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Volume 10

Bożena Kucała / Robert Kusek (eds.)

Travelling Texts:  
J.M. Coetzee and Other Writers
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Unlike his earlier novels, J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* has not received the attention that it deserves from the critics. Instead, and according to Coetzee's authorized biography, the novel has "earned him some of the fiercest criticism ever in his novelistic career"; some critics have even accused him of literary terrorism, while others have claimed how his Dostoevsky comes out as a neurotic and unpleasant person (Kannemeyer 2012: 8935). Others saw no value in the novel except for confusing or even deceiving the reader, and distorting history (ibid. 8935–8939). The fictional story, published in 1994, set in Russia, does not only partly draw on real aspects of Fyodor Dostoevsky's life but also on certain political events witnessed in Russia at the time as well as on a number of novels by the Russian author, specifically *The Devils* or *The Possessed*. In the novel, Coetzee allows himself "many distortions and manipulations of the historical data" (ibid. 8914). In addition, as the novel progresses, we learn that Coetzee's Dostoevsky is an aging author who is irked by the failure of his mental and physical faculties, and the event that brought him to St Petersburg from his self-imposed exile assumes much larger implications than the mere mysterious death of a student or even a stepson. The incident that has forced him to come to Russia exposes the tensions that exist between the generations, namely between parents and children, and reveals the nature of the evil flaunted by the revolutionaries, which is later reflected by the actions of the writer as he invites the demon/muse in, introducing the demonic nature of writing, a notion that began with Stavrogin's confession in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*.

In this essay, I will look at the relations between fathers and sons in the novel, and how certain issues alluded to in the novel not only correlate with factual elements in both Coetzee's and Dostoevsky's lives but at times question the nature

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1 Kannemeyer writes: "In the novel Coetzee not only adapts data from the life of Dostoevsky, as recorded by, among others, Joseph Frank in his comprehensive biography. He also engages intertextually with Dostoevsky's work, among others Poor Folk and Crime and Punishment, but in particular *The Possessed*, so that Coetzee's novel becomes a palimpsest of Dostoevsky's life and work" (2012: 8924).
of evil as the novel sheds light on the process of writing itself as well. Coetzee's novel begins with the Russian author's return to St Petersburg following the death of his stepson, Pavel, in October 1869. The real-life Pavel, however, outlived the Russian author (Poyner 2009: 132). Gary Adelman writes: "The actual Pavel, Pasha Isaev, died in 1900" while the real Dostoevsky died in 1881 (1999/2000: 352). The first page of the novel introduces us to a "man in late age, bearded and stooped, with a high forehead and heavy eyebrows that lend him an air of sober self-absorption" (Coetzee 1995: 1). From the very beginning of the novel, issues of death and old age begin to emerge. We are only introduced to the identity of the protagonist in chapter 5, and specifically on pages 33–34, when the judicial investigator, Councillor Maximov, who is interrogating the Russian author, reads out the signature on one of the letters addressed to Dostoevsky's dead stepson, Pavel Isaev (33–34). Maximov tells him, "So let me be clear, you are not Isaev at all, you are Dostoevsky" (34). From the onset, the death of the fictional Dostoevsky's son looms heavily over the novel, as the father tries to understand the rationality behind the unnatural sequence of events of fathers surviving sons, a concern that has surfaced in a number of novels by Coetzee.

The novel, which connects historical events of the Russian author's life and times with fiction, and which encompasses a few weeks of his life, led to some critics' accusation of Coetzee that he is not only misrepresenting Dostoevsky and the other characters but also distorting the historical data (Kannemeyer 2012: 8932). The real Dostoevsky was in fact living in Dresden to avoid debt incurred by his deceased elder brother, Mikhail, in a failed commercial venture, which the younger brother voluntarily assumed, rather than by his own gambling (Frank 2010: 46). According to Adelman, "The historical Dostoevsky remained abroad between 1867 and 1871 for reasons of debt" (1999/2000: 352). In Coetzee's novel, however, his self-imposed exile was a result of his desire to escape his debtors due to financial obligations incurred as a result of gambling. Adelman argues that the novel "dramatizes the broken filial connection, the gulf between fathers and sons in a period of revolutionary change, which might as well be the gulf between life and death" (1999/2000: 353). The chasm between fathers and sons takes on a broader implication than a strained relationship during a tense period of political change. It begins to embody and question all relationships between parents and children, a theme that is recurrent in the novels of Coetzee. Coetzee began writing The Master of Petersburg two years after the death of his own son, Nicolas. Kannemeyer states: "it appears that Coetzee started work on the novel on 21 February 1991, almost two years after the death of Nicolas. In the period covered by the novel, the fictional Dostoevsky was forty-nine years old, and

Pavel twenty-three, which "correlates exactly with the age difference between Coetzee and Nicolas at the time of Nicolas' death in 1989" (2012: 8889). At first Coetzee wanted to call the novel Falling, showing how crucial the theme of the fall is for him in this novel, but then abandoned the idea as the title had already been used by another (Kannemeyer 2012: 8878). Falling plays an important part in the novel; we are told that Pavel fell from a tower, and the circumstances of his death remain a mystery, even though Dostoevsky is certain that he was killed by the revolutionaries, while the latter claim that the police were the ones who caused his death. Likewise, Coetzee's son, Nicolas, died due to a fall from the 11th floor of his apartment in Johannesburg (Kannemeyer 2012: 8821). Mystery still surrounds Nicolas' death, the autopsy suggesting a verdict of suicide, while somebody in the flat opposite implies otherwise, as Nicolas was heard calling "I can't hold on, can you help me" before losing his grip and falling (Kannemeyer 2012: 8829, 8832). In The Master of Petersburg, Dostoevsky explains to Matryosha the circumstances of Pavel's death. He tells her:

You can put your life in danger but you cannot actually kill yourself. It is more likely that Pavel put himself at risk, to see whether God loved him enough to save him. He asked God a question – Will you save me? – and God gave him an answer. God said: No. God said: Die. (Coetzee 1995: 75)

In more than one reference in the novel, Dostoevsky mentions the act of falling, which is both physical and metaphorical. Both Dostoevskys suffered from epilepsy. The fictional Dostoevsky begins to associate the epileptic fit with a descent into the underworld or even a bad omen, a descent that is at once shameful and demonic, and in which he loses all consciousness (Coetzee 1995: 68). Nonetheless, he remains apprehensive about being seen having a seizure, a condition that he likens to both madness and possession, leaving him with nothing to hold onto but the fall (235). Following one of the meetings with Nechaev who promises to take him to the place from which Pavel fell, Dostoevsky leaves silently as "he stumbles to the door. He finds the staircase and descends, but then loses the way to the alley" (105). He tells the readers later in the novel that he "shall become a body within whose core a plunge is taking place, a body which contains its own falling and its own darkness" (234). Nechaev's Finnish friend takes Dostoevsky by the hand as she physically and metaphorically guides him down flights of stairs through an unlit passageway cluttered with boxes (106). The downward descent or falling are also symbolic of a spiritual fall, a point I will return to later.

The fictional Dostoevsky enters Russia under the false name of Mr. Isaev, which is the name of his stepson's father, claiming that the reason for the false papers is to evade his debtors. Assuming his stepson's surname is the first step
towards the aging author's attempt to inhabit the memory of Pavel and an endeavor at absorbing his identity. As soon as he enters his son's room, he searches for the smell of his son in the bed linen, then in the white cotton suit folded in the suitcase, and presses his nose to it, breathing "in deeply, again and again, thinking: his ghost, entering in" (3-4). He also decides to move into his son's lodging. From the beginning, he tries to silently form the name of his son on his lips, trying to conjure up a presence. He tells us that he is trying to cast a spell, and compares his action to Orpheus' descent into the underworld, hoping to unite the soul with the name (5). Dostoevsky does not adhere to the rule of not looking back, and as an allusion to Orpheus' descent he looks back to be forever absorbed by Pavel's gaze, which begins to haunt him, adding to his feelings of guilt toward his stepson (54). When Nechaev accompanies him to the location of Pavel's death, in order to prove to him that the police had murdered his stepson, Dostoevsky,

[...] grips the railing, stares down there into the plummeting darkness. Between here and there an eternity of time, so much time that it is impossible for the mind to grasp it. Between here and there Pavel was alive, more alive than ever before. We live most intensely while we are falling – a truth that wrings the heart (Coetzee 1995: 121)

From the very beginning of the novel, remorse and guilt permeate its pages. Kannemeyer writes how at the center of The Master of Petersburg "stands the dominant theme of the father-son relationship, and behind that looms Coetzee's grief at the death of Nicolas. It was a theme that Coetzee knew from Ivan Turgenev's Fathers and Sons and Franz Kafka's Brief an den Vater" (Kannemeyer 2012: 8874). Jane Poyner writes that the names Pavel and Anna Sergeyevna are borrowed from Turgenev's novel (2009: 133). The novel is riddled with guilt resulting from failed promises and expectations between fathers and sons, even though in a conversation with Nechaev Dostoevsky says that a man can "sow the seed; after that it has a life of its own" (Coetzee 1995: 188). When Dostoevsky first married Anna, "it was not a happy time for Pavel" as his wife and Pavel were close in age (64). Pavel, apparently, warned his wife that the author was too old for her (64). He then started referring to himself as the orphan and "this made for a troubled household" (64). The fictional Dostoevsky had promised Pavel when he took him to school for his first term that he will never abandon him; yet he did, even though on more than one occasion in the novel he had claimed that he had brought up Pavel as his own son (5, 30). In J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing, Coetzee reflects on his own son's death when he mentions how he rescued a friend's little boy from drowning but was unable to save his own (Kannemeyer 2012: 8843). In the novel, Dostoevsky uses the fact that his son could not get up in the mornings as a reason for his scattered education and for the decision to send him away to school, saying "you cannot expect to matriculate if you do not attend school" (Coetzee 1995: 15). It is worth noting that in Coetzee's biography we are also told that oftentimes "Coetzee could not get [Nicolas] out of bed in the morning, and he would wake up only in the afternoon having missed school" (Kannemeyer 2012: 8781). The fictional Dostoevsky tells us that he wants to capture and conserve the memories of his son; he refuses to adhere to what he refers to as the order of death, mourning then forgetting; instead he welcomes other people's talking about him so as not to forget and to keep his memory alive (Coetzee 1995: 14-15). He tells us: "I have a hunger to talk about my son [...] but even more of a hunger to hear others talk about him" (25).

Dostoevsky has not been able to bid his son farewell, hence is reluctant to mourn him. He tells the reader that his "son is inside him, a dead baby in an iron box in the frozen earth. He does not know how to resurrect the baby" and this leaves him paralyzed (52). To the author, mourning for a child has no end (77). Even the mere thought of his stepson, he tells us, will keep Pavel alive, "suspended in his fall" (21). Dostoevsky describes the fact that being alive "at this moment [is] a kind of nausea" and wishes that he were dead (16-17). At one time, he even tries to defend Pavel's choice of friends to Anna who complained about their unruly behavior, excusing his actions as a result of being "democratic in his friendships" (26). Both his attitude and feelings towards Pavel are inconsistent; his foremost concern is to persuade himself that he loves Pavel, and conjugating a favorable image of his stepson at this point becomes of paramount importance. He has to be able to love him in order to mourn him; he has to love him in order to lessen his guilt. Yet, on a number of occasions in the novel, he exhibits jealousy towards his son, and youth in general; the rivalry is between children and those who are not, between the young and the old who even carry with them "in their lovemaking the first foretaste of death" (63).3

Dostoevsky begins to feel empty at having lost the contest with his son, because the latter is no longer with him (108). To him, jokes between fathers and sons often masked the "intensest rivalry" and now that his son is gone, he feels

2 Frank writes that the conflict of generations "had been brilliantly depicted in Turgenev's Fathers and Sons" (the Russian title has "Children" instead of "Sons"), a novel Dostoevsky greatly admired" (2010: 50).

3 Franklyn A. Hyde argues that in writing this novel, Coetzee was influenced by Freud's essay, "Dostoevsky and Parricide" (2010: 207).
of Nicolas' death, his son had a postcard from him in his possession (Kannemeyer 2012: 8857). When Maximov showed the fictional Dostoevsky his final letter to Pavel, Dostoevsky recalls a story from Siberia about a fellow-convict who had violated his twelve-year-old daughter and then strangled her, only to be seen later with her body in his arms, carrying her with great tenderness (Coetzee 1995: 124, 125). Dostoevsky calls up the image again in an effort to understand the evil that is embodied in such relationships. Later in a conversation with his landlady, Anna, Dostoevsky mentions that young people are now turning back on their parents, their homes, their upbringing, because they are no longer to their liking!” (137). This tension also exists in Dostoevsky's own work. Poyner writes:

All three works, *Fathers and Sons*, *The Possessed* and *The Master of Petersburg*, draw upon this generational conflict and are, accordingly, structured around the father-son relationship. In nihilist ideology the “father” (authority) must be regularly rooted out for, as Nechaev in *The Master of Petersburg* says, “Revolution is the end of everything old, including fathers and sons […]. With each generation the old revolution is overturned and history struts again. *Carte blanche* […]” (2009: 133)

This becomes apparent in the conversation that Dostoevsky has with Nechaev, who informs him that he has always been suspicious of fathers, and that their sin, to which they are disinclined to confess, is greed (Coetzee 1995: 158). Greed is what makes them reluctant to relinquish authority over the young or even youth itself. Later in the novel when Dostoevsky questions the revolutionary about his own father, Nechaev informs him that he, the son, left home when he was sixteen and never looked back. Moreover, Nechaev tells him “old men make [him] sick,” and how they resent the fact that the reins are “passing into the hands of younger and stronger men who are going to make a better world” (188). Scanlan argues that the contempt towards fathers was fostered by the liberal intellectuals who not only offered aid to terrorists but also actually bred them culminating in this disrespect for fathers, authority and tradition (1997: 467). Joseph Frank argues that the real Dostoevsky was probably aware of the nihilist children's negative attitudes towards their own fathers (2010: 52).

To the fictional Dostoevsky, this has become the sickness that reflects the times (Coetzee 1995: 137). At the cemetery scene, he ponders over the presence of a hypothetical newborn babe, thinking if there were one, “he would pluck it from its mother's arms and dash it against a rock” (9). In the presence of the young, he is constantly reminded of his age; he tells us that in Matryona's company, “his skin is dry and flaky, that the dental plates he wears click when he

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4 Coetzee's own son, however, was estranged from his father, refusing to accept any money from him (Kannemeyer 2012: 8800). Coetzee had to keep supporting him financially as his income was meager, by creating "chains of fictional benefactors" (Kannemeyer 2012: 8813, 8804).
talks. His haemorrhoids, too, cause him endless discomfort" (66). In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud writes:

The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. (2001: 246)

When Dostoevsky receives the cable informing him of Pavel's death, his own age looms heavily over him, as he reflects that he is the one who has died and was buried, and what remains for him is the image of "an old man in a corner with nothing to do but pick over the pages of his losses" (Coetzee 1995: 124). His attempt at resurrecting Pavel is his way at keeping the young man in him alive; he tells us that he "feels a pang of a kind" and that "memories of old feelings stir [...] the corpse within him not yet buried" (226).

On a number of occasions in the novel, Dostoevsky resorts to certain actions in an attempt to inhabit Pavel's youthful soul, the first of which is when he takes off his own clothes and puts on Pavel's white suit (19). In a similar action later in the novel, although he claims that he is wearing the suit as a gesture "of defiance and love" to the dead boy, he quickly realizes that when he looks at himself in the mirror, he sees "only a seedy imposture and, beyond that, something surreptitious and obscene, something that belongs behind the locked doors and curtained windows of rooms where men in wigs and skirts bare their rumps to be flogged" (71). The suit does not fit him; and although the jacket is loose and the trousers long, he convinces himself that he does not look clownish in (19). In a similar action later in the novel, Dostoevsky resorts to certain actions to the dead boy, he quickly realizes that when he looks at himself in the mirror, he sees "only a seedy imposture and, beyond that, something surreptitious and obscene, something that belongs behind the locked doors and curtained windows of rooms where men in wigs and skirts bare their rumps to be flogged" (71). The suit does not fit him; and although the jacket is loose and the trousers long, he convinces himself that he does not look clownish in (19). In the third reference to the white suit, however, Dostoevsky writes in Pavel's diary, in Pavel's room, that the white suit is now perfectly tailored, and "he is not himself any longer, not a man in the forty-ninth year of his life. Instead he is young again, with all the arrogant strength of youth" (242).

Youth is often associated with demonic energy in the novel (111). The same demon that is Nechaev must have been in Pavel, "otherwise why would Pavel have responded to [Nechaev's] call" (113). Demonic acts and perversion surface on a number of occasions in the novel. Dostoevsky tells us that as a child he was in the habit of spying on visitors in his home and trespassing "surreptitiously on their privacy," and this weakness still resides within him, and stems from the fact that he refuses to accept limits (71). Coetzee's Dostoevsky adds his actions give him a "voluptuous quiver of pleasure" (ibid.). He intentionally smudges the glass of a photograph of a younger Anna Sergeyevna with her late husband, "leaving his thumbprint over the face of the dead man" (ibid.). Towards the end of the novel, he is able to answer an earlier question by Maximov's assistant who wants to know what kind of books he writes, as he states: "I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places. I follow the dance of the pen" (236). In order to liberate himself from evil, he has to actually write a book about evil by "cutting himself off from good" (134). This is an allusion to Stavrogin's confession in The Devils, which he begins to write at the end of the novel. As he allows the demon in, he can no longer recognize himself in the mirror, as he catches a glimpse of himself hunched over the table, without his glasses, "he could mistake himself for a stranger" (236). Dostoevsky begins writing in Pavel's diary, in effect soiling the dead youth's pages, and this he tells us is no longer "a matter of listening for the lost child calling from the dark stream, no longer a matter of being faithful to Pavel [...] On the contrary [it is] a matter of betrayal" (235).

The betrayal is double-fold, Dostoevsky's betrayal to his country and to his son.5 In order to write, he has allowed the demon in. He has been trying to summon up the face of Pavel, but

5 Rosemary Jolly sees a number of betrayals in the novel: "In The Master of Petersburg, the cost is great, as the series of betrayals that constitute Coetzee's fiction of the genesis of Dostoevsky's The Possessed emerge. There is the betrayal of Dostoevsky's wife in his sexual relations with Anna Sergeyevna; and the betrayal of Anna Sergeyevna both in his use of her as a way to access Pavel, and his use of her to enact his fantasy of using Matryona in the same way. For Dostoevsky fantasizes about Anna's daughter, Matryona. He betrays Matryona's faith when she asks him why Pavel had to die, deliberately reducing her to tears by responding that perhaps Pavel means nothing to God" (2009: 104).

6 Loving the unlovable is a concept that was also expressed by Mrs. Curren in Age of Iron. She tells us that she does not want to die in a state of ugliness, the latter not only referring to her diseased body but also to the unpleasantness that is going on in her country. The first step she tells us is that she "must love, first of all, the unlovable," and here she was referring to Bhekí's friend (Coetzee 1990: 136).
A few pages later when he retreats into Pavel's room, and as he whispers "Pavel" "over and over, using the word as a charm [...] what comes to him inexorably is the form not of Pavel but of the other one, Sergei Nechaev" (Coetzee 1995: 60). The fictional Dostoevsky feels that by associating with Nechaev and having been drawn into these radical circles, Pavel has betrayed him, especially that he had no knowledge of his stepson's activities in the letters he had sent him (60). Coetzee is here inventing an encounter between the fictional Dostoevsky and Nechaev that "thoroughly destabilizes the relationship between the novelist, by middle age a staunch czarist and his subject" (Scanlan 1997: 464). Contrary to Coetzee's novel, the historical Dostoevsky substitutes the nihilist Sergei Nechaev, the author of the "Catechism of the Revolutionist," an 1869 manifesto setting forth a program of systematic terrorism, into the antisocial Peter Verkhovensky (Scanlan 1997: 465, 464). By making Dostoevsky a fictional character, Coetzee is able to pull the Russian author into center stage, making it possible for him to engage in dialogue with Nechaev (Scanlan 1997: 465). Frank writes that it was the murder of a young student at the Petrovsky Agricultural Academy in Moscow by the real Nechaev in November of 1869 that inspired Dostoevsky's Demons (2010: 48). Even though Coetzee's Dostoevsky is disturbed by "what he perceives as the demon-possession of revolutionary zeal," he nonetheless realizes that to be able to write again he has to allow these demonic forces in, personified by Nechaev (Poyner 2009: 134). By embracing Nechaev he is aware that all barriers have crumbled. Coetzee describes the scene:

[Dostoevsky] takes a step forward and with what seems to him the strength of a giant folds Nechaev to his breast. Embracing the boy, trapping his arms at his sides, breathing in the sour smell of his carbuncular flesh, sobbing, laughing, he kisses him on the left cheek and on the right. Hip to hip, breast to breast, he stands locked against him. (Coetzee 1995: 190)

The kiss may symbolize the Christian forgiveness of turning the other cheek, but with this act the process of possession is complete. Dostoevsky now embodies the evil that is personified by Nechaev. In Diary of a Bad Year, JC in his final chapter, "On Dostoevsky," describes the "anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of the world" (Coetzee 2007: 225). These horrors are at once typified by the likes of Nechaev, and Russia itself. He tells the reader that he is required to live "a Russian life: a life inside Russia, or with Russia inside [him]" as this is a fate he cannot escape (Coetzee 1995: 221). To be able to write again, to feel alive again, he has to absorb the Russian ills. Marais argues that Coetzee is here suggesting that it is not only the nihilists who are infected by the sickness that symbolizes Russia but Dostoevsky who is part of the country is sick as well (2006: 87-88). Alternatively, when he opens Pavel's diary to write in it, the words that he writes seek to bring back Pavel; it is his way of making his dead stepson speak (Attwell 2008: 231). Towards the end of the novel, Dostoevsky gambles with God and loses; to try and make God speak is blasphemous, he tells us (Coetzee 1995: 237). Instead he will be saved by the thief of the night, the demonic presence; he realizes that in order to write again he has to sell his life and others' lives, like a "Yakovlev trading in lives" (Coetzee 1995: 237, 222). Throughout the novel, Dostoevsky vacillates between the forces of good and evil, "but ultimately his descent into the underworld is what triumphs" (Nashef 2009: 130). During their first encounter, Anna and Dostoevsky spend the night in Pavel's room and "it excites him too that they should be doing such fiery, dangerous work with the child asleep in the next room" (Coetzee 1995: 56). At the end of the novel, the fictional Dostoevsky embraces the underworld he has fallen into; he begins writing Dostoevsky's censored chapter, "Stavrogin's confession," an appendix added in later publications of The Devils. Coetzee's Dostoevsky writes:

Throughout, he is aware of the door open a crack, and the child watching. His pleasure is acute; it communicates itself to the girl; never before have they experienced such dark sweetness [...] On Wednesday evening, pretending high spirits, he leans across the table and ruffles the child's hair. She draws away. He realizes he has not washed his hands, and she has picked up the after-smell of lovemaking. (244-245)

This act is also an allusion to Stavrogin's confession; Nikolai deliberately leaves the door open when he makes love to the maid who is one of his mistresses, so that the lodgers' daughter, Matryosha, witnesses it from the next room (Dostoevsky 1981: 683). In The Master of Petersburg, Dostoevsky crosses the final threshold when he leaves two pages of the novel he is writing open on the table; this he says is "an assault upon the innocence of a child. It is an act for which he can expect no forgiveness" (Coetzee 1995: 249). He refers back to how everything in life including time is suspended before the fall, but, as he reflects, "I have lost my place in my soul," he has already fallen. He recollects what the girl told him about being paid a lot of money for his book, "but the quote uncannily is attributed to the dead Matryona in The Devils who has committed
suicide and not to the Matryona in Coetzee's novel who is still alive" (Nashef 2009: 134). The fictional Dostoevsky no longer recognizes himself; the one thing though he does recognize is the bitter taste of gall in his mouth, brought on by his betrayal of everyone (Coetzee 1995: 250). It is the ultimate war, the old against the young, and the young against the old that tastes so bitter (Coetzee 1995: 247).

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