anna is the individual who initially discerns that Mikhailovich's intentions extend beyond casual romantic involvement. The individual in question is under suspicion for attempting to reach his son through Anna, causing her significant distress due to her limited comprehension of the writer's intentions. The protagonist's arduous endeavour to retrieve his son's soul from the realm of the deceased renders him immobilised. The individual possesses a limited comprehension of the discomfort arising from his own self-initiated behaviours. The individual's moral faculties have been rendered insensible due to the overwhelming experience of sadness and pain, resulting in a lack of solace derived from engaging in conversation with others. The simultaneous challenges of reviving Pavel and satisfying his insatiable writer's spirit have diminished his desire to engage in communication.

The individual in question exhibits a state of cognitive confusion, likely resulting from the psychological distress he experiences. This trauma has significantly impaired his capacity for coherent thinking, leading him to engage in repetitive and unproductive thought patterns that provide no illuminating insights. Mikhailovich, consumed by his persistent preoccupation with establishing communication with his deceased offspring, awakens from a state of slumber under the impression that he has perceived his son's vocal summons, only to discover that it is in fact the lamentation

of a canine. Mikhailovich successfully retrieves all of Pavel's correspondence and, upon perusing their contents, experiences a profound sense of remorse for his shortcomings as a paternal figure. A significant portion of the correspondence sent to the son pertains to the subject of finances, wherein the father's inclination towards parsimony becomes evident. The individual possesses awareness of their actions towards their son during their lifetime, and it is plausible that the meagre amounts they provided to him caused significant difficulties for the young individual. The father's endeavours to remember his deceased son through more investigation appear to provide limited outcomes, as indicated by the increasing emotional detachment between the boy and the father. Due to the father's deficient display of affection, the son has steadfastly declined all attempts at reconciliation with his father.

Until such time as this occurs, when he possesses a sense of certainty regarding his understanding of his son's potential, Mikhailovich remains unwilling to relinquish his attachment to his offspring. The father's persistent frustration stems from the sorrow resulting from his inability to fully understand his son. The uninformed paternal figure is filled with wonder upon learning about the extensive realms within his son's sphere of knowledge. The individual is profoundly impacted by the diverse range of individuals who granted Pavel the opportunity to be a significant presence in their lives. The child, due to the lack of paternal love and care, has created a complex and difficult-to-understand reality for himself. Upon descending into the profound depths of this expansive realm, the father finds himself astounded by the pulsating vitality of this ethereal dimension. The letters returned to him by law enforcement are the correspondences that he had written to his son. The act of reading these texts brings him profound and unrelenting sadness, as he is well aware that there is no opportunity to rectify his past shortcomings. The tale concludes with a surprising turn of events as the father makes the conscious decision to gracefully embrace the passing of his son. As the narrative nears its conclusion, Mikhailovich encounters challenges when attempting to depart from the chamber that he has been inhabiting, which belongs to his son. The final pages of the story portray a pivotal scene set in Pavel's chamber, in which Nechaev is in attendance. Nechaev employs Pavel's previously worn garments as a means of evading the persistent

surveillance of law enforcement personnel. The aforementioned action serves as a symbolic representation of a complete resolution to Pavel's demise, as the grieving father relinquishes his entitlement to the potentially recoverable existence of his offspring. The psychological distress resulting from the loss of a juvenile individual is definitely the most formidable challenge to surmount.

The individual in question does not conclude abruptly, thus failing to leave any discernible impact on the individual who is affected. The psychological distress resulting from a profound experience of loss and sorrow must naturally progress through time; it cannot be prematurely resolved. Each type of trauma possesses its own distinct logic and dynamics. Mikhailovich embarks on a journey driven by a profound longing to restore the life of his deceased son, exploring diverse aspects of his son's enigmatic existence. As a consequence of his traumatic experience, his ability to communicate with others has become severely impaired, leading him to frequently seek solace in a state of quiet that transcends linguistic expression. The father, experiencing a sense of helplessness and desperation, briefly suspends his writing activities despite being a highly productive writer. In this state, he indulges in vivid flights of fancy as he endeavours to locate his deceased child. The individual's fervent attempt to establish communication with the deceased offspring might be interpreted as a manifestation of their profound sense of powerlessness, which can be viewed as an alternative manifestation of their traumatised state of silence.

In the works of Coetzee, the notion that personal experiences are inherently intertwined with public discourse aligns with the principles advocated by postmodern ideologies. The personal tragedies experienced by individuals are interconnected with the overall well-being of the society or nation in which they reside in multiple ways. The characters crafted by Coetzee exhibit pain that serves as a reflection of the inherent shortcomings prevalent within the society they inhabit. Persons impacted by trauma frequently endure an extended period of silence, which can be characterised as a state of enduring pain. The absence of vocalisation from the victims possesses a profound degree of implication and may be interpreted as the sole method of communication employed by those individuals. The condition of silence experienced

by the victims in the three aforementioned novels can be appropriately is a result of trauma.

The tone of Coetzee's narrations is notably subdued, maybe stemming from a deep-seated scepticism towards any authoritative voice. The author's voluntary abstention from speaking is indicative of a pathological state that arises from the erosion of one's social and moral orientation. In Coetzee's literary works, the causes of silence cannot be attributed solely to straightforward and linear factors. The true motivations underlying the subsequent actions of his characters are deliberately ambiguous or enticingly evasive. The behaviours, or lack thereof, exhibited by the characters in Coetzee's works appear to be influenced by a remarkably complex and multifaceted level of consciousness. The objective of this paper is to examine a specific type of silence that can be described as traumatic in nature. Additionally, it aims to delve into the profound psychological depths of the characters, who remain relatively unknown despite the increasing amount of information revealed about them. The genre of the book imposes a significant demand on the novelist, as they frequently encounter the need to suppress their own voice in order to maintain the momentum of the narrative.

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