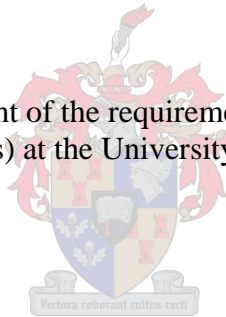


**“A Life Lived in Cages”:  
Strategies of Containment in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*,  
*Life & Times of Michael K*, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*  
and “The Poetics of Reciprocity”**

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Supervisor: Professor Dirk Klopper

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## Declaration

By submitting this dissertation electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'W. Adams', written over a grid of lines.

Date: 26/11/2009

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The support of my supervisor, Professor Dirk Klopper, is gratefully acknowledged. In addition, I would like to thank the National Research Foundation for their financial assistance.

## ABSTRACT

In its conversations with four texts by J.M. Coetzee – *Age of Iron* (1990), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) as well as the critical essays published in *Doubling the Point*, “The Poetics of Reciprocity” (1992) – this thesis will demonstrate the manner in which the singularities of each of these texts prompt, expand and challenge the framework that sustains its reading of Coetzee’s fiction. Whereas some critical methodologies seek to eliminate the characteristic indeterminacy of Coetzee’s fiction, imprisoning his novels in a contextual cage, this thesis demonstrates an allegiance to the primacy of the literary text together with a concern with the ethics of reading. The thesis proposes – in both content and form – an inductive ‘style of reading’ concerned with the continuous modification of its own strategies according to the ‘internal logics of the text’. I first encountered the term, ‘confinement’, in relation to Coetzee in an unpublished conference paper by Lucy Graham, “‘It is hard to keep out of the camps’: Areas of confinement in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee”. Graham’s paper focuses on the different camps, the ‘different circles of hell’, in *Life & Times of Michael K* especially, mentioning that ‘images of the camp resonate throughout Coetzee’s most recent fiction’. Although this thesis considers a variety of concrete and conceptual camps as well, it rather places predominant emphasis on the relationship between reader and literary text, which is examined in terms of two forms of delimitation, confinement and containment.

This study identifies its style of reading as a ‘containment’ rather than a ‘confinement’. The term is intended to evoke an adaptable, constructive delineation of Coetzee’s fiction that involves a reciprocal relationship between reader and/or critic and text. As the thesis’s primary conceptual tool, one that I will argue is both solicited *and* thematised in Coetzee’s fiction, containment refers not only to a style of reading, but also to any reciprocal relationship, any mutual exchange. It applies to the relationship between genres (realism and metafiction) and ‘reality’ in *Age of Iron*; between text and reader in *Life & Times of Michael K*; between self and other in *Elizabeth Costello*; and between text and critic in “The Poetics of Reciprocity”. The notion of containment accepts the

critical challenge posed by Coetzee's fiction to engage with what Derek Attridge would call each 'singular event' or 'act of literature' on its own terms.

## OPSOMMING

In die tesis se gesprek met vier tekste deur J.M. Coetzee – *Age of Iron* (1990), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) asook die kritiese tekste wat in *Doubling the Point*, “The Poetics of Reciprocity” (1992) gepubliseer is – sal dit toon hoe die sonderlinghede van elk van hierdie tekste die raamwerk wat my interpretasie van Coetzee se fiksie ondersteun, uitbrei en uitdaag. Waar sekere kritiese metodologieë probeer om die kenmerkende onbepaaldheid van Coetzee se fiksie te elimineer en sy romans in ’n konstekstuele hok te beperk, demonstreer hierdie tesis ’n getrouheid aan die voorrang wat die literêre teks moet geniet, insluitend ’n gemoeidheid met die etiek van lees. Die tesis stel, ten opsigte van sowel inhoud as vorm, ’n induktiewe ‘leesstyl’ voor wat gemoeid is met die deurentydse aanpassing van sy eie strategieë volgens ‘die interne logikas van die teks’. Ek het die term ‘beperking’ vir die eerste keer teëgekomp in ’n ongepubliseerde referaat deur Lucy Graham, “‘It is hard to keep out of the camps’: Areas of confinement in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee”. Hierdie voordrag fokus op die onderskeie kampe in spesifiek *Life & Times of Michael K*. Graham wys daarop dat ‘die kamp-beeld in resente Coetzee-werke resoneer’. Alhoewel hierdie tesis ook variante van konkrete en konsepsuele kampe bekyk, gaan dit verder om by voorkeur die klem te laat val op die verhouding tussen leser en literêre teks. Dit word ondersoek in terme van twee vorme van afbakening en ontperking, naamlik beperking en inperking.

Hierdie studie definieer sy eie leesstyl as ‘inperking’, in teenstelling tot ‘beperking’. Die bedoeling met die term is om ’n aanpasbare, konstruktiewe afbakening van Coetzee se fiksie te ontlok wat ’n wedersydse verhouding tussen leser en/of kritikus en teks behels. As die tesis se primêre konsepsuele instrument, waarvan ek sal aanvoer dat dit in Coetzee se fiksie aangevra *en* getematiseer word, verwys ‘inperking’ nie net na leesstyl nie, maar ook na enige wederkerige verhouding, enige wedersydse uitruiling. Dit geld vir die verhouding tussen genres (realisme en metafiksie) en realiteit in *Age of Iron*; tussen teks en leser in *Life and Times of Michael K*; tussen die self en die ander in *Elizabeth Costello*; en tussen teks en kritikus in “The Poetics of Reciprocity”. Die begrip ‘inperking’ aanvaar die kritiese uitdaging wat deur Coetzee se fiksie gestel word om wat

Derek Attridge elke 'sonderlinge geleentheid' of 'literatuurdaad' sou noem, op sy eie terme te benader.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### “THE GILDED CURLICUES OF THE FRAME”: COETZEE’S CRITICAL RECEPTION

[People] want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. (*Life & Times of Michael K* 247)

Michael K’s pivotal observation regarding the confinement of a life defined by actual and by conceptual imprisonment, does not only pertain to *his* life – as Chapter Three, “‘A Life Lived in Cages’: The Reader and Confinement in *Life & Times of Michael K*” will demonstrate – but also to the life and times of the novel that bears this protagonist’s name, that is, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983).<sup>1</sup> In fact, though somewhat contrived, this statement can be extended to encapsulate the ‘story’ of the entire oeuvre of the Nobel Prize-winning South African author, J.M. Coetzee, stretching from the pioneering text, *Dusklands* (1974), to the newly released *Summertime* (2009).<sup>2</sup>

In order to clarify, explain or, in Stefan Helgesson’s terms, “make sense” (184) of the characteristic ambiguity and elusiveness of Coetzee’s fictional writing – as embodied by Michael K in *Life & Times* and Vercueil in *Age of Iron* (1990), for example – critical responses often use historical, biographical, theoretical and/or critical contexts in order to frame their respective perspectives on the novel.<sup>3</sup> Losing sight of the literary text, such a contextual framework may assume the shape of a preconceived grid, a *cage* that compels

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<sup>1</sup> I first encountered the term, ‘confinement’, in relation to Coetzee in an unpublished conference paper by Lucy Graham, “‘It is hard to keep out of the camps’: Areas of confinement in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee” (2005). Opening with a similar quotation from *Life & Times of Michael K*, “What I have learned of life tells me that it is hard to keep out of the camps”, Graham’s paper considers the different camps, the “different circles of hell” (4), in *Life & Times of Michael K* especially, mentioning that “images of the camp resonate throughout Coetzee’s most recent fiction” (5). Although this thesis considers a variety of concrete and conceptual camps as well, it rather places predominant emphasis on the relationship between reader and literary text, which is examined in terms of two forms of delimitation, confinement and containment.

<sup>2</sup> Coetzee’s nationality has been a source of controversy since he relocated to Australia in 2002 and became a citizen in 2006. Timothy Francis Strode, for example, recognises a “poetics of exile” (179, italics removed) in Coetzee’s fiction, given its “orientation outward, away from home, counter to the *nostos* of nostalgia” (178).

<sup>3</sup> In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), Linda Hutcheon makes a similar point by stating that “critics and theorists today have seemed much more willing to read and assimilate the latest theory, hot off the press, than to trust to [sic] the insights revealed by the self-reflexivity of the equally recent fiction” (xii).

the text to yield the contextual or allegorical meaning pursued by the critic.<sup>4</sup> In the same manner that a particular painting is overpowered by “the gilded curlicues of the frame” (140) in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), the particularities of the text can be overwhelmed by such a predetermined framework.<sup>5</sup> According to Helgesson, concerning the critical reception of *Life & Times*, literary critics “all seem to be *cornering* Coetzee’s novel” (187) given an “‘allergic’ relation to alterity” (Strode 7).<sup>6</sup> Along similar lines, Dominic Head, with reference to a particular image in *Disgrace* (1999):

[is] tempted to see in the use of ‘shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing’ a metaphor for the critical betrayal or mastery of a text, processed by the critic careless of the text’s integrity. Where Lurie stands for a world in which men do not beat corpses in this way, does Coetzee not stand for a world in which critics do not do ‘violence’ to works of literature? (“Belief” 107)<sup>7</sup>

Given that a conceptual framework serves as lens through which the critic reads and interprets the literary text, how, then, should an analytical reading frame Coetzee’s fiction without confining its ‘life’ to a critical cage? In its conversations with three of Coetzee’s fictional texts, *Age of Iron*, *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Elizabeth Costello: Eight*

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter Three draws a parallel between the medical officer and the reader’s attempts at extracting meaning from Michael K’s elusive frame: “I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!*” (*Life & Times* 208)

<sup>5</sup> “A fragment of memory comes back to him, of a painting he has seen in a gallery somewhere: a woman in dark, severe dress standing at a window, a child at her side, both of them gazing up at a starry sky. More vividly than the picture itself he remembers the gilded curlicues of the frame” (*The Master of Petersburg* 140).

<sup>6</sup> According to Derek Attridge, “[i]t is precisely this unpredictability ... that gives literature its ethical force: in doing justice to a literary work, we encounter the singular demands of the other. Coetzee’s works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?” (*The Ethics of Reading* xii) In an unpublished paper, “The Case of Coetzee”, Michael Chapman criticises Attridge’s approach by arguing that “[w]hen we in the apartheid-scarred divisions of South Africa should be seeking a tenuous commonality, scholars in literary criticism pursue a determined othering, in which Levinas’s epistemology of the Other is imposed as a material entity” (7). Although my thesis falls into the second category, it does acknowledge the other end of the spectrum, as represented by Chapman’s paper.

<sup>7</sup> With regard to literary criticism in general, De Man also notes that “demystifying critics are in fact asserting the privileged status of literature as an authentic language, but withdrawing from the implications by cutting themselves off from the source from which they receive their insight” (*Blindness and Insight* 17).

*Lessons* (2003),<sup>8</sup> as well as critical essays published in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, “The Poetics of Reciprocity” (1992), the thesis hopes to demonstrate the extent to which each text – if closely attended to by the reader – prompts and guides the critic’s response.<sup>9</sup> These four encounters address an overarching concern with the ethics of reading and interpretation, especially the notion of narrativisation as a cage, as confinement, not only thematised in, but also solicited by, Coetzee’s fictions. Given that such an ethics relates directly to the manner in which the reader and/or critic frames the literary text, a consideration of the codes, the Barthesian term for the “system of constraints and possibilities that exists within any given language” (Macey 65) and govern the relationship between reader and text, appears justified. A regard for the primacy of the literary text in the field of literary analysis constitutes the foundation of my inquiry.

Before launching my interpretation of the texts in question, a “style of reading” concerned with the continuous modification of its own methods according to the “internal logics of the text” (Macey on Derrida 93), I find it necessary to provide an outline of some influential critical responses to Coetzee’s fiction. Therefore, in addition to offering a preliminary framing of the study’s primary concerns, this introduction will contextualise (contain) my perspective, revealing its constraints and possibilities. The concluding chapter, Chapter Five, on the other hand, will delineate the methods employed by four of Coetzee’s own critical essays published in “The Poetics of Reciprocity” to further embed the thesis in a critical context. This text will be regarded in the same light as the critiques of Coetzee’s fiction to emphasise the peripheral status both of critical commentary and the author’s intention.

It follows that the thesis’s primary focus, that is to say the textual analysis of three of Coetzee’s fictional texts, has been situated between the introduction and the conclusion,

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<sup>8</sup> Instead of using ‘novels’, I use ‘fictional texts’, given that *Elizabeth Costello* cannot be categorised as such.

<sup>9</sup> The fictional texts will not be considered in chronological order. *Age of Iron*’s (1990) preliminary delineation of the major concerns of this thesis influenced the arrangement of the chapters. Regardless, a sequence that takes the text’s considerations – instead of the date of publication – into account, can perhaps be said to correspond to the principle of textual primacy.

the two supplementary sections that constitute the thesis's contextual horizon. Rather than providing the customary demarcation of the fiction's relevant contexts (an introduction to the thesis's content, an outline of each chapter, an elaboration of conceptual and critical tools like 'containment' and 'confinement'), this introduction, in acknowledging its marginality and subsequent subservience to the literary text, will only offer an outline of the manner in which other literary critiques circumscribe, in other words, introduce and approach, Coetzee's fiction.

Consequently, the thesis will postpone the establishment of its framework to Chapter Two, "'The Tongue of a God': Realism and Containment in *Age of Iron*". It is this chapter that, by way of a close consideration of the significant shantytown scene and its encircling events in *Age of Iron*, will demonstrate the manner in which the particularities of the literary text – rather than one of its contexts – can propose the framework that facilitates the critic's conversation with that same text. My structure is inspired by Derrida's understanding of deconstruction not "as a method to be applied to texts, but rather as a style of reading or criticism which works by teasing out the internal logics of the text ... a mode of reading [that] develops and changes in the course of those readings" (Macey 93). It is an inductive approach to literature, a style of reading that starts with the specific and concrete, in other words, the particularities of the literary text, and moves towards the general and the abstract, that is, the theoretical framework generated by the text. This style of reading does not deny the merits of conventional methodologies. Rather, it attempts to provide a different vantage point on the conventional style(s) of reading adopted by Coetzee criticism in order to bring its constraints and possibilities to light. In order to prove its point, this thesis will demonstrate the particularities of its approach, not only in content but also in form, in a manner more explicit than deemed necessary.

Before discussing, in subsequent chapters, the manner in which Coetzee's fiction gives rise to a particular style of reading, allow me to contextualise my approach by examining five critical frameworks (as listed alphabetically): Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2005), David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee: South*

*Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993), Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of JM Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988), Susan VanZanten Gallagher's *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (1991), and Dominic Head's *J.M. Coetzee* (1997). I have chosen to focus on full-length studies rather than a compilation of essays by different authors, given the systematic and comprehensive coverage of the author's whole oeuvre in the former. The studies I have chosen are the most renowned, respected and, consequently, most frequently cited full-length studies in the field of Coetzee criticism, and might be said to constitute its foundation.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion of these critical frames will not be arranged in chronological order, but according to their primary contexts. For example, whereas Gallagher concentrates on South Africa's various historical contexts, Head places more emphasis on Coetzee's biography. On the other hand, both Dovey, in her discussion of Coetzee's novels as Lacanian allegories, and Attwell, in his account of the fiction's literary and intellectual climate, demonstrate a concern with theoretical influences. Finally, in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, the study that inspired the style of reading of this thesis, Attridge actually circumvents such contextualisations by bringing to light the literary text as the principal object of literary analysis, in all its singularity.

### **Gallagher's Story of South Africa**

Many of Coetzee's novels were written during the era of apartheid. While South African authors like Lewis Nkosi and Nadine Gordimer were producing activist works of literature, "realistic documentation[s] of oppression" that "[bore] witness" (Attwell *The Politics of Writing* 11) to the apartheid regime's atrocities, Coetzee's fictions were

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<sup>10</sup> For the sake of brevity, I have chosen to focus on five texts only. However, other influential book-length studies require specific mention as well, including Dick Penner's *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (1989). Nonetheless, as Helgesson notes, "Penner's cautious comparative readings amount mostly to an accumulation of paraphrase and conventional aesthetic observations" (184). For this reason, I have chosen to exclude this book. Two recent book-length studies should also be taken into account: Laura Wright's *Writing "Out of All the Camps": J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* (2009) offers an interdisciplinary examination of the displacement of narrative and authorial voice in Coetzee's fiction, while Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (2009) concentrates solely on *Elizabeth Costello*. I also take into consideration non-English studies like Arnim Mennecke's *Koloniales Bewusstsein in den Romanen J.M. Coetzees* (1991).

understood more broadly as “realist representations of, and humanist protests against, colonial rapacity at large, and in particular against the intricately institutionalised system of racial oppression that ... prevailed in South Africa” (Parry 149).

Susan VanZanten Gallagher’s *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee’s Fiction in Context* (1991) situates Coetzee’s fiction against such a backdrop as part of its consideration of the relationship between the fiction and the ‘life and times’ of its production. As suggested by the book’s title, Gallagher understands Coetzee’s novels as direct engagements with or representations of the history of South Africa and, subsequently, proceeds “to resituate Coetzee’s fictions in their discursive moments, to examine a variety of social, cultural, and rhetorical contexts from which his novels emerge and in which they participate” (ix-x). In the preface’s justification of her “strongly externalistic” (Helgesson 184) project, Gallagher maintains that “[t]he study of literature in recent years ... has shifted from a focus on language to a focus on history” (ix).

The preface and following two chapters clearly demonstrate Gallagher’s focus on history via a detailed discussion of a variety of contexts. In chapter one, “History and the South African Writer”, Gallagher provides a concise history of apartheid, followed by a summation of the manner in which South African writers responded to this era of repression. She, then, considers Coetzee’s personal history, the critical reception of his work, and his conception of the role of the author in society, concluding with a brief consideration of his own critical writing. The ensuing chapter, “Naming the Other: History, Language and Authority”, introduces the notion of the other in relation to the discursive practices of the apartheid era. This discussion is developed with a consideration of the white myths of history, the subsequent banning of black voices during apartheid, and the manner in which language was utilised as a tool of oppression. An illustration of the manner in which these factors challenged the white writer’s fictional engagement with the times brings the chapter to a close. Here, on page 44,

Gallagher briefly mentions and summarises Coetzee's fictional oeuvre – for the first time.<sup>11</sup>

Traces of Gallagher's partiality towards historical explication can also be found in the ensuing chapters in that each, concerned with one of Coetzee's novels, is launched by a detailed contextualisation of the particular work in terms of historical events and/or Coetzee's biography. The chapter on *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), for example, opens with an exposition of Stephen Biko's death in 1977. Although there are certain similarities between the death of the first prisoner in the novel and the demise of Biko, Gallagher's introduction has to mould the ensuing text to fit this interpretive frame.

It should be noted that the contextualisation of a literary work is standard procedure in the field of literary criticism, given its contribution to the critic's understanding. Indeed, as argued by Gallagher herself, critics are generally "urged ... to acknowledge that literature is situated within a web of historical conditions, relationships, and influences" (ix). Attridge, for one, acknowledges "the valuable insights that this mode of reading has produced and no doubt will continue to produce" (*The Ethics of Reading* 33).

However, although Gallagher's historicist critique generates a myriad of insightful observations, its introductory contextualisations, predetermined grids of social, cultural and rhetorical contexts, result in the reduction of the characteristic elusiveness of Coetzee's fiction, as demonstrated in the chapter on *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Such fixed, preset frameworks are "always reductive of the complexity of the writing process" (Attridge "Coetzee in Context" 233) in that some of the literary text's focal features are inevitably overlooked. Gallagher's discussion of Biko's torture, for example, forces the text to yield allegorical significance in this regard, negating the singularity, the 'reality' of the first prisoner's demise – and the integrity of the novel as a whole.

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<sup>11</sup> Throughout the thesis, I use the British '-se' instead of the American '-ze' (for example, 'summarise' instead of 'summarize'). However, when quoting directly from American texts, I keep the '-ze' as it appears in the quoted text.

## Head's Story of 'Coetzee'

Like Gallagher's *A Story of South Africa*, Dominic Head's *J.M. Coetzee* (1997) firmly locates Coetzee's "post-colonising literature" (27) within the context of apartheid South Africa.<sup>12</sup> An initial chronology, for example, lists Coetzee's most important biographical information, including the publication dates of his novels, together with the dates of significant events in the history of South Africa. Furthermore, chapter one, "The Writer's Place: Coetzee and Postcolonial Literature", provides a brief biography of Coetzee's life and times, giving emphasis to his position within the literary community, as well as to the relation between his literary and cultural identities.

Whereas Gallagher places Coetzee against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa, Head concentrates on Coetzee's fictional reactions to these historical conditions. The preface, for example, introduces Head's monograph with an immediate discussion of Coetzee's main concerns, associating them with the environments that motivated their emergence. Unlike Gallagher, Head relates his particular portrayal of the South African situation directly to the concerns of Coetzee's fiction. In addition, his chapters serve as direct engagements with the respective texts.

Consequently, Head's contextualisation of Coetzee's oeuvre serves to inform and illuminate certain aspects of the fictional texts. Although each chapter reveals an awareness of the novel's milieu, the interpretative frames do not overshadow the individual narratives themselves, allowing Head to encounter the fiction on its own terms.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, as Gallagher's study leans towards providing a particular history of apartheid, as seen through the frame of Coetzee's fiction, Head's introductory chapter tilts in the direction of a biography of Coetzee's life and times, founded on his fiction.

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<sup>12</sup> Head's *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee* (2009) has just been published and promises to be an interesting read. At the time of submission, a copy was not yet obtainable.

<sup>13</sup> See the concluding chapter for a discussion of the limits and possibilities of a style of reading that encounters the text on its own terms. Coetzee describes this relation as "an equal marriage" (*Doubling* 61) between literature and criticism.



The title of Gallagher's book, *A Story of South Africa*, proposes the history of South Africa as its main object of analysis. Similarly, Head's title, *J.M. Coetzee*, presents Coetzee as the book's primary focus. But what is meant by 'Coetzee'? Note how critics often talk of reading 'Coetzee' (instead of reading 'Coetzee's fiction'), using only his name to designate his body of work. In addition, a critic of Coetzee's fiction is often referred to as a 'Coetzee scholar'. On the one hand, this may be a sign of the fiction's institutionalisation, in a manner of speaking. On the other, it may also imply that the persona that is 'Coetzee' is predominantly constituted by his fictions – even *is* (his) fiction. The name of Head's book invokes the manner in which author and fiction are customarily conflated in the field of Coetzee criticism. Certainly, Head's study interrogates the association between Coetzee, the fictional oeuvre, and Coetzee, the writer, in what appears to be an attempt to (re)introduce the field of Coetzee, the fiction, to Coetzee, its maker.

### **Dovey's Allegory of Academia**

Like the previous two studies, Teresa Dovey's psychoanalytic explorations or, in the words of Attridge, "relentless theoretical readings" ("Coetzee in Context" 321) of Coetzee's oeuvre in *The Novels of JM Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988) is another example of the manner in which an indeterminate text can be used as a vehicle to involve extraneous discursive contexts. Whereas Gallagher and Head contextualise Coetzee's fiction in terms of the life and/or times of its author – that is, the social, political, intellectual and literary climate of Coetzee's life in apartheid South Africa – Dovey locates his body of work chiefly within the realm of contemporary thought. She reads Coetzee's metafiction as staged upon Lacanian psychoanalysis and proceeds to demonstrate "how Coetzee's novels recuperate the themes of each model they inhabit for a thematics of the Lacanian subject" (11).

Dovey's study translates Coetzee's multifaceted, multi-dimensional texts into illustrations of post-structuralist paradigms and, by doing so, fails to acknowledge the primacy of the literary narrative. She justifies this rendition by referring to Coetzee's

texts as “criticism-as-fiction, or fiction-as-criticism”, stating that “with a writer like Coetzee the novelist and critical discourses fuse” (9). Coetzee’s fiction is undoubtedly permeated with the traces of a variety of styles of thought and modes of writing. These ideas delicately frame the narrative whilst assisting the play of events.

According to Dovey, “Coetzee’s novels perform this function, of criticism-as-fiction, in a self-conscious and systematic fashion, engaging in the contemporary theoretical debate in a way that circumvents some of the problems facing critics who adhere to more conventional forms of critical discourse” (9). Therefore, Dovey appears to consider Coetzee’s fictions as the instruments of or vehicles for particular ideas. In considering the text as a kind of supplement to criticism, her perspective denies the singularity, sovereignty and integrity of the literary text. As stated by Head, “Coetzee’s novels have a power and a resonance beyond the concerns of academia” (*Coetzee* xi).

I agree with Attwell when he states that, although “Dovey was able to make the startling but justifiable claim that the novels possessed a pre-emptive theoretical sophistication that disarmed the critics in advance”, her “theoretical allegory turns Coetzee’s novels into a supplement to Lacan” (*The Politics of Writing* 2). Indeed, although Dovey paved the way for sophisticated engagements with Coetzee’s fiction, her *Lacanian Allegories*, the first book-length study on Coetzee, should be perceived as an example of the manner in which literary criticism can construct and impose preconceived theoretical frameworks, in the shape of contextualisation or allegorisation, that reduce a text’s multi-dimensionality.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Note how my discussion of the abovementioned studies of Coetzee’s fiction does not explain its claims by reading back into the historical or biographical contexts of its authors. If a critic such as Dovey chooses to refer to a theoretical study such as Lacan’s psychoanalysis without contextualising that study’s claims in terms of Lacan’s life and times, why should that same critic then choose to examine the literary text in terms of its contexts? It appears that there exists an underlying and unnecessary uncertainty as to the relevance of literature as opposed to more historically or theoretically oriented discourses. Is this the task that some literary critics have assigned themselves: the historical and theoretical validation of narrative fiction?

## Attwell's Self-awareness

Perhaps writing with a foreign audience in mind, it appears that Gallagher, Head and Dovey intended to accommodate the overseas demand for contextualisation via their introductions.<sup>15</sup> However, when the integrity of the discipline bows to the international market, self-interrogation is imperative – especially when attending to the metafiction of a self-conscious novelist like Coetzee, who “refuses to subordinate form and technique to content, while ensuring that form and technique are never deployed purely for their own sakes” (Attridge “Coetzee in Context” 321). Although Gallagher’s, Head’s and Dovey’s studies make valuable contributions to the field, these studies’ introductions partially negate the literary text’s primacy and, as a result, impede the respective encounters with Coetzee’s fictional texts.

David Attwell, on the other hand, exhibits a redeeming self-awareness as to his chosen methodological path. In the introduction to his study, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993), Attwell admits that his reading of Coetzee’s novels “back into their contexts” and thus “against the grain” (7) might constitute either “a tribute or a betrayal” (7) of narrative concerns.

In order to demonstrate how Coetzee’s fiction “seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a particular historical locale, that of contemporary South Africa” (1), Attwell’s book “turn[s] to the theoretical and historical contexts brought into play by Coetzee’s reflexive South African fictions” (7). The introductory contextualisation can be perceived, in a sense, as a synthesis of Gallagher’s historicism, Head’s biography and Dovey’s theory. Chapter one, “Contexts: Literary, Historical, Intellectual”, contains traces of all of the above: the history of apartheid, Coetzee’s critical work, Coetzee’s position within the literary community and its “vehement debates on the shaping of a national culture” (Colleran 585), his position regarding post-

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<sup>15</sup> Attridge notes that “[n]on-South African readers in particular will find the result a useful guide to Coetzee’s novels” (“Coetzee in Context” 321).

colonialism and postmodernism, as well as the correlation between the fiction's agency and contemporary theory.

However, in locating Coetzee's "form of situational metafiction ... in the nexus of history and text" (2-3), Attwell's first two chapters explicate the history only – and not the text. In Attwell's study, the literary text serves as an explanation of the context, which brings its discursive environment to the fore. Note Colleran's related observation:

Attwell's ... book is so intently trained on the circumstances in which each novel appeared or, more exactly, on the historically situated discursive formulations within and against which each novel operates, that primary emphasis is given to each work's status as historical artefact, and less is placed on any synthesis between novels or an accumulated sense of them. (588)

Indeed, in the words of Sarah Nuttall, "David Attwell ... has undertaken to do something which Coetzee has explicitly resisted" (731). Therefore, I must conclude that, like Dovey's study, Attwell's contextual analysis – however valuable its insights may be – overpowers Coetzee's fiction, giving rise to a betrayal of its contents; a betrayal that is alleviated, nonetheless, by the introduction's singular self-awareness.

### **Coetzee's Commentary**

Given that Gallagher, Head, Dovey and Attwell tend to use the fictional text to promote predetermined arguments, it follows that the textual substantiation is not always sufficiently substantial. Instead of relying primarily on the text, they quote not only other critics and theorists in validation of their assumptions, but also Coetzee's *own* comments about his fiction or extracts from his academic work.<sup>16</sup> I am putting my case more

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<sup>16</sup> Critics regularly quote Coetzee in defence of their arguments. Although some do so more than others, I will provide only one example from each of the five monographs to illustrate this tendency: Gallagher's *A Story of South Africa*, page 145; Head's *J.M. Coetzee*, page 95; Dovey's *The Novels of JM Coetzee*:

strongly than I should, but it seems to me that some literary critics, with notable exceptions, have developed a blind spot with regard to Coetzee's fiction. Although regular references to and close considerations of Coetzee's observations speak of a great reverence on the critic's part, these observations are not necessarily conducive to the development of a style of reading suited to engaging with Coetzee's singularly self-reflexive fictions.

In addition, some critics conflate the perspectives of author, implied author, narrator and character under the title of 'Coetzee'. The medical officer's statements in *Life & Times*, for example, are occasionally understood as the personal opinions of 'Coetzee'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the notion of the implied author as an intermediary consciousness appears to be dwindling in this field.<sup>18</sup> This encourages the impression that the novels are the straightforward, unproblematic vehicles of Coetzee's personal opinion. But, according to Rimmon-Kenan:

[a]n author may embody in a work ideas, beliefs, emotions other than or even quite opposed to those he had in real life; he may also embody different ideas, beliefs and emotions in different works. Thus while the flesh-and-blood author is subjected to the vicissitudes of real life, the implied author of a particular work is conceived as a stable entity, ideally consistent with itself within the work. (87)

In following Coetzee's pronouncements too closely, critics run the risk of negating his fiction's primacy. In fact, one would think that the critical commentary of a faithful

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*Lacanian Allegories*, page 320; Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, page 89; and Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, page 64.

<sup>17</sup> Attridge notes that the medical officer from *Life & Times*'s "interpretation of K's mode of existence in the Kenilworth camp has frequently been extended by commentators to embrace the whole novel; yet the fact that it is advanced by the well-meaning but uncomprehending medical officer must throw some doubt on it, and on allegorical readings of the work more generally" (*The Ethics of Reading* 34). As an example, Attridge refers specifically to the following statement, as uttered by the medical officer: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (*The Ethics of Reading* 34).

<sup>18</sup> For an example of such an oversight, see Gallagher's chapter on *Life & Times of Michael K* in *A Story of South Africa*.

follower of Coetzee's impressions of his own fiction would reflect his belief in the rivalry of history and literature in his novels, to the subordination, one might add, of history. Attwell and Head both quote Coetzee's renowned statement from "The Novel Today":

[i]n times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry. (*The Politics of Writing* 15; *Coetzee* 10-11)

In quoting this statement, using Coetzee's 'real' opinion as a method of justifying their arguments, Attwell and Head are defying Coetzee's intention by placing their faith in the primacy of reality, of history; and not in fiction. In quoting this excerpt to prove the prevalence of fiction, they are, in fact, revealing an ironic allegiance to the 'reality' of the quotation, the reality of Coetzee's life and times.

The renowned evasiveness of Coetzee's answers in response to questions about his fiction speaks of his resistance to making such proclamations.<sup>19</sup> When formulating statements about his fiction in 'real' time, Coetzee may seem to implicate himself in the reduction of his fiction's multi-textured performances to mere representations of reality. Nonetheless, he displays a characteristic irony in statements such as the following, imbuing them with performativity: "[W]hat is criticism, what can it ever be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object? How often is there an equal marriage?" (*Doubling* 61). In making such a critical statement – a statement that is often quoted by critics in literary commentary (for example, Head *Coetzee* 26) – Coetzee is performing the manner in which criticism, including his own, can overpower, betray and thus confine fiction.

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<sup>19</sup> In his preface to *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Attridge aptly thanks Coetzee, "who, in true friendship, kept his reservations to himself" (xiii).

## Attridge's Singular Style

In *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2005), Derek Attridge argues for a critical response, “a response that might be called ‘responsible’” (9), one that “attempt[s] to do justice to the singularity and inventiveness” (xi) of Coetzee’s fiction. By largely avoiding what Helgesson describes as the act of “chasing the Holy Grail of a wholly non-appropriative form of reading” (189), such a responsible reading is “one that is fully responsive to [the literary work’s] singularity, inventiveness, and otherness, as these manifest themselves in the event or experience of the work” (*The Ethics of Reading* 11). According to Head:

[a] responsible reading, for Attridge, does ‘not attempt to pigeonhole a work’: ‘To read a work responsibly ... is to read it without placing over it a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement. It is to trust in the unpredictability of reading, its openness to the future.’ This would seem to represent the critical equivalent of Coetzee’s insistence on the autonomy of the writer and the novel. (“Belief” 105)

Three aspects of the ‘responsible’ methodology followed by Attridge in his comprehensive consideration require specific mention. First, unlike Gallagher, Head, Dovey and Attwell, Attridge’s frame does not attempt to bring Coetzee’s fiction into the order of the same as part of a pursuit of meaning and ‘truth’, but emphasises the fiction’s alterity instead. Secondly, Attridge’s creation of a “companion volume” (xiii) to *The Ethics of Reading*, called *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), allowed him to theorise and elaborate “some of the questions about literature raised briefly in the chapters” (xiii) without having to subject Coetzee’s literary texts to this theoretical progression. Ideas that might have been inspired by, but not directly related to, the novels could be explored elsewhere. Thirdly, he does not provide a comprehensive introduction; only a preface that succinctly describes his personal response to each novel. The ensuing description of the work’s methodology and the various chapters’ associated aims appears to emerge from

these respective experiences. There is an acute sense that Attridge's study will "follow Coetzee's lead" (xii) in order to stay true to his initial impression of each text. The preface is a nuanced, sophisticated, introspective and self-aware delineation of the research field that, nevertheless, allows the ensuing chapters the necessary autonomy to effectively and responsibly engage with the narrative fictions on their own terms.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, my thesis attempts to follow Attridge's lead in this regard.

In a critique of Attridge's methodology, Head draws attention, however, to the loss of autonomy and critical distance that might accompany "this cozy relationship" ("Belief" 108), suggesting that, unless Attridge's notion of "a responsible instrumentality" (Attridge qtd. in "Belief" 108) is introduced to such a reading, the critic might not "arrive at an appropriately modified (and evolving) ethical overview of a field of study" ("Belief" 108).

### **Contextualisation as Supplementation**

Thus far, I have mentioned certain types of contextualisation or acts of framing with regard to Coetzee's fiction. To summarise the potential pitfalls of such interpretative frames, I now refer to a Master's thesis that was written by Julia Streuber, under Nuttall's supervision at Stellenbosch University ten years ago, called *'South Africa' in Three Novels by J.M. Coetzee*. In a conventional manner, Streuber reaches for a number of contexts in justification of her argument, regarding Coetzee's oeuvre as the unmediated expression of his own personal condemnation of apartheid and, thus, a direct engagement with the contexts of his fictional works' production. She quotes Coetzee, the person not the fiction, on page 10, for example, as well as prominent scholars, on pages 1 to 6, for instance, deeming their opinions as valid as, if not more valid than, the notions that arise from the novels themselves. Streuber does not interrogate or test these statements against the examined narratives, reading them as objective truths instead of subjective

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<sup>20</sup> However, this expectation is somewhat thwarted by the contextualisations that launch most of the volume's chapters. In most cases, the literary examination is conducted only after a consideration of a specific context or concept – and this undercuts the preface's promise of an ethical engagement with the voices of the individual narratives.



assessments. In addition, the perspectives of author, narrator and character are often conflated (see pages 14 and 38).

I offer this brief critique of Streuber's thesis, a thesis unacquainted with the implications of its chosen methodology, to indicate the manner in which the field of Coetzee criticism has been shaped. The respective responses to his oeuvre have regularised a particular approach to and engagement with the fictional texts; a method which is followed by many students of his literature. Although each literary commentator should be at liberty to respond to a text in a personal and individual manner, as befitting the text, he/she should bear in mind, I would suggest, the primacy of the literary text. Often, the large body of responses to Coetzee's fiction causes literary analysts to lose sight of the object, or, perhaps, one should say 'subject' of their analyses, namely the literary text, as they struggle over interpretations generated by other critics.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, I am fully aware that these critics, nevertheless, supply more nuanced readings than their interpretative programmes might suggest. Their own observations exceed their frames of reference, which is why I often quote them approvingly throughout this study. As mentioned, the presentation of my case might be considered too extreme. However, in order to problematise the critic's delineation of the literary text, I deemed it necessary to *make explicit* the particulars of my concerns, including the style of reading embodied by this thesis. For example, it seems that Coetzee criticism generally assumes that it should expose the 'underlying' or 'hidden' 'truth' of the fictional text. In the introduction to *The Politics of Writing*, Attwell, for example, states that his project has set itself the "goal of explication" (6). Is it even necessary to explain Coetzee's fictions? Are they not self-sufficient, sovereign texts that speak for themselves through the act of reading? The meaning of the literary text is by no means reliant on its critical 'explication'. Though immoderate, such concerns prompted me to deploy a style of reading which (like Coetzee's own critical style) endeavours to supplement and intensify – and not to reduce or overpower – the concerns of the literary text.

Such considerations open a space in which one can ask how precisely the critic should go about framing and supplementing Coetzee's fiction. What should and should not be said, lest the delimitation confine and condemn the study to 'a life lived in cages'? The following chapter on *Age of Iron* strives to demonstrate the practicalities of an ethical encounter, a containment of Coetzee's fiction as opposed to a confinement, placing specific emphasis on the interpretative frame provided by the literary text itself. It is this frame that will facilitate the consequent illumination of and supplementation to the aspects I have chosen to consider.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “THE TONGUE OF A GOD”: REALISM AND CONTAINMENT IN *AGE OF IRON*

‘To speak of this’ – I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth  
littering the path – ‘you would need the tongue of a god.’ (*Age of Iron* 91)

In her letter that comprises the narrative, Elizabeth Curren, the protagonist of J.M. Coetzee’s sixth novel, *Age of Iron* (1990), does indeed speak of and evoke the particulars (‘the bush, the smoke, the filth’) of this scene of devastation to her daughter, despite the demurrals. Various emphases on Mrs Curren’s lack of authority and objectivity suggest that she possesses anything but the tongue of a god, a tongue that would succeed in providing an unmediated, truthful representation of ‘this’ reality.<sup>21</sup> Mrs Curren’s attempt to find her “own words” (91) to describe the scene suggests an awareness of the ideological implications of an aging, white woman’s promotion of her subjective stance on the matter as ‘truth’. In fact, the shantytown scene, the scene to which Mrs Curren is responding in the citation, ends with an appeal to her daughter to recognise the subjectivity of her portrayal (95-6).

As a demonstration of the merits of close reading, the following consideration of a significant passage and its encircling events should serve to illustrate how the primary concerns and style of reading that constitute my act of framing ‘Coetzee’ are prompted by the codes of the text itself. In addition, this chapter will argue that the shantytown scene, this mimetic moment in *Age of Iron*, is not a coincidental concession to the project of literary realism, as some critics would like to believe, but rather a careful consideration of the conditions, limitations and possibilities of this device by way of a metafictional performance of the manner in which realism (re)presents or (re)produces reality.

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<sup>21</sup> “This house, I thought. This world. This house, this music. This” (27).

## The Shantytown Scene

The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. He still wore the grey flannel trousers, white shirt and maroon pullover of his school, but his feet were bare. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating on him for hours, on him and his comrades, not only here but wherever they had been when they met their deaths; their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth ...

I was shaking: shivers ran up and down my body, my hands trembled. I thought of the boy's open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again.  
(95)

This realistic representation of Mrs Curren's response to the death of Bheki, her housekeeper's fifteen-year old son, is a pivotal point in *Age of Iron*. Contained by the events that precede and follow it, this central scene lies at the core of Mrs Curren's conflict-ridden journey to Guguletu, a township on the outskirts of the South African city of Cape Town.<sup>22</sup> Here, at the sight of Bheki's dead body, her eyes, till then "sunk in the sleep of worldliness" (153) are prised open and forced to see, and acknowledge, the reality of apartheid.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Attridge observes that some critics refer to the protagonist, 'Mrs Curren', as 'Elizabeth' "out of the same unconscious sexism that makes critics speak of 'Susan' – but not 'Robinson' or 'Daniel' – in *Foe*" (*The Ethics of Reading* 95). With this observation in mind, I will henceforth refer to Elizabeth Curren, not as Elizabeth, but as Mrs Curren.

<sup>23</sup> Feeling "[t]ired beyond cause, tired as an armour against the times, yearning to close my eyes, to sleep" (117), Mrs Curren frequently struggles to keep her eyes open – open eyes indicating a direct, unmediated and thus 'truthful' picture of reality. "How do I know the scales are not already thickening over my own eyes?" (117), she asks with reference to the conservative, presumably white South African eyes that "[cloud] over again, scales thickening on them, as the land-explorers, the colonist, prepare to return to the deep" (116).

The journey commences with a telephone call “[i]n the small hours of the night” (81) to Florence, Mrs Curren’s housekeeper, summoning her to the aid of her fifteen-year-old son, Bheki. “There is trouble” (81) says Florence. Mrs Curren offers to take her and her other children to Guguletu by car. “Full of misgivings” (83), she drives beyond the protective boundaries of her sleepy suburb, which she describes as “[a] closed universe, curved like an egg, enclosing us” (20), into a wholly different, somewhat surreal world. “Swirls of mist floated towards us, embraced the car, floated away. Wraiths, spirits. Aornos this place: birdless” (83) writes Mrs Curren to her daughter. This layer of mist, darkness and rain presses against the windshield and windows of her rundown “little green car” (88), separating the passengers from the dreamlike world of the suburbs behind, and the nightmarish reality that lies ahead. Then, in the contained space of the vehicle, they have to cross another boundary, a barricade of police cars, to reach Guguletu.

On arrival, Florence’s cousin, a teacher named Mr Thabane, enlists the help of a boy, a “child of the times, at home in this landscape of violence” (85), to help navigate the vast, chaotic landscape of the township. In search of the missing Bheki, Mrs Curren and Mr Thabane leave the car, Mrs Curren’s last item of suburban security. While crossing the hellish “landscape of scorched earth” and “blackened trees” (86), Mrs Curren’s brittle body is exposed entirely to the elements, even as her white skin – the mark of her complicity in apartheid’s dying regime – renders her vulnerable to the residents’ “resentment” and “hatred” (99).

Mrs Curren and Mr Thabane cross a “wide, flat pond” (87), a barrier of water, in the direction of the partially flooded shanties.<sup>24</sup> She writes that, while struggling up against a dune, “the noise we had heard, which at first might have been taken for wind and rain, began to break up into shouts, cries, calls, over a ground-bass which I can only call a sigh: a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing” (87).

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<sup>24</sup> In her chapter on *Age of Iron*, Gallagher writes that “[I]ed by a black Virgil through water and fire, Mrs Curren, like Dante, enters hell” (197).

Here, on top of the dune, Mrs Curren encounters an anguished “scene of devastation: shanties burnt and smouldering, shanties still burning, pouring forth black smoke” (87).

As the gangs of men responsible for the devastation advance on the gathering spectators, Mrs Curren flees amidst screams and gunfire. “There was nothing I longed for more than to get into my car, slam the door behind me, close out this looming world of rage and violence” (88-9), she notes. After recrossing the pool, Mr Thabane, the teacher, confronts her response to the reigning chaos in front of a curious crowd. He asks: “You want to go home ... But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?” (90).

They retrieve the car on route to “a long, low building, a hall or school perhaps, surrounded by a mesh fence” (92-3), kept under surveillance by troop carriers. Here, at the end of her perilous journey, Mrs Curren finds Florence weeping at Bheki’s lifeless body. Mrs Curren responds to Mr Thabane’s condemnation: “‘Please listen to me,’ I said. ‘I am not indifferent to this ... this war. How can I be? No bars are thick enough to keep it out.’ I felt like crying; but here, beside Florence, what right had I? ‘It lives inside me and I live inside it,’ I whispered” (95).

This brief description is intended to bring the variety of boundaries that enclose – or contain – the above quoted scene, to light. In order to reach Bheki’s deceased body, Mrs Curren has to cross a space of darkness, mist and rain, a police barricade, a hellish landscape of scorched earth, a barrier of water, then a dune subjected to gunfire, as well as the school’s mesh fence – not to mention the conceptual delimitation posed by the township and Mr Thabane’s judgment and censure – all the while enduring the harshest restriction of all, that imposed by her dying body. These boundaries create an acute sense of the concrete and conceptual distance that has to be traversed from sleepy suburbia to vigilant shantytown.

Before considering the significance of these boundaries – the scene’s frame, if you will – and what they include and exclude, a consideration of the scene’s realism must follow.

## The Reality-effect

David Macey observes:

verisimilitude can be established by the reality-effect produced by the introduction into a narrative of details that do nothing to advance the narrative, and which are therefore redundant in structural terms, but which 'say' to the reader 'We are real', and thus guarantee the verisimilitude of the narrative as a whole. (391)

A number of narrative details clearly guarantee the 'reality' of apartheid as the principal context against or 'inside' of which *Age of Iron*'s narrative events unfold. First, particular references to South Africa, Africa, and a variety of regional locations, like Guguletu and Cape Town, plainly situate the narrative within a South African context. Secondly, the concluding contextualisation of the novel's 'times', "1986-89" (181), gives a specific indication as to the narrative's time frame: the era of the black youth's intensified resistance to the apartheid regime's oppressive reign.<sup>25</sup> According to Head, "[t]he scenes of township violence evoke the Cape Town unrest of 1986, and this would appear to be the date of the novel's setting" (*Coetzee* 131). Mrs Curren also makes frequent statements about the country's oppressive government, its leaders being "Cetshwayo, Dingane in white skins" (26),<sup>26</sup> and the resultant resistance of the black youth.<sup>27</sup>

In general, these narrative details do not appear to play a significant part in advancing the narrative. However, in the shantytown scene, they are brought to the foreground. Whereas Mrs Curren usually displays an awareness of the 'reality' of apartheid as

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<sup>25</sup> Note that the term 'apartheid' is never used in *Age of Iron*.

<sup>26</sup> "The new Africans, pot-bellied, heavy-jowled men on their stools of office: Cetshwayo, Dingane in white skins. Pressing downward: their power in their weight. Huge bull-testicles pressing down on their wives, their children, pressing the spark out of them. In their own hearts no spark of fire left. Sluggish hearts, heavy as blood-pudding" (26).

<sup>27</sup> "Children of iron, I thought. Florence herself, too, not unlike iron. The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? A Spartan matron, iron-hearted, bearing warrior-sons for the nation. 'We are proud of them.' We. Come home either with your shield or on your shield" (46).

something which is disconnected from the veracity of her dying body, here, in this scene, she encounters directly or, rather, enters into the reality of apartheid, experiencing it from within.

For example, in the scene, there are specific references to the youth's resistance in the midst of violence, chaos and confusion – a conflict which, in the reader's mind, is played out against the background of Mrs Curren's continuous condemnation of the loss of childhood innocence. Schoolchildren are everywhere. Initially, a confident ten-year old boy guides Mrs Curren's party through Guguletu. Then, in the scramble to escape the gangs of men terrorising the shanties, Mrs Curren is shouldered out of the way by a "girl, an enormously fat teenager ... glaring with naked animosity: 'Get out! Get out!'" (89). In addition, Mr Thabane, it emerges, "was a teacher. But I have left the profession temporarily. Till better times arrive. At present I sell shoes" (92). This is related to the fact that the building where Bheki's deceased body lies, still clothed in his school uniform, resembles a school. Lastly, Mrs Curren is confronted by another child: "A girl in an apple-green school tunic advanced on me, her hand raised as if to give me a slap. I flinched, but it was only in play. Or perhaps I should say: she forbore from actually striking" (93-4).

All things considered, the shantytown scene engages with a specific or 'real' situation in a manner directly related to the representational approach of literary realism. Unlike most of Coetzee's narratives, this scene, in a typically realist fashion, seems concerned with the "omniscient presentation of a mirror of empirical 'reality'" (Hutcheon 138), "[bringing] social and historical reference to the fore" (Hutcheon xiii). As in the case of literary realism, here "[the realist or representational sign] effaces its own status as a sign, in order to foster the illusion that we are preceiving reality without its intervention. The sign as 'reflection', 'expression' or 'representation' denies the *productive* character of language" (Eagleton 136).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Eagleton uses 'preceiving' instead of 'perceiving'.



The selected scene not only sustains the illusion of realism, but also appears to engage with a shared reality, the reality of apartheid, in an attempt to bear witness to its truth, its futility as embodied by Bheki's fatality. This engagement resembles the approach adopted by the seemingly unmediated realist prose of other South African authors. Dominic Head, for instance, compares *Age of Iron* with the novels of Nadine Gordimer, stating that there exists "a surprising affinity" (Coetzee 132) between Coetzee's novel and Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* (1979). He also mentions Coetzee's "interesting appropriation ... of the motif of the buried black man" (133) as deployed also in Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974). In other words, the scene appears to present a mirror of reality in a manner analogous to the style employed by (the South African variety of) oppositional realism.

However, as the next section will argue, this style is contained by the variety of boundaries that separate the realist(ic) shantytown scene from Mrs Curren's self-reflexive suburban existence. Two of *Age of Iron*'s characterising features are absent here, proving that this scene – along with a few others – is incongruous with the remainder of the narrative.

### **The Other: John**

John is the friend of Bheki, Florence's son. The two boys are involved in the South African youth's struggle against apartheid and use Mrs Curren's house as refuge from the conflict raging in Guguletu, often spending the night. "I cannot turn my home into a haven for all the children running away from the townships" she tells Florence after the boys' struggle with Vercueil (49).

Mrs Curren distrusts John intensely. "What a self-important child" (42), she exclaims:

I did not like him. I do not like him. I look into my heart and nowhere do I find any trace of feeling for him. As there are people to whom one spontaneously warms, so there are people to whom one is, from the first,

cold. That is all. This boy is not like Bheki. He has no charm. There is something stupid about him, something deliberately stupid, obstructive, intractable. He is one of those boys whose voices deepen too early, who by the age of twelve have left childhood behind and turned brutal, knowing. A simplified person, simplified in every way: swifter, nimbler, more tireless than real people, without doubts or scruples, without humour, ruthless, innocent. While he lay in the street, while I thought he was dying, I did what I could for him. But, to be candid, I would rather I had spent myself on someone else. (71-2)

When John is injured, ‘lying in the street’ after being chased by a police van, Mrs Curren keeps him from bleeding to death, visiting him in the hospital “to make sure [he is] all right” (71). Her unyielding (judg)mentality is clearly expressed in this passage.<sup>29</sup> Whereas she finds it easy to love Bheki, this boy repels her feeling, her sympathy. It comes as no surprise that, during the visit, her reductive judgment is met with John’s “wall of resistance”: “I felt him stiffen, felt an angry electric recoil” (72). Ironically, Mrs Curren tells John: “Be slow to judge” (72). She then starts to lecture him on war in terms utterly foreign to him (she mentions Thucydides, for example), a speech which “[falls] off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white” (72).

In “Speech and silence in the fictions of J.M. Coetzee”, Benita Parry considers “whether the reverberations of Coetzee’s intertextual transpositions, as well as the logic and

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<sup>29</sup> Mrs Curren has firm notions of what childhood should be and impresses these ideas, first, on Florence and, then, on Mr Thabane: “Last year, when the troubles in the schools began, I spoke my mind to Florence. ‘In my day we considered education a privilege,’ I said. ‘Parents would scrimp and save to keep their children in school. We would have thought it madness to burn a school down.’

‘It is different today,’ replied Florence.

‘Do you approve of children burning down their schools?’

‘I cannot tell these children what to do,’ said Florence. ‘It is all changed today. There are no more mothers and fathers.’

‘That is nonsense,’ I said. ‘There are always mothers and fathers.’ On that note our exchange ended” (36).

Also note the following: “Mr Thabane, let me make one thing clear to you. I am not trying to prescribe to this boy or to anyone else what he should do with his life. He is old enough and self-willed enough to do what he will do. But as for this killing, this bloodletting in the name of *comradeship*, I detest it with all my heart and soul. I think it is barbarous. That is what I want to say” (136).

trajectory of his narrative strategies, do not inadvertently repeat the exclusionary colonialist gestures which the novels also criticize” (150). To my mind, the realist depiction of the relationship between Mrs Curren and the black characters in the novel – specifically Florence, Bheki, John and Mr Thabane – does repeat this foreclosing gesture. Note how Mrs Curren sees John in her mind’s eye “in Florence’s room, in the growing dark, the boy, lying on his back with the bomb or whatever it is in his hand, his eyes wide open, not veiled now but clear: thinking, more than thinking, envisioning” (137). At another stage, she imagines a weekend in Florence and her husband’s life, concluding with the statement: “All of this happened. All of this must have happened ... Almost it is possible to say: This is how life should be” (39). It appears that Mrs Curren is attempting to approach John as well as the strong-willed Florence somewhat ineffectually with sympathy and understanding. Nevertheless, these visions are fraught with appropriation and confinement and, therefore, typified by a lack of reciprocity.

John is undoubtedly, in the words of Parry, “subjected to acts of ventriloquizing” and “situated as [an object] of representations and mediations which offer [him] no place from which to resist the modes that have constituted [him] as at the same time naked to the eye and occult” (151). However, Parry – along with many other critics – does not seem to consider the possibility that *Age of Iron*’s portrayal of the relationship between Mrs Curren and John may, in fact, be *purposefully* enacting the limitations of the literary genre, that is, realism.

In imitating literary realism’s typical representation of the black other, *Age of Iron* illustrates how, in the words of Mike Marais, “the realist novel does not so much mask as *deny* entirely the existence of alterity” (Marais 3).<sup>30</sup> In other words, in the realist novel “that which is presented as ‘other’ is simply the same masquerading as alterity” (Marais

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<sup>30</sup> Marais writes: “[M]uch post-colonial fiction does not offer a satisfactory solution to the problem of the novel’s relation to otherness, a problem which has beset it since its emergence. It *professes* to be counter-discursive but is actually always already implied by the very system which it purportedly challenges. It presupposes that which it seeks to transgress and in the very moment of criticizing it, restores it. Furthermore, its self-reflexive admission of implication in the order of the same is, if anything, more suspect than the realist novel’s profession of innocence: in claiming to represent an irruption of alterity into sameness, it masks what is simply another means of constituting otherness. In short, it claims to represent an otherness which is not other” (8).

7). As a medium that “[‘clarifies’] language” (Marais 2) and stabilises meaning, it, in fact, antagonises a freeplay, a plurality of meaning. Therefore, the realist novel is perceived as incapable of representing ‘true’ alterity – as demonstrated by Mrs Curren’s one-dimensional encounters with Florence and her family that bring them into the order of the same. These encounters eradicate their alterity, as well as their multi-dimensionality in a performance of “the way in which [fictional and historiographic] representations routinely foreclose on otherness” (Marais 9).

At a certain stage, however, Mrs Curren begins to repent. As her relationship with Vercueil intensifies, her deliberations on life and death begin to demonstrate an awareness of the impropriety of her obstinacy and inflexibility as well, borne of a sense of complicity with the regime that John is fighting, as well as of responsibility, sympathy, respect and even of a kind of love.<sup>31</sup> “Poor child! Poor child!” she thinks: “From somewhere tears sprang and blurred my sight. Poor John, who in the old days would have been destined to be a garden boy and eat bread and jam for lunch at the back door and drink out of a tin, battling now for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed, for all the garden boys of South Africa!” (138). In other words, Mrs Curren starts to acknowledge that she does not possess the authority to judge or restrict others through the reductive narrativisation of their lives.

Interestingly, it appears that Vercueil’s presence is primarily responsible for the prompting of Mrs Curren’s self-doubt and her desire to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the other:

Whose is the true voice of wisdom, Mr Vercueil? Mine, I believe. Yet who am I, *who am I* to have a voice at all? How can I honourably urge them to turn their back on that call? What am I entitled to do but sit in a corner with my mouth shut? I have no voice; I lost it long ago; perhaps I never

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<sup>31</sup> According to Gallagher, “[e]ven as she acknowledges that she feels no love for this black child, she admits that she played a part in making him unlovable. This paradox, so typical of the dilemma of white South Africans, adds to her feelings of impotence and guilt ... Again she is caught in an endless circle of will and volition, of intellect and feeling” (201).

had one. I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence. But with this – whatever it is – this voice that is no voice, I go on. On and on. (149)

Mrs Curren also tells Vercueil:

But now I ask myself: What right have I to opinions about comradeship or anything else? What right have I to wish Bheki and his friend had kept out of trouble? To have opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one, is, it seems to me, nothing. (148)

### **The Other: Vercueil**

“His name is Mr Vercueil,” I said. “Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil. That’s what he says. I have never come across such a name before. I am letting him stay here for a while” (34). Like Michael K’s name, ‘Vercueil’ – Mrs Curren twice calls him “Mr V” (75; 174) – projects a sense of indeterminate alterity, of that which is concealed (the Afrikaans word ‘skuil’ means ‘to hide’).<sup>32</sup>

There is nothing seemingly redeeming about this man, an ungrateful if not indifferent alcoholic with vacant unhealthy green eyes. Yet, Mrs Curren offers the stranger work, food and shelter in exchange for his company, or rather his companionship. She shares her most intimate thoughts with him, even the plan to kill herself, an idea he ardently supports. At the time of John’s injury and hospitalisation, Mrs Curren flees the house and

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<sup>32</sup> There are many similarities between Michael K and Vercueil. Both are: handicapped (Michael K has a hare lip and Vercueil’s hand has only two working fingers); gardeners (although Vercueil’s attempt at gardening are marked by his lack of enthusiasm and characteristic indifference); workless, poor and homeless; comfortable with this homelessness; indifferent to societal codes and history; and both are subjected to a superior’s persistent attempts to appropriate their ‘stories’. In addition, the skin colour of both is omitted, a significant omission given the context of these narratives. In this sense, it almost seems as if Michael K, as a transworld identity, had wandered into *Age of Iron*’s space, introducing himself to Mrs Curren (and the reader) under a different name. However, there are subtle differences between the two characters. Michael K’s indifference, for example, is portrayed as a result of his naiveté, his innocence, simplicity and sincerity in contrast to Vercueil’s perceived cunning or shrewdness. In addition, Michael K shows an aversion to alcohol. Quite the opposite, Vercueil is drunk most of the time.

spends a night on the streets, where she is later found by her unearthly ‘angel’, her Vercueil, who sleeps on the ground next to her. After they return to her house, the text concludes with an intimation of Mrs Curren’s death at the hand of Vercueil’s cold, suffocating embrace.

Vercueil, unlike John, strictly resembles the indeterminate other usually encountered in Coetzee’s fiction, a character that is partially (Michael K, for example) or entirely (like Friday) without voice. This forms part of Coetzee’s problematisation of the limits and limitations of narrativisation. Whereas Mrs Curren’s relationships with Florence, Bheki, John and Mr Thabane are concrete or ‘real’, Vercueil flutters in and out of her house, obscured by a haze of ontological uncertainty. For instance, whereas John bleeds copiously after his bicycle accident, Mrs Curren cannot imagine blood on Vercueil’s leathery face. Also, while the black characters have distinct opinions, Vercueil is wholly indifferent and, most of the time, “intoxicated” (41). Often he ignores Mrs Curren when she speaks to him: “He said nothing” (7).<sup>33</sup>

In addition, Mrs Curren frequently describes Vercueil, “this reconnaissance, this other annunciation” (4), in otherworldly terms, as a “marionette” (3), “a visitor” (3), “a lost soul” (13). She writes:

A dry creature, a creature of air, like those locust-fairies in Shakespeare with their whipstock of cricket’s bone, lash of spider-film. Huge swarms of them borne out to sea on the wind, out of sight of land, tiring, settling one upon another upon another, resolving to drown the Atlantic by their numbers. Swallowed, all of them, to the last. Brittle wings on the sea-floor sighing like a forest of leaves; dead eyes by the million; and the crabs moving among them, clutching, grinding. (174)

And:

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<sup>33</sup> Also note the following: “He sat relaxed, imperturbable” (14); “Like water against a rock my words thudded against his silence” (29); “Vercueil said nothing” (65); and “He did not answer” (181).

He is like one of those half-mythical creatures that come out in photographs only as blurs, vague forms disappearing into the undergrowth that could be man or beast or merely a bad spot on the emulsion: unproved, unattested. (177)

Mrs Curren's first judgment of this creature is met with his spitting on the ground: "'You are wasting your life,' I said. 'You are not a child any more. How can you live like this? How can you lie around and do nothing all day? I don't understand it'" (7). It is here, by means of Vercueil's resistance to Mrs Curren's attempts to 'make sense' of his indeterminacy and fix his 'meaning', that her 'training' in reciprocity begins. The novel tracks the oscillation between appropriation and reciprocity in her engagements with, specifically, Vercueil and his alterity, but with the other characters as well.

Returning to the subject of the shantytown scene, the most significant element here is the *absence* of Vercueil, the initiator of Mrs Curren's systematic realisation of her lack of authority. In his absence, Mrs Curren's observations speak of a clear, rational and alert mind when the stark reality of the township breaks through the self-reflexive, self-doubting suburban state of mind she assumes in Vercueil's presence. The absence of the narrative's indeterminate other furthers Marais's claim that realism is unable to represent, explore and interrogate alterity.<sup>34</sup>

### **Mrs Curren's self-reflexive eye/I**

The most obvious destabilising element of realism's discursive techniques is Coetzee's concretisation of the distance between the opinions voiced in the text and his own. With Mrs Curren's narration, it becomes increasingly difficult to read 'Coetzee' between the lines of *Age of Iron*. Whereas realist fiction, in a deceptively objective manner, strives to unearth the 'truth', the 'reality' of a particular milieu, as witnessed by the implied author,

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<sup>34</sup> Attwell also alludes to the way in which Vercueil problematises the novel's realist quality: "Commentators who – with the 'literariness' of *Foe* in mind – have remarked on the strongly 'realist' qualities of *Age of Iron* (referring to what I have called the novel's social density, the graphic depictions of township violence, and so on) have played down the transformative role played by the novel's mode of address and by Vercueil" ("Dialogue' and 'Fulfilment'" 174).

*Age of Iron* rather emphasises the subjectivity of Mrs Curren's expression of her particular point(s) of view. Throughout the novel, Mrs Curren's 'I' and subjective 'eye' are directly related: "A fly settles on my cheek. It cleans itself. It begins to explore. It walks across my eye, my open eye. I want to blink, I want to wave it away, but I cannot. Through an eye that is and is not mine I stare at it ... But it is upon me, it is here: it struts across me, a creature from another world" (24). Her letter's persistent recollection of the eyes of those around her – Vercueil's eyes, Florence's eyes, the eyes of the two black boys – as well as her own, suggests a metafictional interest in the constitution of perspective, revelation and truth. This draws attention to the subjectivity of Mrs Curren's gaze, destabilising the notion of omniscient representation.<sup>35</sup>

For example, after witnessing the death of Bheki, Mrs Curren writes: "This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again" (95). This evokes open eyes' conventional association with awareness and insight. "I cannot have my eyes closed" (165), writes Mrs Curren. However, this association is challenged by three obscure references to open but not insightful eyes, eyes that are dead, blank or simultaneously shut: "If you so much as scuffled with your shoe you would uncover them: the faces, the dead eyes, open, full of sand" (114); "Her eye is open and is blank. She sees and does not see" (164); and "His eyes are unblinking ... His eyes are open and mine, though I write, are shut. My eyes are shut in order to see" (159).

Thus, it appears that the notion of the uninhibited, unmediated and 'truthful' observation of 'reality' is shown to be somewhat elusive and problematic. Mrs Curren's attempts to bear witness and come to terms with the reality of apartheid emerge as singular evocations of her struggle to provide an adequate and ethical reading of the turbulent times. Consequently, the emphasis shifts from *what* Mrs Curren sees to *how* she sees or, otherwise stated, to her subjective interpretation of the world.

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<sup>35</sup> Although the scene is perhaps but a significant instance of Mrs Curren's bodily confinement, allow me to venture a reading of the fly as the reader, as an explorer of the eye or the perspective of a fictional being. When the eyes of Michael K and the foreman lock, it appears that the stare transcends the page and meets the eyes, that is, the means of interpretation, of the reader. One could read the following extract as a like meeting between worlds. See Chapter Three, pages 70-3 for a discussion of this particular passage.



In other words, there is a sense that *Age of Iron*'s encounter with reality is mediated and shaped by a particular psyche – that of a singular, elderly, dying eccentric that regularly takes medicine. As a result, Mrs Curren's psyche is by no means sound, stable or objective. Because of this, *Age of Iron* is infused with eccentric estimations and strange metaphors. Note, for example, how the descriptions of Mrs Curren's suburb are sometimes obscured by the air of a drug-induced dream, a reverie frequented by Vercueil, her animal-like, ethereal companion and allegorical angel.

It is significant that the shantytown scene itself, however, does not involve Mrs Curren's usual inward focus on her pending death, her complicity in apartheid's dying regime, as well as her consequent lack of authority. This time her gaze is directed outward. Although the scene is told in the first person, as in the case of the rest of the narrative, Mrs Curren's voice acquires a somewhat omniscient quality in the shantytown scene, enabling the temporary, partial effacement of the subjectivity of her eye, her perspective. All the customary allusions to the subjectivity of her own gaze are omitted, which produces the illusion of an unmediated, truthful representation of reality.

In conclusion, the self-reflexive and self-doubting statements that pervade the rest of the novel are missing from the shantytown scene, only reappearing at its edges. Therefore, the characteristic problematisation of objectivity and truth is significantly absent. It follows that the shantytown scene captures 'reality' in a manner incommensurable with the rest of the narrative's approach.

### **“The Word-mirror is Broken”**

The illusion of this scene's reality is shattered, along with its containment, when, at the scene's end, someone throws a rock at Mrs Curren's windscreen. Like Elizabeth Costello's mimetic mirror (*Elizabeth Costello* 19-20), the transparent window, the frame which Mrs Curren has produced to facilitate her daughter and the reader's observation of the 'reality' of Bheki's death, shatters. This alerts the reader to the mediating presence of

the frame. Significantly, the smash occurs immediately after Mrs Curren instructs her daughter to acknowledge the subjectivity, the particularity of her portrayal:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain ...; your heart beats with mine.

... I am the only one. I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye. (95-6)

The shattering of the windscreen, in conjunction with this statement, signals the end of the specific containment of realism in *Age of Iron*. Near its end, the conventions of realism are largely abandoned, allowing the narrative to assume its dominant style.

Significantly, the somewhat surreal border of fog and rain, along with the shattered windscreen at its conclusion, creates the impression that the selected scene, this realist realm – as severed from the totalising space of the novel by borders as well as by differences in style and method – is virtually floating at *Age of Iron*'s centre. Other smaller, less significant scenes that also mimic realism's conventions, like the previously mentioned descriptions of Florence's life outside of Mrs Curren's house and John's state of mind prior to his arrest, can be perceived as similar enclosures within the narrative as a whole.

The context of the selected scene should, therefore, be taken into account before proclaiming *Age of Iron* a paragon of realist literature. Given its dissimilarities with regard to the rest of the novel, the shantytown scene cannot be perceived as a microcosm of the entire narrative. However, this does not mean *Age of Iron* projects an “imitative

representation” (Head *Coetzee* 132) by means of which to condemn critical realism. Rather, it emphasises that the genre known as literary realism is a technique with insights as well as constraints. Realism as well as metafiction are (re)presented, rather, as vantage points that are played off against one another, neither of which is renounced or favoured. In “[projecting] himself or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*” (McHale 224) in the letter, the reader circulates in these registers, never settling on one, encouraged to interrogate the fictional mode’s limitations.

Therefore, it appears to be impossible to locate Coetzee’s desired denunciation of apartheid amongst the various approaches in the novel, given the manner in which *Age of Iron* weaves together different ways of writing, of accessing, constructing and experiencing reality. Accurately to represent reality, one would, in the words of Mrs Curren, “need the tongue of a god” (91).

In a gesture characteristic of Coetzee’s fiction’s “subtle working together of different kinds of narratives” (Nuttall 734), realism’s conventions (its possibilities and limitations) are interrogated by means of the containment of the realist scene at *Age of Iron*’s centre. The scene’s frame, therefore, allows for a metafictional “re-examination of the possibilities of realism” (Nuttall 733) inherent in its style of representation. Accordingly, *Age of Iron* should be defined as a “self-referring or auto-representational” text that “provides, within itself, a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception” (Hutcheon xii).

### **A Solicited Context: The Debate on Realism**

This chapter has provided the textual substantiation necessary to refute the oft-assumed claim that *Age of Iron* can be categorised as an unproblematic or straightforward work of realist fiction. In order to demonstrate the particular importance of such a refutation, one of the novel’s contexts, that is, South Africa’s foremost literary debate of the 1980s, must be evoked.

Apartheid South Africa was an era characterised by “alienation” (Morphet 53), separate development and passes. The government controlled and inhibited the mobility of South African society by creating concrete as well as imaginary boundaries to establish and institutionalise various structures or modes of confinement.

Drawing on Bauman, Tony Morphet examines the apartheid regime’s confinement of society as a response to modernity’s “construction of social space” (53). Morphet suggests that “the insulating boundaries of the premodern world” produced secure structures that are now being eradicated by the “expanding cores of the developed world” (53), reconstructing societal space in a radically different manner. In other words, as globalisation intensifies and development expands, borders are crossed and destroyed, leaving the individual and state vulnerable. As a solution to the problem of white vulnerability and disempowerment, apartheid’s “thrust”, writes Morphet, “was to produce what Graham Pechey has called a countermarch against modernity – driving blacks in particular, but whites also, backward into [the] premodern conditions” (54) that exposed South African society to the political organization of racial hatred (Reich 17). In response to the vulnerability of individual and state in an expanding world, the apartheid government constructed concrete and conceptual structures to simulate the illusion of insulation that characterised premodern society.

In the mid-1980s, there was a “wave of nationwide unrest” in response to the acts of oppression and cruelty engendered by “the government’s ‘total strategy’, involving ideological as well as repressive control” (Head *Coetzee* 131). In the literary realm, this confinement instigated the attempts of anti-apartheid authors to “bear witness” (Attwell *The Politics of Writing* 11) and communicate the regime’s atrocities through their writing.

In the foreword to Helgesson’s *Writing in Crisis* (2004), Marais speaks of the “[literary text’s] inevitable contamination by the discursive determinants of the cultural and historical context from which it emanates”, a contamination which forces one “to consider ... the ways in which the South African ‘interpretative community’ of the

apartheid era was affected by historical forces” (ix). As Helgesson puts it: “we would be hard pressed to find any writer or critic at the time who is unaffected by the conflict” (12).

Indeed, it is during the intensified pressures of the “siege mentality” (André Brink qtd. in Helgesson 1) that South African writers found their imaginative mobility increasingly restricted. As a result, oppositional fiction was “plunged ... into its worst crisis in years” (Nkosi qtd. in Helgesson 1), a crisis that inspired the most prominent literary debate of the 1980s. Tony Morphet describes this debate as the “set of exchanges ... even a kind of battle, over how the conditions of life in South African were (and indeed are) to be represented” (54). The heated critical dispute over which route of response should have been employed in the liberal novel – a debate essentially about “literary representation, artistic integrity and political responsibility” (Marais “Foreword” ix) – took place between two main groups. In fact, the majority of oppositional ‘white writers’ were divided into the “heavily polarized positions” (Marais “Foreword” ix) of either the oppositional realists who used works of ‘real’ fiction as “instruments of revolution in South Africa” (Monson 259) and the aestheticists who maintained that fiction belonged to a different order than that of witnessed ‘truth’. At the time, Gordimer’s fiction was proclaimed the foremost embodiment of South African realism, and Coetzee’s narratives, the epitome of self-reflexive aestheticism.<sup>36</sup>

As the discussion of realism in *Age of Iron* demonstrates, Coetzee’s fiction appears to be inclined toward a refutation of this genre’s attempted reconstruction of reality. Not surprisingly, given his fiction’s contrary manner of addressing the South African situation by means of a “non-realistic, self-referential fiction that constantly highlights its own unreliability” (Gallagher 44; Gallagher qtd. in Head *Coetzee* 9), Coetzee’s novels have given rise to somewhat resentful criticisms by the supporters of realism. Many such

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<sup>36</sup> Helgesson warns that the view of Gordimer and Coetzee’s positions “as a neat antithetical pair ... risks eliding a crucial point of resonance: the fact that both of them *address* the relation between history and writing, and that both find this relation problematic as well as potentially rewarding” (15). In a similar sense, the heavy polarisation of the two factions “did not allow for much in the way of clear thinking – for a recognition, for instance, of the point ... that is, that form *has* content, is *always* political, and that content is, in fact, *constituted* by form” (Marais “Foreword” ix).

critics specifically cite Gordimer's critique of the fiction of "those South African writers who ... failed to engage history in a like manner" (Gallagher 8), fiction that is perceived by "many writers, and many more readers ... as a form of political and ethical evasion" (Attwell *The Politics of Writing* 11). According to Parry, "Coetzee's fiction ... might perhaps even be seen as turning its face from Africa" (162).

The question of *Age of Iron's* particular response to these contexts of confinement has been tackled by many literary critics. Does the novel turn its face from, or does it rather embrace South Africa and its history? One can argue that the text does indeed solicit such an interrogation, given Mrs Curren's evident engagement with the reality of apartheid. However, in their eagerness to find traces of oppositional realism in Coetzee's novels, many significant aspects, like *Age of Iron's* particular *interrogation* of this discursive register, have been overlooked.

### **Realism as Literary Ideology**

Instead of mirroring the stratagems of oppositional realism to 'bear witness' to the 'reality' of apartheid, Coetzee's fiction, in general, demonstrates a more nuanced "postmodern preoccupation with the violence of representation" (Jolly xiii), which can be related directly to "the suppression of difference" (Jolly 1). Writing from an environment characterised by concrete and conceptual confinement, Coetzee appears to have decided to engage with the concept of limitation (as a metaphor for narrativisation) itself, rather than risk reproducing and enforcing similar structures through his writing. The "ambiguity and ambivalence of the speaking positions of his narrators" (Kossev 4) and protagonists demonstrate an acute awareness of "the violations that established categories of thought can enact upon ... a fictional body" (Jolly 2), especially with regard to a white writer's potential suppression of (black) other's difference.

In a characteristic dismantling of fictional devices, *Age of Iron*, specifically, draws attention to the stratagems employed by literary realism in order to examine the "imposition of single, authoritative meaning" (Hutcheon xiii) that accompanies this

mode. Turning to a “self-conscious narrative form that enacts problems of authorship and authority, freedom and determination, and the colonizing nature of language itself” (Gikandi 118-9), *Age of Iron* suggests a concern with the manner in which realism, “a literary ideology” according to Barthes, “tends to conceal the socially relative or structured nature of language” (Eagleton 135-6). In the words of Terry Eagleton:

[t]he ‘healthy’ sign, for Barthes, is one which draws attention to its own arbitrariness – which does not try to palm itself off as ‘natural’ but which, in the very moment of conveying a meaning, communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well. The impulse behind this belief in the earlier work is a political one: signs which pass themselves off as natural, which offer themselves as the only conceivable way of viewing the world, are by that token authoritarian and ideological. Ideology seeks to convert culture into Nature, and the ‘natural’ sign is one of its weapons. (135)

Kavanagh also emphasises realism’s ideological implications, stressing that “‘realism’ ... can ... be understood as the paradigmatic form of ideology ... It has the function of producing an obvious ‘reality’ that social subjects can assume and accept, precisely as if it had not been socially produced and did not need to be ‘known’ at all” (311). In its general “resistance to the hegemonic oppression of imperial power, whatever form that may take” (Kossew 7), Coetzee’s fiction draws attention to the ideological implications of realism’s negation of the subjective mediation of its perspective.

By bringing the shantytown scene’s frame, and consequently the subjectivity and constructedness of the perspective, into focus, Coetzee does not evade his responsibility as a South African writer as many critics have claimed, but, rather, reveals and problematises the limitations, in other words, the constraints and possibilities, of the responsible gesture itself.

## The Solicited Frame: Containment versus Confinement

In the preceding discussion, I have hoped to illustrate the importance of boundaries in the shantytown scene's performance, especially in that this instance of realism brings the gap between reality and its epistolary representation, so often underscored by Mrs Curren's self-reflexive eye/I, to a near close. Not only does Mrs Curren cross numerous borders to reach Bheki's body, she is forced to expand her limited awareness of the reality of apartheid as well. When the shattering of the windscreen brings the shantytown scene to its end, it becomes apparent that Mrs Curren's perspective has been altered irreparably. "[N]umb in body and soul" (99), she asks herself: "Have I ever been fully awake? ... A doll's life? Is that what I have lived?" (100). The expansion of the conceptual and concrete borderlines which confined her to a state of ignorance places Mrs Curren, then, in a position to start questioning the validity and authority of her narration. The experience, although it distresses and disheartens her, nevertheless prompts a comparison with Goethe's vagabond:

who, after his aimless migrations, returns home to his family, only to find with them the bliss he had sought throughout his wanderings. This migrant explorer has gained the ability to see his 'home' with new eyes and to experience his limited realm with new values, because he found that in his effort at overcoming the borderline which hemmed him in he was merely expanding it. (Von Molnar 230)

Thus far, I have invoked the language of demarcation in order to demonstrate that *Age of Iron* deploys conceptual and concrete boundaries, at the level of plot and imagery, to enable its interrogation of realism's limits and limitations. This interrogation employs and engages with the concept of delimitation, a concept which can be said to characterise Coetzee's oeuvre in its entirety. It follows that this text, along with *Life & Times of Michael K*'s explicit imagery as will be identified in the next chapter, can be said to prompt a framework that foregrounds and problematises this concern with the productive, as well as reductive, manifestations of delineation in Coetzee's fiction. The following



consideration of the shades of meaning contained by this concept will shape the frame, the lens, through which I shall read – and, in fact, already have read – Coetzee’s texts in the remainder of the thesis.

The individual perceives the world as a constellation of defined objects, identified and rendered meaningful by being outlined. Definition is one of the essential components of perception. Given that to ‘define’ means to “give meaning of”, “describe scope of” or “outline; mark out the boundary of” (Elliott 189) one might say that without definition, without the individual’s ability to mark out the boundaries of the world and its objects, he/she would be unable to describe its scope and meaning. Without the ability to separate the world into objects, the individual would be lost in a fog of ignorance.

The act of delimitation plays a crucial part in the reading and interpretation of the world, and one of its most intriguing embodiments; the literary text. Only by marking out the boundary of a text can its range and possibilities be determined; only by marking out the boundary of a word, distinguishing it from all others, can its meaning be established. One might infer that a text, in the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley, is “at once the centre and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line in which all things are contained” (476).

As a cartographer’s imposition of boundaries turns a vast land into localities, the reader’s interpretation transforms the extent of the page’s potential meanings into a particular narrative. Given that every reading is located within a unique context, each interpretation, each evaluation yields a different narrative, a different bounded space or state. It follows that every literary critique perceives and generates a singular landscape, the boundaries of which may or may not coincide with other interpretations. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the precise borders of a novel’s landscape, given that it is the act of reading, the act of interpretation that defines the provisional, ever fluctuating margins of its textual localities.

Although literary realism, as a discursive register, imposes a fixed limit or boundary in its authoritative representation of reality, the metafictional strategies employed by *Age of Iron* as a whole, rather, have been shown to draw a more flexible delineation – given the manner in which these strategies bring the act of narrativisation, the fictional perspective’s frame – into focus. In order to distinguish these two types of delineation in Coetzee’s fiction, I have chosen to employ the terms, ‘containment’ and ‘confinement’.

Defined (in other words, delimited *and* identified) by *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary and Thesaurus* as the “action or policy of preventing expansion of hostile country or influence” (Elliott 155), ‘containment’ (the act of containing) is more often than not employed to describe the destruction or the prevention of the movement or expansion of (1) a hostile country or influence, (2) a disease, (3) radioactive material, or (4) conflict or unrest. ‘Containment’ was initially employed as the name given to the overall theory underlying United States policy towards the Soviet Union China during the Cold War which aimed to isolate these countries and to block Communist expansion in the world.

Taking this definition into account, ‘confinement’ (the act of confining) seems a straightforward synonym for ‘containment’. Confinement’s verb, ‘to confine’, can be defined as an action that “imprison[s]” or “keep[s] or restrict[s] within certain limits” (Elliott 149). Therefore, at first, a clear, unambiguous relation appears between definitions of ‘confine’, ‘confinement’ and ‘containment’. However, these denotations are problematised when one allows the varied meanings of containment’s verb, ‘to contain’, to come into play.

Elliott demarcates ‘contain’ as an action that is capable of “holding within itself”, that “include[s], comprise[s]; prevent[s] from moving or extending” and “control[s]” or “restrain[s]” (155). Here, ‘contain’ appears to be not only a restrictive force but also an *enabling* influence. Does ‘flesh’ not contain body; womb, baby; wall, home; and sentence, significance?<sup>37</sup> The self, for example, can only exist as a container of

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<sup>37</sup> Here, the term, ‘flesh’, is exercised in accordance with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the “intertwined layers of body and world” (Salamon 101).

consciousness; similarly, the body owes its existence to its containment by an envelope of flesh; a child's identity is reliant on the realisation that she is a whole and contained entity, disconnected from her mother (if one follows Lacan); a country is comprised of geographical boundaries, in the same manner that a society is dependent on laws to unite and contain individuals to maintain order; in addition, language *is* delineation. One of the most apparent examples of containment in *Age of Iron* can be found in the manner in which the novel contains or encloses realism as a register which enables a performance of its limits and possibilities. On the other hand, an instance of confinement in *Age of Iron* can be traced to the manner in which Mrs Curren's judgments reduce and restrict the alterity of the other.

Thus, whereas 'confine' presupposes an authoritative subject imposing a restrictive force upon a precarious object, 'contain' presupposes such an imposition but includes a subject's fostering embrace of an object. Consider, for example, the manner in which a state power 'contains' its citizens, in both meanings of the term, in that it restricts, represses and forecloses (therefore, 'confines') but does so in order to uphold order and security (ideally).

Therefore, although 'confinement' and 'containment' seem synonymous, 'containment' is the stronger of the two when the significances of the respective verbs, 'to confine' and 'to contain', come into play. Otherwise stated, confinement is a *type of* containment. Whereas Elizabeth Curren's body can be said to contain but also to confine her soul, for example, Anna K's suitcase contains but does not confine its contents.

Given this thesis's deployment of 'containment' as a conceptual tool to facilitate its consideration of the concept of delimitation in Coetzee's texts, the denotations of 'containment' must be divided into two camps for the purposes of clarity. On the one hand, 'confine', 'restrain', 'restrict' and 'imprison' are grouped together under the subheading 'confinement'. Henceforth the dissertation will refer to this group, in other words, as that which signifies containment's *destructive* dimension, with the terms 'confinement' and 'confine'. On the other hand, 'hold', 'include', 'comprise' and 'foster'

will be grouped together, signifying ‘containment’s *constructive* dimension or, in the words of Von Molnar, “the positive values which may be derived from limitation” (226-7), under the status of ‘containment’ and ‘contain’. It follows that ‘containment’ is now purged of its destructive dimension, a dimension which will henceforth be identified with ‘confinement’.

Having made the distinction between containment and confinement, I could only find one other article that draws a similar boundary, that is, Géza von Molnar’s “Confinement or Containment: Goethe’s *Werther* and the Concept of Limitation”, written in 1970. Von Molnar considers two forms of the German word, ‘Einschränkung’, using the English term, ‘confinement’, for “its negative implication” and ‘containment’ “for its positive complement” (226). According to Von Molnar, “[t]here is, to be sure, the expected negative version which emphasizes the purely restrictive aspects of limitation, but a more positive complement occurs with equal frequency” (226). As discussed by Forest Pyle with regard to Wordsworth’s poetry, a similar distinction can be made between “writing as *enshrinement* and writing as *entombment*” (60).

These two terms are employed by this study, in the first instance, to identify two types of reading. The act of reading, as inevitably entangled in the workings of language, is an act of definition, referring to the manner in which delimitation – the establishment of concrete and conceptual boundaries – enables signification. These boundaries are responsible for the generation of the forces under discussion, that is, containment and confinement. The type of boundary determines the force exerted. Where a permeable boundary will contain the space it demarcates, given that it enables an interrelationship between the interior of the contained space and its exterior – in other words between text and context, text and intertext, text and reader, as well as text and author – an impermeable, rigid boundary will rather confine and restrict such an exchange. Von Molnar, for example, describes true containment as a “balanced interplay” (232) between “the finite and the unlimited” (231), subject and object (233), and “part and whole” (233), in other words, as a “free and harmonious equilibrium between the realms of human limitation and infinite longing” (233).

Timothy Francis Strode, in his development of “an interpretative framework for discerning ethical forms within territorial representations, including works of narrative fiction” (vii), supplements the distinction I am making between containment and confinement with a comparable differentiation between Levinasian and Heideggerian dwelling. The “totalizing horizon” (Strode 7) of Heidegger’s “enrooted dwelling or property” (Strode 6) “requires the shutting out of all that is foreign to its identity ... to maintain the clarity of its objects” (Strode 37). In other words, “in its relations with alterity”, Heidegger’s subject endeavours to confine or “possess alterity, to remove alterity’s resistance and otherness, and to convert this difference to sameness” (Strode 17). Levinas’s conception opposes the notion of Heideggerian dwelling with “an essential uprootedness” (Strode 4) or “dwelling-as-wandering” (Strode 5) that “situate[s] ethics at the heart of intersubjective relations”, a stance which can be aligned with containment.

As one reads, delimits and identifies, one is presented, especially with reference to Coetzee’s writing, with an ethical imperative: a choice between limits which will determine either the confinement (the possession) or the containment (an intersubjective, reciprocal engagement with the alterity) of the text; either the imprisonment or the problematisation and intensification of its play of meaning.<sup>38</sup> Speaking in extremes, one might say that, ultimately, the act of reading will either leave the text in the “geography of ... variety” (Easton 5), or drive it into the order of the same.

This chapter has endeavoured to illustrate the extent to which a close analysis can give rise to the frame that facilitates the examination of that same text. Whereas certain critics frame their arguments with the textually unsubstantiated assumption that *Age of Iron* is a realist representation of apartheid, this section has enclosed its consideration of realism within a frame constituted instead by textual substantiation. In proving that this work of fiction actually interrogates the stratagems of certain discursive registers, of which realism is the primary instance, it does allow for a different, more responsible interpretation than that of a study framed by a presupposed context.

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<sup>38</sup> Marais also associates the act of reading with choice (*The Novel* 15).

## Criticism as Containment

It must be noted that I do not denounce contextualisation in the least. My introductory chapter offered a critique of various contextualisations in order to differentiate between two main types of introductory delimitation: a predetermined, unsubstantiated framework, on the one hand, and a responsible, reciprocal engagement that is prompted by the text itself, on the other. As suggested by this discussion, a literary analysis should not feel the need to explain, reduce or dilute the indeterminacy of Coetzee's singular works of fiction. This thesis proposes a style of reading – from a range of other alternatives – that, rather, hopes to supplement and intensify the text's freeplay of meaning in accordance with the internal logics or codes of that same text. The interaction between the critic and Coetzee's fictional text, if read closely and responsibly, can generate the framework that will facilitate its interpretation. In the words of Von Molnar “[s]uch free interaction without usurpation characterizes the positive aspect of limitation; it characterizes the concept of containment” (229). Of course, as this chapter has argued, a boundless encounter between critic and text is impossible. Nevertheless, the critic can choose which *type* of boundary to draw in his/her conversation with the narrative.

The concept of delimitation can be extrapolated fairly unproblematically from *Life & Times of Michael K* given the explicit images of confinement that will be examined in the following chapter, initially drawn attention to by Graham's paper on the concentration camps in *Life & Times*, ““It is hard to keep out of the camps’: Areas of confinement in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee” (2005). Though not as overt in *Life & Times*, *Age of Iron* also appears to engage with this concept at the level of plot, especially, as this chapter has demonstrated by way of a close reading of the enclosed shantytown scene. *Elizabeth Costello*, on the other hand, will be shown to resist my framework's attempts at translating some of its concerns into the language of the limit, forcing this paradigm to encounter its *own* limits and limitations. Finally, a consideration of four critical essays in *Doubling the Point*'s “Poetics of Reciprocity” will conclude the consideration of containment in Coetzee's fiction with an examination of the strategies deployed by his

criticism. All of the ensuing chapters relate the concept of limitation deployed *in* the fictional texts to the style of reading, the type of delineation, solicited *by* these texts. As a result, the study aims to delineate a way in which literary criticism can, without becoming obsolete, embrace the sense of bewilderment that accompanies any type of engagement with Coetzee's texts.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### “A LIFE LIVED IN CAGES”: THE READER AND CONFINEMENT IN *LIFE & TIMES OF MICHAEL K*

[People] want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. (*Life & Times of Michael K* 247)

I first encountered the term, ‘confinement’, in relation to Coetzee in an unpublished conference paper by Lucy Graham, “‘It is hard to keep out of the camps’: Areas of confinement in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee” (2005). Opening with a similar quotation from *Life & Times of Michael K*, “What I have learned of life tells me that it is hard to keep out of the camps”, Graham’s paper considers the different camps, the “different circles of hell” (4), in *Life & Times of Michael K* especially, mentioning that “images of the camp resonate throughout Coetzee’s most recent fiction” (5). Although this thesis considers a variety of concrete and conceptual camps as well, it rather places predominant emphasis on the relationship between reader and literary text, which is examined in terms of two forms of delimitation, confinement and containment. While, in the paper’s conclusion, Graham draws a link between “public speech and (en)closure ... between confession and incarceration” (5) and, therefore, could perhaps be taken to hint at the relationship between language and confinement, she does not develop this notion further. In addition, given the paper’s explicit examination of confinement, the constructive aspect of delimitation, what I call containment, is not acknowledged.

The title of my thesis, “*A Life Lived in Cages*”, derives inspiration from the pivotal passage (quoted above) in J.M. Coetzee’s fourth novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), where, near the end of the novel, the protagonist, Michael K, “is made to reflect” (Dovey 271) on the question of putting a life, a history, a reality into words, and transforming it into a story about perpetual imprisonment in a variety of concrete and conceptual cages.

Michael K compares himself to three pet (and caged) animals, known for their



performances of entertaining tricks: budgies, white mice and monkeys. This comparison, importantly, associates the act of reading, the act of receiving the story, with the reader's requirement of a caged performance from the story's characters, reducing the act of reading to a degrading and ridiculing voyeurism.

According to Teresa Dovey, "[i]n *Life & Times of Michael K* there are repeated references to this need to translate the random and chaotic quality of the lived experience of the victim into the form of a story" (271). The quotation expresses Michael K's opposition to such a translation, given that the conversion of life into story will imprison and confine his immeasurable life to a linguistic cage. As a result, Michael K's elusive life resists delimitation and "eludes representation", whilst his body "refuses to be 'embodied' in the meaning of the text" (Dovey 301).<sup>39</sup> It appears that K is the victim of textual confinement, forced to sacrifice his agency, his significance and his 'being' to the desires of the text:

[i]f, in the mode of realism, Michael K is the victim of an oppressive and exploitative system, in the mode of text construction he is the victim of a hierarchy of authorities, which range from the structural needs of the narrative and the prescribed codes of the genre, to the desire of both writer and reader, and to the ultimate *author-ity* of the discursive context, of language as Other. (Dovey 267)

However, as will be explained in this chapter, *Life & Times* solicits such a confining interpretation from the reader as part of a performance of delimitation's reductive dimension, that is, confinement. The performance of confinement, in fact, alerts the reader to the dangers of imposing rigid limits on the text and, in the process, reveals the

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<sup>39</sup> Of course, Michael K's struggle, like his being, is of a textual nature. Yet, the more K resists narrativisation, an act which exists as, or in the, text only, the more 'real' or extratextual he seems to become in the reader's mind.

potential for containment instead.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, although Michael K is continuously subjected to the reader's act of delimitation, he does not have to be confined by it.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the extent to which interpretation (which I equate with the act of reading) can be related to the establishment of the boundaries that enable signification.<sup>41</sup> Here, it becomes apparent that the act of reading inevitably necessitates delimitation. The text, however, can present the reader or critic with a *choice* between types of reading: types of delimitations which either reductively confine or productively contain and enable the text's depth, fullness and vibrancy.<sup>42</sup>

To be precise, *Life & Times of Michael K* brings into play the reader's choice between confinement and containment. The novel produces an ethical imperative by simultaneously exploiting and exposing the manner in which textual indeterminacies solicit numerous interpretations. Thus, what attests to *Life & Times*'s particular relevance to an examination of the nature of Coetzee's oeuvre is, in fact, the manner in which it *solicits* such decisions by means of indeterminacy at the level of character and narrative.<sup>43</sup> Otherwise stated, the reader is compelled either to confine the text's potential in preferring one above all other interpretations or, rather, to contain, celebrate and amplify the text's ambiguous dimensions.

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<sup>40</sup> The 'reader', here, is "a function implicit in the text, an element of the narrative situation. No specific real person is meant; the reader has only a diegetic identity and an active diegetic role to play" (Hutcheon 139). In *Life & Times*, "the reader or the act of reading itself ... become thematized parts of the narrative situation, *acknowledged* as having a co-producing function" (Hutcheon 37).

<sup>41</sup> Paul de Man describes reading as "an act ... that separates from the undifferentiated mass of facts and events, the distinctive elements susceptible of entering into the composition of a text. This occurs by means of a *process of elision, transformation, and accentuation* that bears close resemblance to the practice of critical understanding" (*Allegories of Reading* 57, my emphasis). Reading, therefore, necessitates a choice, a foregrounding of one or a couple of interpretations above others.

<sup>42</sup> This thesis does not suggest that there are two types of interpretation only. In terms of the study's conceptualisation of reading as delimitation – which, it must be noted, is only one aspect of the act of or one way of considering reading – only two categories emerge: containment and confinement. The discussion of these two concepts should also not be taken as an establishment of a binary opposition. Firstly, both concepts are subdivisions of delimitation and should not be perceived as polar opposites. Secondly, in their rigid polarisation, binaries lead to confinement. The thesis employs these concepts not to confine the text's potential, but, rather, to arrive at a manner in which a critical analysis can *contain* a text.

<sup>43</sup> Helgesson also observes that the "'open-endedness' of K is precisely what invites us to produce new readings". He goes even further to "claim that the *only* way to be 'true' to *Life & Times* is to continually produce an array of heterogeneous readings and thus obstruct the construction of a singular truth about the novel" (187).

In other words, it is the invitation of a delimiting, constitutive choice that involves the reader in the staging of one of the novel's motifs, that is to say, reading as a choice between containment and confinement. In addition, the reader's choice, *my* choice, can be perceived as an extension or manifestation of this significant concern. All readings of *Life & Times* are, therefore, extensions of and supplements to the text, partaking in the novel's problematising performance of interpretation. All readings of the novel, in being interpretations solicited by the text that perform one of its motifs, are contained by *its* framework, *its* cage. Otherwise stated, given the manner in which the text solicits certain readings and manipulates interpretation in its generation of meaning, the reader is subjected to its wishes, its literary codes. In a post-colonial context, a reading that, in a sense, colonises this specific novel could, then, be perceived as a colony of its (master) narrative. My chapter on *Life & Times* is as much a textual construction, an extension of the text's performance of interpretation and meaning, as the figure of the protagonist, Michael K – each signifying a brief 'life lived in cages'. This study thus implicates me in the text's performance.

The novel achieves this subtle yet powerful consideration of the various guises of limitation by exploiting not only the constative but also the *performative* faces of language.<sup>44</sup> Constatively, the text expresses a concern with the concept of limitation. Performatively, in the interpretation of the text, the reader is invited to concretise this concern by, in fact, defining and delimiting that same text. This aids the development of the narrative's subtle yet powerful interrogation of the means of interpretation. As stated, *Life & Times* bears, as one of its motifs, the problematisation of the act of interpretation or, more specifically, the difficulties inherent in the relationship between signification and delimitation. In particular, the medical officer's confinement of Michael K's meaning and being, as represented by the section on Michael K's stay in the infirmary of the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp, Section II, guides the reader into a moment of self-reflexivity regarding his own interpretation of *Michael K*, the novel, as well as Michael K, the character.

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<sup>44</sup> I use the terms, 'constative' and 'performative', as employed by Derrida.

Consequently, this chapter, following the style of reading elaborated in the previous chapter, will argue for a critical containment of *Life & Times* that accounts for the manner in which the reader is implicated in the performance of one of its motifs, that is to say, reading as an act of delimitation. I embark on this journey, this reading of the novel, by examining the manner in which Michael K experiences these spaces of confinement (as well as of containment) through his senses, through his skin, to arrive at an understanding of the nature of K's intense internalisation of the restrictive forces that surround him. This is but one constituent of K's elusive character as the ensuing subsection illustrates in its initial identification of the main types of indeterminacy located in the novel and a corresponding explanation of *how* each style generates opposing interpretations that lend the novel its air of elusiveness. Furthermore, the particular manner in which textual indeterminacies solicit an interpretation from the reader is considered in accordance with the medical officer's conceptual confinement of K's significance. The argument then draws a link between the medical officer's interpretation of K *in* the narrative and the reader's interpretation *of* the narrative in its explication of the self's choice between containment and confinement in the face of the elusive other. In conclusion, the interpretative choice is considered in terms of Derrida's notion of supplementarity to place conclusive emphasis on the text's performance of the act of definition and the ethical gesture it solicits.

### **Defining the Spaces in and of the Narrative**

In the words of Dominic Head, the title of *Life & Times of Michael K*:

alludes directly to a tradition of thinking about individual identity in relation to history – ‘The Life and Times’ – which is represented in a variety of genres, including the historical novel and the *Bildungsroman* ... *Life and Times of Michael K* proclaims itself as having an involvement with this tradition in which the individual life is held to interact intimately with social and political development. (Coetzee 93)

With this statement in mind, the title, as the reader's first engagement with the text, prepares the reader for a fictional biography, an account of a significant individual life intimately shaped by its social and political milieu. In terms of my frame of reference, this novel tells the story of singular man's quest for containment in an era fraught with conflict and confinement. Schooled in Huis Norenius, a strict institution for unfortunate children in Faure, Michael K is taught silence and obedience, character traits he hides behind when faced with unyielding authority.

Indeed, K's life can be defined as a series of encounters with the persistent and invasive onslaught of power in its various guises. For example, after Huis Norenius, during his journey to Prince Albert and, then, in his evasion of the authorities, K faces a constellation of actual or concrete structures of confinement, such as the Somerset, Stellenbosch, Prince Albert and Kenilworth hospitals, Anna K's room under the stairs at the Côte d'Azur, forced labour at Touws River, the Jakkalsdrif resettlement camp, and the rehabilitation camp at Kenilworth. These camps or confinements can all be read as manifestations or embodiments of the military, the police, and the government, and even medical personnel's wielding of state power. According to Graham, "[w]hat is remarkable about *Michael K*, whose increasingly skeletal protagonist finds himself twice interned in concentration camps, is the linking of mere life and the space of the camp to colonialism, war, and state racism" (3).

Michael K's life is thus represented as intricately entwined with the conditions of war and its forms of confinement. At the novel's conclusion, K mentions the manner in which war has divided the landscape into a variety of camps:

Now they have camps for children whose parents run away, camps for people who kick and foam at the mouth, camps for people with big heads and people with little heads, camps for people with no visible means of support, camps for people chased off the land, camps for people they find living in storm-water drains, camps for street girls, camps for people who

can't add two and two, camps for people who forget their papers at home, camps for people who live in the mountains and blow up bridges in the night. Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being. How many people are there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate? (249)

As suggested by this meditation on the confined state of being and life that accompanies times of war, *Life & Times of Michael K* does indeed tell 'the story of a life lived in cages'. In reading the novel, the reader accompanies K through and consequently delimits a variety of concrete and conceptual spaces, some of which resemble confined cages, others, contained enclosures. It appears, therefore, that the novel is saturated with images of confinement, as well as of containment, which will be discussed shortly. However, before I launch my examination of the most significant concrete and conceptual spaces in and of *Life & Times*, allow me first to clarify the concepts, 'concrete' and 'conceptual', in terms of this thesis's vocabulary.

I use the term 'concrete spaces' to refer to structures that are constituted by material, tangible boundaries: actual buildings composed of walls, camps composed of fences, and gardens composed of furrows. As revealed in Chapter One, it is the type of boundary that determines the nature of the space. Where limits are impermeable and rigid, a destructive, restrictive and thus confined space comes into being. The various concrete cages that confine K, of which the Jakkalsdrif and Kenilworth camps are leading examples, are defined by their impenetrable, oppressive borders. Permeable limits, on the other hand, produce a constructive, nurtured and, in other words, contained space. K's cave in the mountains, as well as his burrow on the farm, for example, serve as a demonstration of delimitation's enabling and fostering capabilities.

'Conceptual spaces' refer to configurations constituted by abstract, intangible boundaries. Conceptual spaces of confinement are established by unyielding delimitations which exert power in various guises. In the novel, tradition, wealth and legislation, for example,

define the patriarchal power of Visagie, the white grandson, whilst violence and legislation define the authority of the military. Conceptual spaces of containment, on the other hand, are defined by flexible, accommodating boundaries. Privilege and sympathy, for example, can be said to put forth or define the fostering faculty that is charity: “His heart was full, he wanted to utter his thanks, but finally the right words would not come”.<sup>45</sup> As stated, conceptual spaces are somewhat entangled with their concrete counterparts, given that material spaces like Jakkalsdrif can often be perceived as the concretisation or manifestation of conceptual spaces like the military’s authority.

As the discussion of his movement through a variety of such spaces of confinement will demonstrate, K resists in a singular manner the different categories of captivity, whether imposed by other characters, the medical officer or the reader. Where he is unable to find or create a constructive space of containment – of which the Karoo vegetable garden is a moving example – he transforms his body into an impermeable solitary and secret structure of containment. In other words, where he is unable to escape confinement in all its guises, he transforms his body into an indeterminate element which resists attempts at delineation. At the pivot of these confining spaces stands K, his body, mind and soul compressed by confinement: “I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day” (93) he thinks in the Karoo cave. It follows that K is defined not only by the concrete and conceptual spaces *in* the narrative, but also by the reader’s interpretation of the entire narrative itself.

The following subsection, “Sensing Space”, explores K’s fabled journey through concrete and conceptual, confined and contained spaces *in* the narrative, calling specific attention to the manner in which his character is shaped by these environments. A later section, “The Power of Supplementation”, on the other hand, considers the manner in which K also travels through the conceptual space *of* the narrative where he is exposed to the reader’s decisive act of delimitation.

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<sup>45</sup> Although K accepts some acts of charity with gratitude, there are similar gestures he considers but another form of confinement: “I have escaped the camps; perhaps if I lie low, I will escape the charity too” (249). Helgesson mentions Marais’s claim “that Michael K ... is ultimately ‘held hostage’ by the ethical imperative of caring” (188).

## Sensing Space

Confinement and containment have been shown to resemble forces or influences exerted by different types of boundaries. Although some of the structures of containment or confinement might be concrete or material, the forces their borders exude are as intangible yet perceptible as the following three metaphorical pairs deployed in the novel: sound and silence, light and shadow, and heaviness and lightness. According to Graham, *Life & Times* displays “an intense focus on bodily sensations” (3). Michael K does indeed perceive or rather senses the spaces through which he moves instinctually, intuitively and, above all, corporeally. His body is portrayed as an accumulation of all five senses – vision, audition, tactition, gestation and olfaction – which develop as the narrative progresses. In fact, the teaspoon – the definitive image of containment because of its striking facilitation of K’s independence, as founded on his reciprocal relationship with the land – is directly related to assimilation and taste:

And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself (things were gathering pace now) and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying ‘What are we going to do about water?’, he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (250)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> According to Graham, the teaspoon “gives [K] sustenance ... and by the end of the novel in K’s imagination the teaspoon has been retrieved to become the meagre tool by which ‘one can live’, asserting humanity and life (however spare), over the negations of the camp and the work of death perpetrated by war” (2). She also states that it is the teaspoon that, in pointing to the harelip, “makes [K] ‘other than’ fully human” (2).



This section will trace the manner in which K seems to feel confinement, to absorb it through his skin, by way of his senses:

‘There was music all afternoon and all evening, till eight o’clock. It was like oil over everything.’ ‘The music was to keep you calm, ... to soothe your savage breast.’ ... ‘The music made me restless,’ he said. ‘I used to fidget, I couldn’t think my own thoughts. ... I used to think about flying. I always wanted to fly. I used to stretch out my arms and think I was flying over the fences and between the houses. I flew low over people’s heads, but they couldn’t see me. When they switched on the music I became too restless to do it, to fly.’ (182)

This extract uses music as a metaphor for the intangible yet influential force of confinement as orchestrated by the concrete walls of Huis Norenius. Because of his disfigurement and supposed slow mind, Michael spends his childhood confined to this school. Within its concrete walls, he is also subjected to an accompanying conceptual structure of confinement: “the list of rules on the door of the dormitory” he calls his “father” (143), a rigid and unforgiving disciplining authority that terrifies him into numbness.<sup>47</sup> This authority, aimed at taming, disciplining and restricting self-determination, is oppressive and stifling ‘like oil over everything’. It weighs down K’s daydreams of flying freely over the concrete and conceptual fences that enclose him.

At fifteen, K leaves the school and works, first, for the Parks and Gardens division of the municipal services of the City of Cape Town as Gardener and, then, at Greenmarket Square’s public lavatories as a night attendant. The lavatories are described in terms of the oppressive “brilliant neon light that shone off the white tiles and created a space without shadows” (5). Later in K’s life, in Touws River, he again faces an oppressive

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<sup>47</sup> “He remembered Huis Norenius and the classroom. Numb with terror he stared at the problem before him while the teacher stalked the rows counting off the minutes till it should be time for them to lay down their pencils and be divided, the sheep from the goats. Twelve men eat six bags of potatoes. Each bag holds six kilograms of potatoes. What is the quotient? He saw himself write down 12, he saw himself write down 6. He did not know what to do with the numbers. He crossed both out. He stared at the word *quotient*. It did not change, it did not dissolve, it did not yield its mystery. I will die, he thought, still not knowing what the quotient is” (151).

light as he is made to work “in the glare of the locomotive’s headlight” (57). Like music, glaring light is engaged as a metaphor for the manner in which the concrete boundaries of the lavatories, on the one hand, and the conceptual borders of K’s forced labour on the railway, on the other, exude an inescapable and imprisoning force. As the music’s ‘oil’ encumbers K’s dreams of freedom, the merciless glare blinds or stuns him into silence, stupidity and lethargy:

Every spadeful he lifted cost him an effort; when he stood erect there was a stabbing in his back and the world spun. He laboured more and more slowly, then sat down at the trackside with his head between his knees. Time passed, he had no idea how much time. Sounds grew faint in his ears.

He was tapped on the knee. ‘Get up!’ said a voice. He scrambled to his feet and in the faint light faced the gang overseer in his black coat and cap. ‘Why have I got to work here?’ K said. His head swam; the words seemed to echo from far away.

The overseer shrugged. ‘Just do what you’re told,’ he said. He raised his stick and prodded K in the chest. K picked up his shovel. (57-8)

K demonstrates an intense physical reaction to captivity. Whereas he initially “balked, like a beast at the shambles” (55), his resistance is now turned inward, causing his body to react instinctively to the imposed labour, as indicated by this excerpt. Not only is “his body ... so stiff that he [can] barely stand” (58), but he is unable to “finish the lukewarm slab of mealie-porridge” (59). In addition, K barely says a word: “‘You don’t talk,’ said the man” (59).

It appears that K instinctively tries to counter the harsh lights and sounds of confinement by hiding, figuratively and literally, in the silent shade where he is “out of the way” (144). Note how K acquires a habit of sleeping or lying down in cages of captivity. Whenever he is forced to work, as in the aforementioned case, his body gains a heaviness that is irreconcilable with his slight, emaciated frame. In confinement, he seems to

gravitate perpetually downward, as if pulled towards 'mother' earth, earth being the location of his mother's remains:

Then he lay down in the warm grey sand with his beret over his face and fell asleep. He awoke sweating. He lifted the beret and squinted into the sun. Striking all the colours of the rainbow from his eyelashes, it filled the sky. I am like an ant that does not know where its hole is, he thought. He dug his hands into the sand and let it pour through his fingers over and over again. (114)<sup>48</sup>

The Jakkalsdrif resettlement camp, enclosed by "a three-metre fence surmounted with a strand of barbed wire" (100), is a concrete space of confinement associated with the "stifling heat" (101) of the sun: "Over his shoulder the sun made its appearance like a ball of fire" (126). On K's first day at the camp, a place he never thought would house people (100), he says to himself, lying on his bed in the oppressive heat: "This is like Huis Norenius, he thought: I am back in Huis Norenius a second time, only now I am too old to bear it" (101). Later that same day he yet again reflects that "[i]t is like going back to childhood, he thought: it is like a nightmare" (105).

During his confinement, K reacts to the imprisonment and forced labour as he did at Touws River. He retreats into himself, refusing to interact with the camp's community, to visit town, to work and, subsequently, to eat: "I don't need to eat all the time. When I need to eat, I'll work" (116). A farmer comments on his skeletal frame – an obvious consequence of his starvation – as well as his inability to work: "He's half-dead! They'll be digging up corpses for us next!" (119). Robert also observes K's silent and sleepy detachment from society: "'I have never seen anyone as asleep as you,' Robert said.

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<sup>48</sup> The following excerpt is another example of how sleeping allows K to detach himself from the confinement of imprisoning spaces. This is associated with a sense of heaviness, as opposed to the lightness K experiences when residing in a contained space: "With nothing to do, he slept more and more. He discovered that he could sleep anywhere, at any time, in any position: on the sidewalk at noon, with people stepping over his body; standing against a wall, with the suitcase between his legs. Sleep settled inside his head like a benign fog; he had no will to resist it. He did not dream of anyone or anything" (46).

‘Yes,’ replied K, struck that Robert too had seen it” (115). “You’ve been asleep all your life,” Robert says to K at a later stage, “It’s time to wake up” (121).

K’s experience of Jakkalsdrif testifies to an impression of a harsh, ineffective and, above all, unnatural space of confinement. It is not surprising that, afterwards, K remembers the earth in Jakkalsdrif as “baked so hard by the sun ... that nothing would ever grow there again” (143). Not only is K exposed to harsh heat and light in the camp, he is also subjected to the noises of the community. For example, “in the middle of the night he was woken by the crying of a baby” going through “cycles of whimpering, wailing, and shrieks” (120). With his body tired and heavy after a hard day’s labour, “K felt anger mount inside himself. He lay with his fists clenched against his breast wishing the child annihilated” (120). Sound is associated with the clamour of society, and K shows a strong aversion to both. Even the physical proximity of his mother in her confined room under the stairs at the Côte d’Azur disconcerts him: “Michael K did not like the physical intimacy that the long evenings in the tiny room forced upon the two of them. He found the sight of his mother’s swollen legs disturbing and turned his eyes away when he had to help her out of bed” (8).

It follows that, when K reaches the farm, he remains inclined to avoid the exposure that daylight brings, tending his garden at night, in silence, like “a blind person” (158), a “creature of twilight and night” (158). Daylight becomes invasive: “Indeed, waking sometimes in the daytime and peering outdoors, he would wince at the sharpness of the light and withdraw to his bed with a strange green glow behind his eyelids” (142).

Thus, like a ghost, K cultivates his patch of earth under the blanket of night. In contrast to harsh and oppressive light, shadow is shown to foster and contain K’s body. He is said, for example, to prefer the shadows of the “tall pine trees and dim agapanthus walks” (5) to the bathroom’s brilliant glare. Like a reptile or insect, thus a creature of the earth, “a lizard under a stone” (159), “a termite boring its way through a rock” (91) and “a worm” (147) or “an ant” seeking its “hole” (114), K desires an isolated, shadowy sanctuary or containment within the earth. “Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and

protect me” (148) he says on the farm when faced with potential exposure. Although K has lost his love for the earth of the Cape peninsula in preferring the dry, hard, yellow and red soil of the Karoo, he, nevertheless, describes the peninsula as a sanctuary with earth “so soft that one could dig and never come to the end of the softness; one could dig to the centre of the earth from Wynberg Park, and all the way to the centre it would be cool and dark and damp and soft” (92).

According to K, “to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day” (135). On two occasions, K finds or fashions such a ‘hole’ of containment; the first being the cave in Prince Albert’s mountains and the second the burrow he builds between two low hills on the Karoo farm. These residences in the veld are characterised by an intense silence: “Sometimes the only sound he could hear was that of his trouser-legs whipping together. From horizon to horizon the landscape was empty. He climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence” (63). Also, in the cave, “[i]nstead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him” (90).

In addition, it is suggested that, as time goes by, K becomes more weightless and insubstantial in his quest for freedom: “Sometimes spells of airiness came over him” (46); “Roaming from one empty room to another [K] felt as insubstantial as air” (80); and “So light now that he could not even be sure his feet were touching the ground, he passed from the last daylight into the shade of the passageway” (245). To be sure, K’s fragile frame loses a lot of weight and this creates a sense of freedom and weightlessness. Yet the lightness of being (to borrow from the title of Kundera’s novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*)<sup>49</sup> he experiences outside the camps supplements this sense of insubstantiality: “His clothes, tattered already, hung on him without shape. Yet as he

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<sup>49</sup> Kundera’s novel, with two of the chapters named “Lightness and Weight”, prompted my consideration of lightness and heaviness in *Life & Times*. A comparative study might yield interesting results, especially if passages like the following are taken into account: “[T]he absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant”(Kundera 5). In *Elizabeth Costello*’s eighth lesson, “At the Gate”, Costello, floating between beliefs, between opposites (213) wonders if she is a light soul (215).

moved about his field he felt a deep joy in his physical being. His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; it seemed possible to be both body and spirit” (139). When K imagines freedom, he sees himself flying over fences; in other words, being weightless. Note how, in the following dream, K finds salvation in his lightness:

In his wild gesturing, in the great windmill sweeps of his arms, he realized he was in danger of losing his footing and being carried over the edge of the rock-face into the vast airiness of space between the heavens and the earth; but he had no fear, he knew he would float. (163)

In conclusion, the novel usually portrays these contained spaces – K’s holes for example – as dark, cool, solitary, safe, silent and earth-bound. Confined spaces, on the other hand, are often depicted as blindingly bright, stifling, communal, noisy, exposed and man-made.<sup>50</sup> These spaces tend to compress K downward, towards the earth, assigning him an uncharacteristic heaviness.

There exists an impression that the reader has access to K’s thoughts and emotions in the novel. Although this is true to a certain extent, critical commentary often overlooks how these feelings are the internalisation of his acute sensory experiences, of absorbing confinement through the skin.<sup>51</sup> In conclusion, this section has shown how Michael K experiences and responds to contained and confined spaces predominantly at a sensory level. The following section will examine K’s indeterminacy in terms of the evasions of

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<sup>50</sup> It would be fallacious to argue that every reference to light, lightness and sound in the novel is directly associated with confinement. Sunlight, in some cases, is shown to be an enabling, constructive influence in, for example, its ripening of K’s vegetables and the pleasant thawing of his body in winter: “From horizon to horizon the landscape was empty. He climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence, feeling the warmth of the sun soak into his bones” (63). Similarly, shadow, heaviness and silence are not always related to containment. The Jakkalsdrif hut, as an example of a silent space of *confinement*, is dark and stifling: “It was dark inside, there were no windows” (101).

<sup>51</sup> By means of his “notion of the world as a prolongation of the body” (Salamon 102), Merleau-Ponty came “to posit perception not just as a capacity of the body but *as the body itself*, as an extension of the body. He suggests that perception itself *is* that sensate border, thus establishing a model in which perception is something akin to a skin” (Salamon 102). The nature of an object is therefore “an expression of the original dynamic unity and ‘overlapping’ between subject and world” (Breeur 430). It might be interesting to consider Michael K’s internalisation of his concrete and conceptual surroundings in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodied meaning.

the abovementioned cages of significance *in* and *of* the narrative: spaces he reads or interprets through his body.

### **Enabling Art through Indeterminacy**

As K “moves in space, experiencing and remaking the meaning of spaces initially constituted to speak of power” (Robinson D7), it becomes apparent that the novel refuses to treat these “experiences of spaces as one-dimensional” (Robinson D7).<sup>52</sup> Indeed, K not only moves through various spaces (or places) *in* the story, but also through the various textual spatialities *of* the story. Each reading of K, whether by other characters, the medical officer, or the reader of the novel, subjects K’s body to one of many overlapping spatialities, realms or ‘cages’ of meaning. Each reading, each interpretation, confines him to a prison of particularised signification that he can never remake, even though he dreams of “flying over the fences and between the houses” (182) to the “blank spaces in between” the bars of signification (Robinson D7).

It is ironic that most readers are somewhat unaware of the cage that their own interpretation frames and “the possibilities for alternative spatialities” it represses (Robinson D7). Each reading produces a new interpretative spatiality that supplements the narrative’s dimensionality and performance of interpretation, in the sense that it ‘(re)makes’ or ‘(re)imagines’ (Robinson D7) the spaces, the ‘life’ and ‘times’ of the narrative. The type of space, however, depends on the type of interpretation. The space of the novel can either be recognised as a heterogeneous “source of potentially new spatialities” (Robinson D7) or be understood in terms of an absent centre or space which needs to be supplemented by a homogenising meaning. The novel thus draws attention to K’s subjective “experiences of mobility, interaction and the dynamism of spaces” (Robinson D7). It is interesting to note that K’s interest in “picture-books of the Ionian Islands, Moorish Spain, Finland Land of Lakes, Bali, and other places in the world” (23) partially defines reading in terms of spaces that are exotic and other.

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<sup>52</sup> The format of this book does not allow for the provision of page numbers.

In addition, this performance of interpretative spatiality – the manner in which the indeterminacy of K invites the reader to participate in the novel as event – blurs the distinction of what De Man calls the “inside/outside metaphor that is never being seriously questioned” (*Allegories of Reading* 5).<sup>53</sup> In performing one of the text’s themes and, so doing, becoming, in a sense, one of its characters, the reader is positioned by the narrative in such a way as to challenge “the metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or critic as the person who opens the lid in order to release in the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside” (De Man *Allegories of Reading* 5).

There is “an *ontological* tension” at work here, “inducing a flicker between presence and absence of this world, between tropological reality and ‘literal’ reality. For what this flicker foregrounds above all is the *textuality* of the text” (McHale 145-6). And it is the textuality of the novel that signals its engagement with the problematics of a text’s being – and, accordingly, with the overlapping encounters between the realm of the text and the world of the reader. Consequently, the reader is positioned as a mediator, a negotiator between worlds or spaces, caught within a purgatorial space, not unlike a vast farm and its “grey thornbushes, the rocky soil, the ring of hills, the mountains purple and pink in the distance, the great still blue empty sky, the earth grey and brown beneath the sun save here and there, where if you looked carefully you suddenly saw a tip of vivid green, pumpkin-leaf or carrot-bush” (249).

This ontological flicker is kindled by the various types of indeterminacy in *Life & Times*. I will now investigate the possibility that the various indeterminacies of the novel in question – like K’s name, for example – solicit potential interpretations that not only challenge each other, but the reader and literary critic as well. As an aside, what I find particularly interesting is that as two critics dispute the precise meaning of Michael K’s elusive hare lip, for example, each adopting a different stance, these critics seem unaware

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<sup>53</sup> Although De Man is here referring to the reconciliation of form and meaning, his hypothesis is also applicable to the reconciliation between the realm of the text and the realm of the reader.



that their dispute is, in fact, emulating the struggle the novel's indeterminacy generates between potential interpretations.

Like the 'times' in the title of the novel, the 'life' in *Life & Times of Michael K* evokes a sense of fullness, of completion that anticipates a comprehensive narrative about a proper or 'real' life – a life in progress as the absence of a definitive article implies. Accordingly, the title promises to answer the following questions: Who is this individual? When, where and how is his life taking place? This expectation is somewhat thwarted, however, by the emergence of the hint of incompleteness, of deficiency and insubstantiality that Michael K's peculiar, acronymic surname, 'K', suggests. The impression of incompleteness is advanced in the first sentence of the novel which informs the reader of Michael K's physical deficiency: "The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip" (3), a lip that could not close, and a lip that could not succeed in stirring a mother's love. Michael K's incomplete name and his incomplete lip are just two examples of textual indeterminacies that generate an atmosphere of deficiency or lack, of incompleteness and indeterminacy that pervade the narrative. Dovey states that "the use of the initial in the names [Kafka's] K, [Kafka's] Josef K and Michael K suggests that what we have in these figures is an incomplete, or partial, representation" (277).

In exploiting and exposing the elusive and bewildering correspondence between text and reality, *Life & Times of Michael K* embraces written language's susceptibility to ambiguity and misinterpretation. In terms of K's times, the unspecified era in which the story unfolds mystifies the reader whilst K himself is an unconventional, uninvolved other that resists the frequent attempts at defining his person. His indistinctness is constituted by a variety of aspects: his acronymic surname, unspecified race, asexuality, ethereality, inarticulacy and awkwardness; his lethargy; his detachment from the social and political world; his stubborn starvation; as well as the conflicting deep-seated or embedded will to live. K's portrayal as an impenetrable individual is assisted by the novel's exclusion of other characters' judgments. These characters are shown not only to ignore or refuse K's requests; their impressions of K are omitted. In addition, K's

judgments of others are rarely shown. Instead, his physical reaction to a specific space is described.

In general, textual indeterminacy puzzles the reader, evoking (to borrow the title of Greenberg's book on Kafka and modern literature) 'the terror of art' which may result in the eradication of this uncertainty by means of imposing a defining, delimiting interpretation on the text. According to Kossew, there are indeed many obvious elements to the story of *Life & Times* that evade closure and thus "[provoke] the reader into signification" (140). In this case, regarding the role it plays in the text's performance of the act of definition, indeterminacy can rather be said to *enable* rather than terrorise art. Attridge's *The Ethics of Reading*, for one, emphasises "the crucial role of that experience of bewilderment in [the fictional work's] achievement as a work of art" (xi).

According to Graff, "'indeterminacy' denotes a property of a text that enters into and infects the interpretation of the text, so that it is not just literature but also the *interpretation* of literature that is fraught with uncertainty" (165). To illustrate how textual indeterminacies generate a variety of uncertain interpretations which then inevitably provoke the reader into delimitation, I will now discuss three such types of indeterminacy as contained by *Life & Times*, namely, ambiguity, rhetoricity, and ellipsis.<sup>54</sup>

*Life & Times*'s use of ambiguity as a central method in the solicitation of a variety of interpretations necessitates a careful consideration of the interaction of these interpretations in that they give rise to the textual tensions which ultimately grant the novel its multi-dimensionality. In considering how ambiguity generates opposing interpretations, I return to the opening sentence of *Life & Times of Michael K*.<sup>55</sup> The first thing the midwife and subsequently the reader notice about K is his hare lip. In addition, this hare lip is immediately cast as a sign when, at K's birth, the midwife interprets it as a symbol of good luck. Anna K, on the other hand, reads it as a bad omen. Their faith in the

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<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Helgesson distinguishes three types of 'blankness' which he relates to K's subjectivity, the story and the narrative (189-92).

<sup>55</sup> See Dovey, pages 283-4, for her discussion of the first sentence of the novel.

hare lip's ability to signify or symbolise K's meaning, essence and character associates K's physical disfigurement with the defects or anomalies of his character. This notion is emphasised by the manner in which the novel then progresses from Michael's physical "disfigurement" (4) to his 'disfigured' mental state: "his mind was not quick" (4). "Because their smiles and whispers hurt her, [Anna K] kept *it* away from other children" (4, my emphasis) by taking Michael along to her place of employment. Here, she teaches him silence, a personality trait he embraces given that his handicap complicates speaking at any rate. Because K is never taught to express himself fully, he is often thought of as unintelligent. Consequently, K's handicap, his inarticulacy, and his supposed slow mind are all associated in this section of the novel.

As a result the novel's opening passage has established two possible readings of K's hare lip: either as a sign of his slow mind or, alternatively, as a constituent of his personality. It is indeed K's appearance which shamed Anna K, compelling her to hide him from the world. A similar tension is established with regard to K's otherness. On the one hand, K's strange appearance and name can be read as indicators of his peculiar personality; on the other, K's childhood can be identified as the primary cause of this strangeness.

According to Head, "[t]he problem the novel sets is the significance of K" (*Coetzee* 95). As indicated, K's *lack* of significance is established by his resistance to the external influences of his times. The novel repeatedly accentuates how various characters interpret K as insignificant – as one of the many "nuisances", "parasites" and "unwanted souls" that inhabit the camps (Graham 4) – and thus unworthy of attention and aid: "'There's nothing special about you,' said the man (59)" and "There is nothing special about you, you can rest easy about that" (186) says a fellow worker and the medical officer, respectively.

To use the term 'insignificance' in relation to Michael K in this context necessitates an awareness of the term's two primary denotations, that is to say, a lack of *importance* as well as lack of *meaning*. With regard to K's 'insignificance', the term, 'immateriality' also comes to mind: firstly, in its suggestion of irrelevance and inconsequentiality and,

secondly, in its apt designation of K's *ethereality* or *antireality*. Aside from his profound relationship with land and earth, K is generally portrayed as a strangely unaffected and impermeable creature, both character and 'real' person, fiction and fictionalisation. Drowsy and wraith-like, he wanders intuitively and instinctively in and out of contained and confined spaces – the conceptual space of the narrative included. Though shown to be quite practical and adept on the farm, K appears to lack common or rather communal sense. His disengagement from society is further underscored by the novel's demonstration of his lack of ambition and materialism (in both meanings of the word) as well as an atypical asexuality. The medical officer, for example, remarks that K "is not of our world. He lives in a world all his own" (194) and that he seems to be "made of air" (221), an "unbearing, unborn creature. I cannot really think of him as a man, though he is older than me by most reckonings" (185). Also note his choice of words when he asks K the following question: "Did you think you were a *spirit invisible*, a visitor on our planet, a creature beyond the laws of nations? Well, the laws of nations have you in their grip now: they have pinned you down" (206, my emphasis).

At the beginning of the novel, Anna K also wonders "*what* had been growing in her all these months" (3, my emphasis). It is here, at K's birth, that Anna K asks the question that I also pose: *What* is Michael K? The "what" and "it" introduce the novel's problematisation of K's ontological status. The novel continues to grapple with this problematic throughout the progression of its narrative, establishing a tension between K's 'real'-ity (the 'Who') and his textuality (the 'What' 'gathering' above the sleeping K). Whereas the first section establishes K predominantly as a *fictionalisation* of a real person, in other words as a 'Who', a "being with a life of his ... own outside the text" (Dovey 276), the second section, narrated by the medical officer, takes the "it" and the "what" posed in the novel's introductory sentence further, raising the question of K's fictional or constructed existence by means of a myriad of references to his significance. This demonstrates the manner in which K's elusive and indeterminate ambiguity provokes the medic's obsessive attempts to extract K's story:

This is not my imagination ... This sense of a gathering meaningfulness is not something like a ray that I project to bathe this or that bed, or a robe in which I wrap this or that patient according to whim. Michaels [the medical officer's name for Michael K] means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me. (226)

From this consideration of Michael K's 'meaning', the medical officer proceeds to testify to his attempts to delimit or restrict K's indeterminacy, confining it to one such significance.<sup>56</sup> Like Mrs Curren's frustrated attempts at extracting the story of Michael K's 'successor', Vercueil, ("A tipsy anger flared up in me against his crudity, his indifference" [115]), the medical officer, "piece by piece" also tries to "put together a story of a life as obscure as any on earth" (*Age of Iron* 172).<sup>57</sup> In the following excerpt from *Age of Iron*, the interpreter or reader is likened to a source of blinding light; and the act of interpretation or reading, to the confinement of the protagonist within its glare: "He looks like a prisoner torn from the darkness of a cell, thrust into a room full of blinding lights, shoved against a wall, shouted at to stand still. His image raped from him, taken by force" (177). Regarding *Life & Times*, the following extract illustrates the manner in which the medical officer tries to 'rape' K's image from him:

'It is time to deliver, my friend. You've got a story to tell and we want to hear it. ... Tell us what we want to know, then we will leave you alone.'

I paused; he stared stonily back. 'Talk, Michaels,' I resumed. 'You see how easy it is to talk, now *talk*. Listen to me, listen how easily I fill this room with words.' ... 'Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed. You will be a digit in

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<sup>56</sup> According to Head, the medical officer's "sense of urgency to interpret K gives him, on the one hand, the hue of an 'overpowering' reader. Yet, on the other, his understanding that K has a meaning that is somehow beyond the 'system' he seems to inhabit, is a redeeming feature. In this sense he shows an incipient understanding that his apparent frustration is inappropriate: he is on a journey, it seems, to the sight inhabited by Attridge's responsible reader" ("Belief" 106), a journey, which one could argue, is continued by Mrs Curren in her attempt to forge a reciprocal relationship with Vercueil or, otherwise stated, approach him on his own terms.

<sup>57</sup> Both Mrs Curren and the medical officer provide their charges with shelter. In addition, whereas Vercueil is proclaimed an angel, Michael K is deemed a life-altering prophet. See pages 75-6, 165 and 177 in *Age of Iron* for examples of Mrs Curren's attempts to come to terms with Vercueil's alterity.

the units column at the end of the war when they do the big subtraction sum to calculate the difference, nothing more. You don't want to be simply one of the perished, do you? You want to live, don't you? Well then, *talk*, make your voice heard, tell your story!' (191-2)<sup>58</sup>

With regard to the medical officer's reduction of his meaning, K is an "allegory" (228) of "the residual, the irreducible, the unclassifiable, the inassimilable" 'digit' or meaning in a system (Foucault 228).<sup>59</sup> He is perceived as an independent entity, moving untouched and unseen through his milieu in an almost ghost-like manner. "Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away?" (228), asks the medical officer. Furthermore, K's preservation of a sense of sovereignty in the face of confinement is described in terms of "how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (228).<sup>60</sup> This can be related to a preceding observation, equating K's being with an indecipherable stone:

a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions

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<sup>58</sup> Also bear in mind the following two instances of confinement: "He closed his mouth obstinately, the mouth that would never wholly shut, and glowered back" (191) and "'Tell us the truth, tell us the whole truth, and you can go back to bed, we won't bother you any more.'

Now he crouched perceptibly, clutching the blanket about his throat, glaring at the two of us.

'Come on, my friend!' I said. 'No one is going to hurt you, just tell us what we want to know!'

The silence lengthened. ...

At last he spoke: 'I am not in the war.'

Irritation overflowed in me. ... 'Of course you are in the war, man, whether you like it or not!' ...

'You must co-operate.'

Still crouching, ready to evade me if I should spring, he made his reply. 'I am not clever with words,' he said, nothing more" (189-90).

<sup>59</sup> Foucault writes that "[d]isciplinary systems ... which classify, hierarchize, supervise, and so on, come up against those who cannot be classified, those who escape supervision, those who cannot enter the system of distribution, in short, the residual, the irreducible, the unclassifiable, the inassimilable" (52). Given K's indeterminacy, he proves to be unassailable not only by the systems of power he encounters in the story, but also by the reader.

<sup>60</sup> However, K is *defined* by the concrete and conceptual spaces he inhabits, as previously argued.

and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of war. (185)<sup>61</sup>

The extracts from the medical officer's narration shed light on the questionable reality, the *significance*, of Michael K's character. By way of the "already fractured hermeneutic regime" (Helgesson 186) that constitutes the medical officer's consideration of K's meaning, "our attention is distracted from the projected world and made to fix on its linguistic medium" (McHale 148). McHale also quotes Maureen Quilligan, saying that "at some point in the play of the narrative the action fades, as if the lights were to go off behind the scrim, so that the audience is left facing the curtain on which are printed the author's words" (147). It appears that, throughout Section II, the reader is reminded that K is, in fact, a *fiction* "made out of text – letters, words, connected discourse". In reality, he "*is* text" and not a representation of a 'real' person, a fact that his acronymic surname "never permits us to forget" (McHale 147).<sup>62</sup> Kafka, Coetzee's precursor in many respects, experimented with the exposition of the textuality of his characters. It seems that Coetzee is concerned with that same tension between textuality and reality in *Life & Times of Michael K*.

To clarify, at the time of the novel's publication in 1983, the confining grip of South Africa's apartheid regime was loosening. This resulted in the escalation of the government's oppression of movements of resistance, which, in turn, gave rise to intensified opposition. Both parties resorted to violence which heaved the country into a state of unrest. As most readings of *Life & Times*'s milieu indicate, the 'times' seems to allude to "the future, projected state" (Kossew 139) of this conflict. This creates a tension between the narrative's realist underpinnings and its fabricated fictions. To clarify, the narrative events are staged against a fictional backdrop: the imaginary future of a country in ruins. However, as constituted by future spaces which are founded upon 'real' landscapes and cities, the Karoo and the city of Cape Town for example, the novel

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<sup>61</sup> In contrast, this description interestingly evokes the following statement in *Dusklands*: "America will swallow me, digest me, dissolve me in the tides of its blood" (9).

<sup>62</sup> In this sense, one might even venture a (confining) reading of the title *Life & Times of Michael K*, as an allusion to the life and times of a linguistic medium or, otherwise stated, to the 'reality' of a sign's existence as it is brought to 'life' through the 'times' of its reading.

appears to oscillate between myth and mimesis. This aspect lends an air of surrealism to K's environments. As K is intimately entwined with the spaces he inhabits, it is not surprising that he is *also* portrayed in terms of an amalgamation of fiction and fictionalisation.

These straightforward examples demonstrate how *Life & Times* refuses to offer definitive reasons or clear explanations of how narrative events come to pass. Traces permeate the text, soliciting discovery and deliberation. For clarity's sake, I distinguish this type of elusiveness from the other two categories with the label 'ambiguity', given that the text creates the impression of not being able to decide between defining K as a fiction or a fictionalisation; a textual sign or a 'real' being. However, it is precisely this indeterminacy which generates a struggle, a pervasive textual tension between opposing interpretations. If the reader acknowledges this tension, contains it in other words, he/she will come to know K not as a 'What' or a 'Who' but as a singular, multi-dimensional figuration of potentialities of being.

An examination of another type of indeterminacy, rhetoricity – a text's rhetorical nature, according to De Man (*Blindness and Insight* 136) – sheds more light on the nature of this textual tension. To demonstrate the inner workings of the production of rhetoricity in this regard, I evoke De Man's discussion of the grammatical pattern, 'What's the difference?', in *Allegories of Reading* given its strong resemblance to the pattern contained in the sentence, 'What am I to him?', in which K's existence and subsequent significance is interrogated:

A short distance away, out of earshot, sat the gang foreman on a little folding stool. K watched him pour coffee out of his vacuum flask. His long flat fingers could not all find a place on the ear of the mug. With two fingers in the air, he raised it and drank. Over the rim his eyes met K's. *What does he see? thought K. What am I to him?* The foreman set down the mug, raised his whistle to his lips, and, still sitting, blew a long blast. (113, my emphasis)



and

I ask myself, What am I to this man? I ask myself, What is it to this man if  
I live or die? (203)<sup>63</sup>

To adapt De Man, “we cannot even tell from his grammar whether [Michael K] ‘really’ wants to know ‘what’” he is to him “or is just telling us that we shouldn’t even try to find out” (9-10). As in the case with De Man’s own example, ‘What’s the difference?’, the grammatical pattern, ‘What am I to him?’ similarly “engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive” (9). Literally, K is ‘really’ asking himself, as well as the implied reader, what he means or signifies to the foreman in the first case and the medical officer in the second. Figuratively, K is asking a rhetorical question, stating rather than questioning his belief in his perceived insignificance. In other words, “the literal meaning asks for the concept ... whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning” (De Man 9). This concept is ‘being’, existence or perhaps even significance (given the term’s denotation of both ‘importance’ and ‘meaning’). The concept of ‘being’ as invited by the literal concept is therefore denied by the answer of a lack of being implied by the figurative meaning: Nothing, I am nothing to him.

It appears that “two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line”, “meanings that exist side by side” and “engage each other in direct confrontation” given that “none can exist in the other’s absence” (De Man 12). This statement evokes Derrida’s hypothesis that “[o]ne can shift back and forth between ... two perspectives which never give rise to a synthesis. Each perspective shows the error of the other in an irresolvable dialectic. This alteration Derrida terms *différance* ... ‘a differing or a deferring’” (Culler 165).

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<sup>63</sup> The following excerpt also raises the question of K’s significance: “This morning when I tried to be friendly he shook me off. ‘Do you think if you leave me alone I am going to die?’ he said. ‘Why do you want to make me fat? *Why fuss over me, why am I so important?*’ [...] ‘You ask why you are important, Michaels. The answer is that you are not important. But that does not mean you are forgotten. No one is forgotten’” (185-6, my emphasis).

According to De Man:

the grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when ... it is impossible to decide ... which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration. And although it would perhaps be somewhat more remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself. (10)

In both cases, it is impossible to decide which of the two meanings should prevail. They are indeed, as De Man claims, mutually exclusive. This irresolvable struggle between or play of possible significations, a notion related to De Man's 'vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration', produces an inescapable tension. This tension is in a sense a conceptual space, a structure of containment in which all potential significations clash and converge. Such a space, it should be noted, can only come into being through the act of reading, the act of defining and reawakening the ambiguity of a phrase like 'What am I to him?'

"The point is as follows", writes De Man:

A perfectly clear syntactical paradigm (the question) engenders a sentence that has at least two meanings, of which the one asserts and the other denies its own illocutionary mode. It is not so that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation. The confusion can only be cleared up by the intervention of an extra-textual intention. (10)

In the case of *Life & Times of Michael K*, the intervention of an extra-textual intention is undoubtedly solicited by the text's various indeterminacies. In addition, I regard the

reader's act of delineation – the means by which the confusion of the syntactical paradigm is partially or wholly resolved – as such an intervention.

To elucidate, the reader and/or critic are presented with a choice regarding the phrase's indeterminacy: on the one hand, he/she can embrace the phrase's solicitation of a variety of irreconcilable significations and discover the text's rich depths or, on the other, he/she can give preference to one meaning, disregard the other possibilities and confine the text's dimensionalities. Of course, it must be noted, most if not all readings do a bit of both.

However, ambiguity and rhetoricity are not the only types of indeterminacy which force a decision upon the reader. The ellipsis or the omission of significant detail plays an integral part in the constitution of *Life & Times*'s perplexing character. Consider the manner in which the omission of K's surname, as well as the omission of the precise causes and conditions – especially the 'times', the era – of the war in which he is confined, solicits the reader's defining interpretation. In addition, *Life & Times of Michael K* never explicitly categorises Michael K in terms of race. This evasion is an example of one of the many indeterminacies which may plague the reader and induce him/her to racialise K's body. This is but one of the ways in which the narrative alerts the reader to society's obsession with rigid categorisation, a fixation which prevailed during apartheid, an era of confinement.

Note, for example, how the grammatical pattern, 'What am I to him?', implicates the reader in yet another sense. In the first extract, the eyes of the reader meet those of the foreman, through the focalisation of K. 'What do you see?', 'What am I to you?' K indirectly asks the reader. Interestingly enough, the foreman is not given the opportunity to answer, like so many others, leaving the significance of K undecided and exposed to appropriation by the reader. I deduce that the intention of this question is not only to evoke K's problematic ontological status, his significance, but also to emphasise the power the reader possesses in defining and thus making a potential decision regarding this status.

Like the omission of the foreman's answer, the thoughts and opinions of many other characters in the novel are excluded in their contact with K. Characters are thus generally prevented from passing judgment on his character. Accordingly, the narrator omits the thoughts not only of such characters, but also of K to a certain extent. As discussed, the narrative rather reveals the manner in which K's body responds to his environments. The partial omission is a consequence of the third-person narrator's "principle of 'limited omniscience'" (in Sections I and III) that "is very cautious in offering interpretations of K" (Head *Coetzee* 100). The partial omission of K and the other characters' inner lives, if you will, can therefore be said to indicate the implied author's caution with regard to fixed definitions. It is this lack of predetermined, fixed delimitations that lend the novel an air of elusiveness. The sporadic omission of K's thoughts and emotions also draws attention to his impermeability, a quality which problematises other characters' attempted interpretations of his embodied meaning.

## **Allegory**

The question now arises as to the critic's particular management of the various textual indeterminacies in *Life & Times of Michael K*. To be precise, many critics have attempted to project the novel's true or proper meaning by perceiving the elusive elements in *Life & Times of Michael K* as constituents of its allegory of apartheid's oppression. As the following discussion of Derek Attridge's essay on allegory will demonstrate, a critical allegorisation may confine and supplant instead of supplementing the fictional text. Although the novel seems to solicit a confining or, in Attridge's conception, 'allegorical' interpretation from the reader, it is the task of the literary critic to recognize the manner in which his/her critical response is directed by these narrative gaps.<sup>64</sup> A critical containment of the novel requires the critic to embrace or contain the alterity of the text

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<sup>64</sup> In "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", Merleau-Ponty describes language in terms of silence, of gaps and fissures that are perpetually soliciting supplementation: "all language is indirect or allusive – that it is, if you wish, silence" (43). As a result, the complete expression or direct representation of the world is impossible. He writes that "[t]here is thus an opaqueness of language. Nowhere does it stop and leave a place for pure meaning; it is always limited only by more language, and meaning appears within it only set in a context of words" (42).

instead of supplanting indeterminacies, whether ambiguous or omitted, with extratextual significance.<sup>65</sup>

In his chapter on *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* in *The Ethics of Reading*, “Against Allegory”, Attridge differentiates between two types of readings: allegorical and literal. An ‘allegorical’ reading “[looks] for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance which the novel may be said to imply without directly naming” (32), whereas a ‘literal’ reading concentrates only on the words themselves. In other words, such a distinction is all the more important given the frequent allegorising or generalising readings of these particular novels, readings that regard ‘the words on the page’, thus the reality of the text itself, as subordinate to the external reality to which the text is supposed to refer. Attridge gives preference to ‘literal’ readings of Coetzee’s fiction, given the manner in which such interpretations explore the singularity of the text without confining its freeplay of meaning. Although Attridge’s important distinction inspired the subject matter of this thesis, it contains some limitations. To my mind, both ‘allegorical’ and ‘literal’ readings can either *confine* the text’s discursive dimensions or *contain* its multi-dimensionality. To clarify, allow me to consider how an allegorical reading can either confine or contain a literary text.

Attridge expresses what McHale would call an “overly narrow sense of the possibilities of allegory” (141). When referring to an allegorical reading, Attridge is only referring to traditional allegory which is “the direct translation of abstract concepts into a transparently-motivated narrative” (McHale 143). Allegory’s “indeterminate”, “destabiliz[ing]” (McHale 142) postmodern relativity is overlooked.<sup>66</sup> McHale offers a

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<sup>65</sup> Attwell writes that “[w]e traduce the purposes of *Life & Times of Michael K* if we make claims for either its political percipience or its predictive power without substantially refining the argument. Its intensity lies not in social representation but in the creation of a protagonist of extraordinary symbolic power who becomes, in turn, the focus of a struggle for control over the resources of fictionality itself” (*The Politics of Writing* 92).

<sup>66</sup> There subsists some disagreement with regard to the particular location of Coetzee’s fiction in terms of contemporary theory. See Attridge’s *The Ethics of Reading*, pages 2 to 6, for a discussion of Coetzee’s modernist foundations; and Attwell’s *The Politics of Writing*, pages 20 to 23, for a consideration of Coetzee’s employment of postmodernism and post-colonialism. To my mind, Coetzee’s fiction contains modernist, postmodernist, and post-colonial features, to name a few. The confinement of his narratives to one of these rigid categories is not conducive to the ethics of delimitation considered by this thesis.

relevant exploration of the “elusiveness of postmodernist allegory relative to what we usually think of as the unequivocalness of traditional allegories” that is directly applicable to different readings of *Life & Times of Michael K*:

The elusiveness is an inheritance from the founding texts of postmodernist allegorical practice ...: Kafka in his novels and stories ... [seems] to promise allegorical meaning, soliciting an allegorical interpretation from the reader, yet withholding any indication of *specific* allegorical content. Everything is *potentially* allegorical, but nothing is *actually* an allegory; the trope seems to lack a specific literal level or frame of reference. (McHale 141)

Attridge’s hypothesis does not account for allegory’s potential to liberate the text’s potential play of significances. Is an elusive textual element, a name like ‘Michael K’, for example, not, in fact, allegorical, given the manner in which it solicits a variety of interpretations? Is an allegorical reading truly a reading that denies a text’s singularity or, rather, a style of reading that embraces its play of potential meanings? I argue in favour of the latter.

McHale also goes on to state that in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, for example:

nothing is literal, everything is tropological. Every expression belongs simultaneously to several frames of reference, none of them identifiable as the basic world of the text, relative to which the other frames are metaphorical; instead, there is a perpetual jostling and jockeying for position among a plurality of simultaneously present (and therefore simultaneously absent) worlds. (McHale 142)

This ‘perpetual jostling for position’ and “tendency to slip back and forth between *literal* fiction and *allegory*” (McHale 181), this freeplay of meaning is exactly what *Life & Times* seems to be generating. The variety of jostling and jockeying interpretations

solicited by textual indeterminacies presents the reader and the critic with a choice: the interpreter can either contain the text by means of acknowledging that it is soliciting more than one interpretation, or the reader can confine the text by means of imposing one, fixed interpretation. McHale discusses the temptation to read the texts, “Order of Insects” in the volume *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (William Glass) – which of course evokes Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1978) – and *L’Arrêt de mort* (Maurice Blanchot), in such a manner:

Allegorical reading is possible here, perhaps even tempting, but it is not in any sense *necessary*: the literal level of both these texts seems perfectly self-contained, quite able to do without an allegorical level. We may well wonder whether an allegorical reading here would not be an imposition of our own. In short, these texts *hesitate* between the literal and the allegorical – just as, from another perspective, they hesitate between the representation of a world and the anti-representational foregrounding of language *for its own sake*. These are ontological oppositions, ontological hesitations ... Hesitation has been displaced ... to the confrontation between different ontological levels in the structure of texts. (82-3)

If the reader chooses to put forth a reading that contains the text, he/she is thus acknowledging the manner in which the text hesitates between the literal and the allegorical. A text’s allegorical dimension – in other words, its ability to contain more than one meaning – can, therefore, offer itself “as a tool for exploring ontological structure and foregrounding ontological themes” (McHale 141). On the other hand, a text’s allegorical dimension may solicit a confining interpretation from the reader, a type of interpretation which is ultimately proven problematic in *Life & Times of Michael K*.

Attridge’s following acquiescence to the likelihood that a literary work may invite allegorisation can therefore be read, rather, in terms of the likelihood that a literary work like *Life & Times* may invite *confinement* – and this is exactly what the novel does in its

performance of the “appropriating function of interpretation” (Attwell *The Politics of Writing* 97):

If reading a work as literature means making the most of the event of reading, an event by which our habits and assumptions are tested and shifted (if only momentarily), then part of the literary experience may be *the event of the allegorizing* [read: confining] *reading* ... In other words, one may be doing justice to the singularity and inventiveness of a literary work by responding to its invitation to allegorize [read: confine] ... because in so doing we are working through the operations of its meaning – irrespective of whether we arrive at some stable allegorical scheme ... The reader may become conscious of the power and allure of allegory [read: confinement], of the temptation to generalize or codify meaning, and at the same time gain a heightened awareness of the specificity and contingency of language and human experience as these resist such generalizations and codifications. (61)

To summarise, it would be fallacious to associate Attridge’s allegorical reading with confining interpretation. As demonstrated, an allegorical reading can either contain or confine. It follows that a ‘literal’ reading, a reading that focuses on the words on the page in front of you, can either confine a text by ignoring the variety of interpretations it solicits or contain it by celebrating its rich depth and variety of meaning as well. It follows that this chapter has *chosen* to engage with or contain the text by acknowledging its potential play of significances. It realises this engagement by means of the two conceptual tools, containment and confinement, as inspired by Attridge’s distinction between ‘allegorical’ and ‘literal’ interpretation.

### **The Power of Supplementation**

All the spaces discussed thus far exist within the topography of the narrative. They are places and situations within the story. However, taking a step back and holding the novel,



the book itself in hand, I realise that *Life & Times of Michael K* is primarily a material space. The two-hundred-and-fifty pages are bound – or bounded – by two covers which can be opened and closed like doors, allowing the reader access to the narrative. Thus, this book, any book, can be described as a *contained* space.

The pages of *Life & Times* are divided into three subspaces: Sections I, II and III. Each of these subspaces can be perceived as a material enclosure which contains and generates a conceptual counterpart.<sup>67</sup> Without these sections, *Life & Times* would have provided an uninterrupted narrative. The narrative flow is further interrupted by the second section's change in style and perspective. Whereas Sections I and III are written in the third-person, Section II, as told in the first-person, has “a wholly different narrative ambition” (Helgesson 190). In fact, Coetzee has been criticised for disrupting the flow of the narrative by way of Section II, which is the medical officer's personal account of Michael K's stay in the Kenilworth rehabilitation camp.

However, it is precisely this disruption which shatters the mimetic mirror and alerts the reader not only to the constructedness of the fiction that is Michael K's life and times, but consequently to the act of delimitation, the drawing of potentially confining boundaries which accompany this story's construction. In tracing the medical officer's interpretative confinement of Michael K's meaning, this section guides the reader into a moment of self-reflexivity with regard to the confinement imposed by his/her own particular reading of Michael K, the character, and *Michael K*, the novel. In other words, this section is crucial in that the medical officer's choice of ‘reading’, a reading that reduces K's multi-dimensionality, alerts the reader to delimitation's reductive dimension, that is, confinement.

Like the shantytown scene in *Age of Iron*, this section, also located at the text's core, is contained or enclosed by the remainder of the narrative. In both cases, the contained

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<sup>67</sup> Not only do these concrete and conceptual subspaces border one another, they also overlap. Although they are separate enclosures, the reader – as well as Michael K – moves effortlessly from one to the other, sometimes inhabiting all simultaneously. For example, when reminiscing about Wynberg Park, K can be said to conceptually occupy both the space of the park and the space of the cave.

section allows for a new perspective or vantage point that brings to light the conditions of the discursive registers employed by the text. In this context, Parry's critique that "the reverberations of Coetzee's intertextual transpositions, as well as the logic and trajectory of his narrative strategies, ... *inadvertently* repeat the exclusionary colonialist gestures which the novels also criticize" (150, my emphasis), also cited in Chapter Two (page 26-7) loses force. As argued in the previous chapter, some of Coetzee's fictions, specifically *Life & Times*, purposefully solicit such foreclosing gestures in its performance of confinement. According to Sue Kossew, the reader's "active" role in the performance of the text's meaning "has not yet been systematically investigated in the context of post-colonial reader-mobilization" (3), in this regard.<sup>68</sup> The two following excerpts serve as a starting point from which to discuss the active, authoritative position of the reader with regard to the allocation of meaning:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (150-1)

And:

Do you want the story to end with you? That would make it a sad story, don't you think? There was a silence so dense that I heard it as a ringing in my ears, a silence of the kind one experiences in mine shafts, cellars, bomb shelters, airless places. (191)

Head states that "[t]here is an obvious parallel with Derridean notions of textuality in the elusiveness of Michael K, a character who eludes final meanings and whose story

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<sup>68</sup> "[B]efore consolidating [his] own hermeneutic capture of Michael K", Attwell demonstrates the awareness that "the novel does inscribe interpretation as a *contest* and an exercise in power" (*The Politics of Writing* 92). Head also writes that "the simultaneous reliance on and distrust of allegory in Coetzee's work puts his readers through the experience of being enticed to overlay a work with a template of meaning before realizing the incompleteness or even complicity of such readings ... Like the colonizer, armed with his own inflexible codes for understanding the world, the reader must balk at his or her own inclination to order, simplify, explain, in the face of the alterity of the text" ("Belief" 104).

challenges the power of interpretation” (Coetzee 97). Dovey also writes that “[w]e shall see that in *Life & Times* Coetzee is concerned, precisely, to demonstrate that ‘the sum is supplemented by a precious remainder’” (Barthes qtd. in Dovey 276). The manner in which the text’s indeterminacy invites the reader’s concluding delineation, what Dovey expresses as “filling up the name with a meaning that is ultimately closed off” (276) does indeed resemble what Derrida calls the process of supplementarity.<sup>69</sup>

Michael K is told by two doctors that he can have his lip ‘corrected’, or, to be more precise, *closed*. Like the two doctors wanting to complete K’s mouth, the reader of the novel attempts to fill the empty or elusive spaces in the narrative (the ‘gaps’, the ‘holes’, the ‘darkness’) with his/her supplementation of its meaning. The correction of K’s defective lip can serve as a metaphor for the medical officer’s obsessive imposition of a final, closed meaning, as portrayed by the manner in which he tries to force K to yield his story and his ‘gathering meaning’: “I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!*” (208). This coercion perceptibly confines K and his starving body, in a manner not unlike putting K’s labelled possessions in a museum: “We ought to value you and celebrate you, we ought to put your clothes on a maquette in a museum, your clothes and your packet of pumpkin seeds too, with a label” (208).

Michael K reflects that his story is always one with a hole in it – a story that lacks a centre. Derrida writes that “it has always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality” (224). The perceived absence of such a centre, the absence of a moral, lesson or theme, requires the reader and the critic to fill this empty space, this dense silence, to ‘correct’ and supplement it “by a process of giving it a centre or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (224). However, it is “useless to pour words” into this indeterminate or blank space; they are “eaten up” and the “gap [remains]” (*Life & Times* 150-1).

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<sup>69</sup> According to Derrida, the logic of supplementarity “is powerful and pervasive; it makes possible everything which we think of as human: language, passion, society, art. Once alerted to it, we can find it at work in the most diverse contexts” (Culler 168).

The absence of a centre is primarily achieved by positing an unstable relationship between signifier and signified, between which “there is never any final or complete coincidence or correspondence” (Derrida qtd. in Macey 99). The allegorical aspect of *Life & Times* relies on the manner in which a signifier, like Michael K’s hare lip, invites not one but various opposing signifieds or referents – and, in the words of Derrida, “where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present” except within a system of differences, this “absence ... extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*” (225).

Such a “lack, the absence of a centre or origin” therefore permits the infinite interplay of signification, or the “movement of freeplay” and of “*supplementarity*” (Derrida 236). In other words, the “superabundance” (emphasis removed) of potential meaning in *Life & Times* is “the result of a lack” (Derrida 238) which solicits the supplementation of the reader. However, the supplemented meaning is swallowed by the darkness and becomes but one of various signifieds struggling to prevail. “One cannot determine the centre”, says Derrida (236-7). He concludes:

[t]here are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay. (240)

Culler describes these two “irreconcilable” (Derrida 241) views of interpretation – which can be related directly to the concepts of confinement and containment respectively – as being either “retrospective, which attempts to reconstruct and original meaning or truth” or “prospective, which explicitly welcomes the indeterminacy of meaning” (158).

Another important aspect of the text’s establishment of elusiveness is the third-person narrator’s principle of limited omniscience in Section I and III, that “indicates a refusal to impose a unifying framework, at least not without questioning the validity of such an

imposition” (Head 100). Whereas this caution is usually interpreted as the author’s awareness that the “too-hasty filling of [the] silence ... of the Other ... can itself become a colonizing activity” (Kossew 146), it can also be interpreted as the text’s invitation to the reader to exercise control over the text and realise that the ‘life’, the ‘being’ of Michael K, is dependent on his/her interpretation of the story. According to Head:

[j]ust as K eludes interpretation, so does the novel. The effect of this ... is ... to elucidate more clearly the hegemonies that are involved in the reading exchange. Interpretative assumptions are themselves held up to question, just as the function and definition of allegory is self-consciously examined. (106)

Certain textual indeterminacies, therefore, invite the reader “to assign a ‘meaning’ and a voice to Michael K” in order, I would argue in accordance with Kossew, to perform the “the dangers of imposing an inauthentic voice upon the Other” (139-40).

Consequently, one could interpret K’s evasion of meaning as a performance of the text’s concern with interpretative confinement. The narrative establishes K as a textuality, a meaning that “is always in motion or in transit” (Derrida qtd. in Macey 93). The reader follows, chases this meaning in transit, trying to make sense of its significance (like the medical officer at the end of Section II) whilst “working in conjunction with the structures of the text” (Macey 324). K unsuccessfully tries to “escape” this “imposed meaning, the process of signification” (Kossew 149). As a result, it would seem that the reader *and* Michael K are both constructions of the text’s structures or design; the one’s epic pursuit of the other is staged in the novel’s performance of interpretation.

In conclusion, through the medical officer’s confinement of K, among others, the novel reveals how *not* to approach the other. Although the narrative does not provide an explicit alternative to interpretative confinement, the text does give certain clues, as interwoven with particular images, which have lead to my conception of containment as such a substitute: K’s general lack of judgment, the presence of enabling structures of

containment like the teaspoon, and the paradoxical impression that even a ‘free’ space owes its existence to permeable borders. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the notion of containment is a partial imposition on the text which facilitates my consideration of its performance of the act of delimitation.

### **‘The Moral of the Whole Story’**

This chapter has examined the various ways in which the concrete and conceptual spaces in and of the narrative either contain or confine Michael K’s body. A critical containment of *Life & Times of Michael K* has been shown to acknowledge the manner in which textual indeterminacies generate an ontological flicker that is founded on the following understanding of interpretation:

interpretation of the sign is not ... a meaning but another sign; it is a reading, not a decodage, and this reading has, in its turn, to be interpreted into another sign, and so on *ad infinitum*. Pierce calls this process by means of which ‘one sign gives birth to another’ pure rhetoric, as distinguished from pure grammar, which postulates the possibility of unproblematic, dyadic meaning, and pure logic, which postulates the possibility of the universal truth of meanings. (De Man *Allegories of Reading* 9)

*Life & Times* is located within this realm of infinitely deferred meaning – and so is its criticism. My interpretation of the ‘sign’ that is Michael K is but another sign that will be translated into yet another sign by the readers of this thesis. In other words, my delimitation of *Life & Times of Michael K* is one of many. Every act of reading is, inevitably, an act of delimitation. Accordingly, this chapter has attempted to draw a flexible and permeable rather than a rigid and impenetrable boundary, in order to establish a reciprocal relationship with the novel. By means of this critical containment, the chapter has chosen to interrogate the manner in which *Life & Times* solicits a choice

between interpretations that either confine and limit, or contain and multiply the text's discursive dimensions.

To be precise, the chapter has examined the medical officer's 'reading' of Michael K as a conceptual space of confinement akin to K's imprisonment in actual and conceptual camps. In addition, just as Michael K's indeterminacy is shown to puzzle the medical officer, forcing him to delimit K's being, *Life & Times of Michael K*'s various types of indeterminacy are taken to bewilder the reader, compelling him/her into delimitation. In soliciting the reader's supplementation of the 'gaps', 'holes' or 'darkness' in and of the text, these indeterminacies are presented as the novel's primary means of performing the ethics of delimitation, which is this thesis's primary concern.

I could conclude by extracting a moral from the narrative, all the while shouting, "'Am I right?' ... 'Have I understood you? If I am right, hold up your right hand, if I am wrong hold up your left!'" (229), the idea of a moral prompted by Michael K himself:

Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden, in the course of events, when you least expect them? (249)

And:

Is this my education? he wondered. Am I at last learning about life here in the camp? It seemed to him that scene after scene of life was playing itself out before him and that the scenes all cohered. He had a presentiment of a single meaning upon which they were converging or threatening to converge, though he did not know yet what that might be. (122)<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Also note the following example: "The lesson, if there was a lesson, if there were lessons embedded in events, seemed to be not to kill such large animals" (78).

However, I disagree with Dovey's definition of Michael K, "the victim", as "the ... vehicle for a ... form of moral instruction", her delimitation of the genre as "a fable ... with a lesson or a moral embedded in events" (285), and, thus, with the idea that *Life & Times* conveys a lesson, a moral, or some inherent truth. Although my discussion of the novel's performance of interpretation "remains restricted to the act of reading and of writing, and to the process of subject constitution this involves" (Dovey 287), it nevertheless suggests an underlying moral. It seems that Michael K, the character, and *Life & Times of Michael K*, the text, can never wholly escape the critic's delimitation; even a critical containment draws boundaries. As keenly observed by Graff in his essay on indeterminacy, "[i]t is noteworthy that critics who insist on the indeterminacy of literature are usually just as sure of their interpretations, and write in just as confident a fashion, as critics who believe in determinate meanings and correct interpretations" (175).

As a concession to K's singularity – an attribute inevitably forsaken by this chapter's emphasis on his textuality – I shall, for the moment, leave the moral, the lesson, the single meaning, in all its indeterminacy, to speak for – or perform – itself.



**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**“RECORD OF AN ENGAGEMENT”: RECIPROCITY IN**  
***ELIZABETH COSTELLO: EIGHT LESSONS***

With Hughes it is a matter – I emphasize – not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body. That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him. (*Elizabeth Costello* 97-8)

**1**

Like the poet, Ted Hughes, gazing at the caged jaguar, I stand before *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) “mesmerized ... entranced ... and overwhelmed”, my “powers of understanding pushed beyond their limit” (95). This chapter will discuss not only Costello’s preferred mode of engagement, but also my own particular conversation with the text to emphasise the manner in which it has problematised the concept of limitation deployed in Coetzee’s earlier works, as well as by this thesis’s paradigm.

*Elizabeth Costello* is a collection of texts that describes eight experiences in the late life of the aging Australian author, Elizabeth Costello. In five of the eight lessons, each describing a specific event in Costello’s life, the reader accompanies her to various locations – Pennsylvania (“Lesson 1: Realism”), a fifteen-day cruise to the Ross Ice Shelf (“Lesson 2: The Novel in Africa”), Appleton College (“Lessons 3 & 4: The Lives of Animals”), rural Zululand (“Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa”), Amsterdam (“Lesson 6: The Problem of Evil”) and even to a Kafkaesque purgatory (“Lesson 8: At the Gate”). Except for Lessons 5, 7 and 8, she is invited in her capacity as the world-famous author of *The House on Eccles Street* (1969), in which she has given voice to Marion Bloom from Joyce’s *Ulysses*. A ninth chapter, a postscript in the form of a letter, “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos”, provides the necessary retrospection.

Eight of these experiences are somewhat ironically called ‘lessons’ (Attridge “A Writer’s Life” 259). These ‘lessons’ presumably refer to the papers Costello delivers within the respective chapters. Moreover, each paper bears a similar title to the chapter that contains it. Chapter or “Lesson 1: Realism”, for example, encloses the lecture, “What is realism?”, as well as the context or story of that lecture, in other words, the events and commentary that precede and follow it.

The protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, was conceived by Coetzee for the purpose of a presentation or, rather, a performance at Bennington College on realism. The first chapter was, therefore, initially performed as or in the place of a paper. It describes in acutely realist fashion the fictional events preceding and following, as well as, most importantly, *including* a seminar on the same topic by the character, Elizabeth Costello. In other words, instead of expressing Coetzee’s thoughts as was expected by the audience, the lectures rather communicated the thoughts of a fictional character. Not only is there a certain semblance between Costello and Coetzee’s surnames, but both are renowned authors “from the Southern Hemisphere” (Attridge “A Writer’s Life” 255). Just as Coetzee presents a seminar on realism at an American college, Costello delivers a paper on the same topic at a similar institution as well. In the same manner that Coetzee’s second lecture ensues the following day, Costello’s seminar also comes to pass the day after the first.<sup>71</sup>

As Attridge notes, Coetzee’s lectures – or stories – therefore appear to mirror the circumstances of their presentation. With regard to Coetzee’s second paper, he describes his surprise when Professor John Coetzee opens the first of the two 1997 Tanner Lectures on Human Values – under the general title “The Lives of Animals” – with the words: “He is waiting at the gate when her flight comes in” (“A Writer’s Life” 254). “No preliminary explanation,” writes Attridge:

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<sup>71</sup> Although there are many similarities between Coetzee and Costello, the differences are somewhat underplayed by critics who are eager to equate the two personas and their opinions.

no introduction to prepare us for this clearly fictional statement, couched in the third-person present tense familiar from *The Master of Petersburg* (his most recent novel at the time), and for those of us who thought this might be the familiar lecturer's strategy of beginning with a quotation from another author, no break in the fictional tissue from henceforward to the end of the presentation. What made the event in which we were participating all the more disquieting was our gradual realization that it was being mirrored, in a distorted representation, in the fiction itself. ("A Writer's Life" 254-5)

In comparison to Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, which, though interrupted by Section II, is still fairly recognisable as a narrative, *Elizabeth Costello* problematises the question of narration on a structural or formal level. It follows that the text does not allow for a linear unpacking of a logical, consequential argument. Whereas two or three main discursive registers (like allegory and realism) can be extrapolated from *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Age of Iron*, in *Elizabeth Costello* a variety of different and conflicting events or registers are staged and juxtaposed, bringing to light the limits and possibilities of each perspective. The relationships between these vantage points are further complicated in that certain positions are promoted more than others through the careful interplay of lecture, response, and interpersonal dialogue (as in Lessons 1 to 6). The ideas in this text, therefore, are lifted to the level of argumentation. Attridge describes the arguments within these stories:

*arguings*, utterances made by individuals in concrete situations – wholly unlike the paradigmatic philosophical argument, which implicitly lays claim to a timeless, spaceless, subjectless condition as it pursues its logic. They are, that is, events staged within the event of the work: and they invite the reader's participation not just in the intellectual exercise of positions expounded and defended but in the human experience, and the human cost, of exposing convictions, beliefs, doubts, and fears in a public arena. ("A Writer's Life" 259)

It follows that the reader circulates through different beliefs, doubts, fears and opinions, of which some are more convincing than others. In oscillating between varieties of stances, passing from belief to belief, the text appears to test each perspective's conditions for a reciprocal relationship against the rest. This challenging text frustrates the critic who, in search of a solution to the problematic staged by the text, then tries to reduce its indeterminacy by means of the reasonable encounter contested by Costello (even though she herself employs reason in the refutation of this totalising system). Given that some of the 'lessons' consider a sympathetic engagement with the other that seems to elude the grasp of reason, this presents a challenge to the critic.

Although the range of ideas and impression voiced in the eight lessons (or nine, if one includes the postscript) eludes categorisation, I will attempt, nonetheless, to trace the relations between the most prevalent ideas of this singularly resistant text.

## 2

In "Lesson 1: Realism", the reader is introduced to the notion that realism, as a genre, requires the writer to imagine or think herself into the embodied being, the existence, of an other. When asked by an interviewer whether she finds it easy to write from the position of a man, Costello replies, "Easy? No. If it were easy it wouldn't be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself. Making up a world for him to move in" (12). John additionally underscores that his "mother has been a man ... She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?" (22-3). In the words of Emmanuel Egudu in "Lesson 2: The Novel in Africa", it appears that by means of her writing, Costello inhabits "fleeting identities" to "pick up and wear and discard like clothing" (43). In a related passage in "Lesson 8: At the Gate", Costello comes to the following realisation:

now that she thinks of it, she lives, in a certain sense, by belief. Her mind, when she is truly herself, appears to pass from one belief to the next, pausing, balancing, then moving on. A picture comes to her of a girl crossing a stream; it comes together from a line from Keats: *Keeping steady her laden head across a brook*. She lives by belief, she works by belief, she is a creature of belief. What a relief! Should she run back and tell them, her judges, before they disrobe (and before she changes her mind)? (222)

In Costello's conception, it appears that the writer moves from one body to the next. Costello is a woman of principle, of conviction. Although she contests this claim in "At the Gate", given the manner in which she passes from one belief to another, all her preceding lectures testify to an unwavering belief in the imagination's ability to inhabit 'fleeting identities' – whether of humans, animals or inanimate objects – and their fleeting beliefs, if they possess any. In fact, when facing the judges of the last lesson's tribunal for the second time, Costello gives corresponding evidence of a 'buried' belief in the imagination in her description of the manner in which the torrential rain awakens the seemingly lifeless bodies of the little frogs of the Dulgannon:

Silent until the next rains come, rapping, as it were, on thousands of tiny coffin lids. In those coffins hearts begin to beat, limbs begin to twitch that for months have been lifeless. The dead awake. As the caked mud softens, the frogs begin to dig their way out, and soon their voices resound again in joyous exultation beneath the vault of the heavens. (216)

In this singular evocation, Costello, in fact, demonstrates to the judges that she is able to imagine herself into the being of an other. In other words, she performs an act of the imagination. This act is not merely a matter of "inhabiting another mind but of *inhabiting another body*" (96, my emphasis). In describing the life cycle of the frog, Costello attempts to inhabit the being of the frog to such an extent that, for a moment, she feels as if she *is* the frog. Thus, what we have in Costello's demonstration of her implicit

conviction is an instance of the power of the imagination to bridge the distance between self and other or, otherwise stated, writing, in this case poetry, “that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him” (96). The reader is thus introduced to the act of writing as an active and arduous exertion of the imagination that brings together two beings.

Although Costello’s vivid evocation of realist detail can be aligned with literary realism, it is also tempting to read this portrayal in allegorical terms. An interpretation of this life cycle as an allegory of, for example, the manner in which the writer’s imagination brings the other to life, seems solicited by the ensuing discussion between Costello and the judges with regard to its allegorical nature. However, Costello emphasises that although “the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical ..., to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing” (217). As implicitly demonstrated in the previous two chapters, allegory requires realism to fix the signifier in place and, thus, to imbue it with the necessary stability. On the other hand, whereas realism may appear, in a certain context, to possess stable, single meaning, as the contexts of reading change, what seemed to be a stable realist text is suddenly opened to allegorical reinterpretation. Costello’s evocation of the Dulgannon frogs, in other words, does not present either a straightforward allegory or an unproblematic realist representation, but the dialectic between these discursive registers. In fact, *Elizabeth Costello* as a whole can be described as interplay between divergent positions.

### 3

The first lesson, “Realism”, is set in motion with two significant paragraphs that display the manner in which this register fixes the signified to the signifier. The passage deals with the notion of imagination as a bridge between the reality of the reader and the reality of the text:

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a

simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on.

Let us assume that, however, it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be. (1)

In the first place, this passage sheds light on the fissure between the writer and the narrativised other. Accordingly, distance refers not only to the dissimilarity between the two territories but also to the gap between signifier and signified which realism attempts to close.

Secondly, the passage expresses fiction's main concern, or 'problem', that is to say, the bridging of this gap between the world of the writer and that of his characters. The writer's implied purpose is to carry the reader from the territory in which she was, the extratextual reality, into the far territory where she wants to be, the intratextual, fictional reality. In a practical portrayal, this passage likens the writer's imagination to a bridge that transports the reader from one world to the next. "What intrigues [Costello] is less the metaphysics than the mechanics, the practicalities of congress across a gap in being" (184), explains the narrator in "Lesson 7: Eros". The relation to sexual congress will be discussed in a moment.

The passage's location, at the outset of "Realism", adds force to the metaphor of the bridge in that, yet again, the form emulates the content. The passage is itself a bridge that accompanies and introduces the reader to the reality of the text; itself a performance of the mechanics, the practicalities of such a journey. In a similar sense, like Costello's evocation of the Dulgannon frogs, the fictional text, "Realism", stages an interrelationship between realism and allegory or, in other words, the bridge between these two registers. A variety of statements open themselves to allegorical interpretation, especially when Costello is described as a "mouthpiece for the divine ... a god incarnated

in child” (31), a description that refers to “the powers that animate her” (26), her creator or her god, which could point to Coetzee himself.

To yet again refer to the gap between word and world, it should be noted that the narrator of “Realism” (a text that is performed by Coetzee during his live delivery of the text) regularly draws attention to the gaps in the narrative in a self-reflexive gesture: “We skip” (2, 15, 16, 17, 24) and “A gap” (27, 28).<sup>72</sup> With regard to these ‘gaps’, the narrator writes/says:

[i]t is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction. Breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion. However, unless certain scenes are skipped over we will be here all afternoon. The skips are not part of the *text*, they are part of the *performance*. (16)

Note that a couple of pages – or a couple of hours – later, the narrator uses a sentence similar to the previous citation’s last: “We skip ahead again, a skip this time in the text rather than in the performance” (24). Breaking into the dream, the illusion of the story’s realism, these two statements which are in themselves interruptions of or gaps in the narrative, also underscore the constructed nature of ‘realism’ itself. It is shown to be a discursive register that relies on the text’s ability to bridge the gap between two realities in its suspension of disbelief. “Remove your gaze for but an instant, and the mirror falls to the floor and shatters” (20), warns Costello. The distance between the extratextual reality and the intratextual world is further emphasised in that narrative time and narrated time, in other words the text and its performance, are revealed as distinct. The text executes this underscoring of distance and difference to expose the manner in which the

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<sup>72</sup> These gaps are not unlike the textual indeterminacies encountered in *Life & Times of Michael K*: elusive elements which solicit supplementation and, consequently, draw attention to the reader’s participation in the generation of the narrative.



genre, realism – the subject of the chapter’s ‘lesson’ – cloaks the text’s distance from the reality it claims to reflect and represent. As in the case of *Age of Iron*, *Elizabeth Costello* appears to contain and perform the discursive register, realism, in order to problematise its limits and possibilities. “The word-mirror [of the text] is broken, irreparably, it seems” (19), says Costello.

Thus far, this chapter has examined the manner in which *Elizabeth Costello* describes imagination as a bridge between self and other. I wish to elaborate on such possession in the sections that follow, exploring the implications of such imaginative possession, beginning with the question of the erotic.

#### 4

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. (9)<sup>73</sup>

Here, the narrator of “Realism” calls attention to the genre’s reliance on the embodiment of ideas. The passage may also suggest that the genre itself is an embodiment of reality, giving it shape and structure in the textual realm of the Symbolic. In “Lesson 7: Eros”, Costello’s conception of the mechanics of the possession of an other body is vulgarly literalised and thus emphasised by descriptions of sexual encounters between the bodies of gods and men. The fissure between dissimilar corporealities (the corporeal reality of beings) is here examined in terms of a literal distance and difference between two radically dissimilar bodies: that of a god (perhaps the author, allegorically speaking) and that of a human being (presumably a character, like Costello). This distance is related to

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<sup>73</sup> John describes realism’s method in terms of his mother’s appearance: “The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves” (4).

desire, and the merging of the two bodies, “the physical mingling of two orders of being” (185), with the erotic realisation of that desire: “Bad enough to have a full-grown swan jabbing webbed feet into your backside while he has his way, or a one-ton bull leaning his moaning weight on you” (184), Costello writes of the intercourse between two dissimilar beings. In the context of this examination of ‘interpenetration’, Susan Moebius’s following question to John acquires a whole new meaning: “If there were no difference, what would become of desire?” (23).

One might even conclude that the intercourse, the interpenetration between the body of the author-as-god, and the body of the character-as-human, gives birth to or generates the text itself:

Appetency and chance: a powerful duo, *more than powerful enough to build a cosmology on*, from the atoms and the little things with nonsense names that make up atoms to Alpha Centauri and Cassiopeia and the great dark back of beyond. The gods and ourselves, whirled helplessly around by the winds of chance, yet pulled equally towards each other, towards not only B and C and D but towards X and Y and Z and Omega too. Not the least thing, not the last thing but is called by love. (192, my emphasis)

The postscript, “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos”, plays with this notion of interpenetration. In her letter to Francis Bacon, this Elizabeth writes of her husband’s “craving to enter [sirens and dryads’] naked, glistening bodies” (227). This expresses a desire not only to penetrate the body of an other, but also to interpret, to inhabit and understand that other. The terms ‘penetration’ and ‘interpretation’ are thus entangled to demonstrate the extent that a writer ‘penetrates’ the being of an other by means of her imaginative possession or ‘interpretation’ of that being’s body. In likening writing – and its creation of a cosmology – to sexual intimacy, the manner in which the imagination brings together or merges corporealities, is underscored.

In “Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa”, Costello writes a letter to her sister, describing how she once posed for a nude portrait, painted by the dying Mr Phillips. The memory suggests the manner in which desire, a consequence of the distance and difference between two bodies, energises the *act* of the imagination, the *act* of art. Whilst posing, Costello recalls Renoir’s statement, “I paint with my penis – didn’t Renoir say that, Renoir of the plump, creamy-skinned ladies?” (148, emphasis removed). This evokes the manner in which art attempts to close the gap, to realise the desire, between dissimilar corporealities – in other words, to interpenetrate.

In Costello’s words, “[t]here are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (80). But the postscript of the text significantly underscores the dangers, and indeed impossibility, of the unbounded imagination. A careful examination of the text demonstrates that imagination is not likened to the total realisation of the self’s desire to merge with the other. Imagination should rather be considered in terms of a desire which can never fully be realised. If the desire is, in fact, realised, the differentiation between self and other disappears. Lady Chandos’s husband, for example, loses his mind because of the inability to separate himself from his surroundings. The self’s total and boundless union with the world, in the subsequent absence of delineation, is shown to be the cause of insanity – and delineation, therefore, deemed necessary. As argued in previous chapters, boundedness is indeed the basis of meaning and relation. Although Costello’s notions of the sympathetic imagination, as the essay will demonstrate, appear to promote a boundless communion between the self and the animal, she retains differentiation throughout her imaginative encounter with the little frogs of the Dulgannon, Kafka’s ape and Hughes’s jaguar.

Significantly, erotic possession is juxtaposed in the text with possession by evil, the subject of my next brief elucidation.

As Elizabeth argues in “Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa” and “Lesson 6: The Problem of Evil”, there should be a limit, a boundary to one’s interpenetration of an other being. The notion of writing as a potential threat to the harmony and sanity of the soul is explored in these two fictions. In “Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa”, Costello for example criticises her sister Blanche for having allowed, or even having driven, a simple man, Joseph, to spend most of his life carving crucifixes from wood:

‘Why didn’t you get [Joseph] to make something else besides crucifixes, crucifixions? What does it do to a person’s – if I dare use the word – *soul* to spend his working life carving a man in agony over and over again? When he isn’t doing odd jobs, that is.’ (137)<sup>74</sup>

In carving Jesus in agony, Joseph has to momentarily inhabit or possess his (His) suffering body. This passage suggests that when an artist like Joseph imagines his way into the embodied being of another, an aspect of that being remains, affecting or tainting his soul.

Costello persists with this train of thought when, in “Lesson 6: The Problem of Evil”, she delivers a paper, “Witness, Silence, and Censorship”, at an Amsterdam conference that warns the audience of the dangers associated with the imagination, in other words, with an attempt of the unbounded possession of the other. Costello specifically engages with the manner in which Paul West’s novel, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*,

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<sup>74</sup> Linking suffering to salvation, Blanche replies that Joseph has spent “thirty years of his earthly existence representing, for the eyes of others certainly but principally for his own eyes, Our Saviour in his agony. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, he imagined that agony and, with a fidelity you can behold for yourself, reproduced it, to the best of his ability, without varying it, without importing new fashions into it, without injecting into it any of his own personality. Which of us, I now ask, will Jesus be most gladdened to welcome into his kingdom: Joseph with his wasted hands, or you, or me?” (138).

introduces the reader to torture, suffering and the “obscene” (169),<sup>75</sup> stating explicitly (and somewhat eccentrically):

certain things are not good to read *or to write*. To put the point another way: I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places: risks, specifically, himself; risks, perhaps, all. I take this claim seriously because I take seriously the forbiddenness of forbidden places. The cellar in which the July 1944 plotters were hanged is one such forbidden place. I do not believe we should go into that cellar, any of us. I do not believe Mr West should go there; and, if he chooses to go nevertheless, I believe we should not follow. (173)<sup>76</sup>

According to Costello, certain things should be left unsaid; certain experiences should be left forgotten – lest they taint the soul. “Through Hitler’s hangman a devil entered Paul West”, Costello thinks to herself, “and in his book West in turn has given that devil his freedom, turned him loose upon the world. She felt the brush of his leathery wings, as sure as soap, when she read those dark pages” (167-8).

Aside from forms of erotic possession and possession by evil, the text devotes much space to what one might call possession across species. Whereas the concept of limitation has been deployed fairly unproblematically in the previous sections with regard to the sympathetic imagination (which provides the means for communing with other species), Lessons 3 and 4 problematise this concept by opposing reason and imagination in such a manner as to compel this thesis to rethink the limitations of its chosen paradigm.

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<sup>75</sup> “*Obscene*. That is the word, a word of contested etymology, that she must hold on to as talisman. She chooses to believe that obscene means *off-stage*. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!*) must remain off-stage” (169).

<sup>76</sup> In “Lesson 3: The Philosophers and the Animals”, Costello, accordingly, refuses to invoke the terror of the slaughterhouses.

The two lectures that constitute “The Lives of Animals” confront the reader with a multitude of arguments for and against particular aspects of the animal rights debate. The fictional nature of the text allows for the juxtaposition of various opinions, some more ludicrous than others, in a complex and sophisticated manner. These arguments prompt an examination of the various ways in which the subject can attempt to engage with and understand animals. Specifically two opposing arguments regarding this approach are presented. The first presents the role of the poetic imagination, enabling humanity to share rather than appropriate a realm of being with animals (“The Poets and the Animals”). The second presents the necessity of appropriation because of the irreducible delimitation of the human gaze (“The Philosophers and the Animals”).

In “Capturing Animals”, a chapter in Ted Hughes’s *Poetry in the Making*, the poet writes that “[t]here are all sorts of ways of capturing animals and birds and fish” (15). Hughes likens poetry, one such method, to his childhood “pursuit of mice ... snatching them from under the sheaves as the sheaves were lifted away” (15). In the fourth lesson of *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003), “The Lives of Animals: The Poets and the Animals”, Costello presents a lecture at Appleton College, in which she compares Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem, “The Panther”, with Ted Hughes’s “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar”.

Given Costello’s concern with the confinement and maltreatment of animals, as expressed in her previous lecture (or lesson), “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals”, it seems fitting that she chooses two poems in which the animals are caged – or captured. Whereas the bars, the limits of Rilke’s cage are said to “[leave] the will stupefied, narcotized” (95), Hughes’s cage “has no reality” to the jaguar. “He is *elsewhere*” (95).

As the two “Lives of Animals” lectures demonstrate, Costello is trying, somewhat ineptly, to engage with animals without subjecting them to the concrete cage of science

or the conceptual cage of reason. What seems to attract Costello's preference is the manner in which Hughes's poem succeeds in negating the jaguar's capture, or delimitation, in opposition to Rilke's panther who thoroughly succumbs to his imprisonment. Whereas Rilke's poem is "about" (96) the idea of a somewhat allegorical panther, which is "a stand-in for something else" (95), Hughes's poem is a singular "record of an engagement" (98), a realist evocation of a corporeal being's kinetic consciousness. "The Jaguar" mobilises poetic devices – or, in Kristeva's terminology, the semiotic as opposed to the symbolic dimension of language – in such a way as to generate a sense of a physical being that, like Kafka's ape, is embedded in a system of relations. Hughes explains that his "words have made a body for [the animal] and given it somewhere to walk" (20).

Costello further argues that "we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within him. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body" (96). In other words, "[w]ith Hughes it is a matter ... not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body" (96). In fact, Costello believes that the animal's "whole being is in the living flesh" (110, my emphasis).

In Lesson 4, Costello discusses Hughes's poem as an instance of the manner in which the poet can capture and convey "a feel for the [animal's] experience" (74), a sense of the jaguar's "fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being" (78). According to Costello, this is "a heavily affective sensation – of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive in the world" (78), in other words, of being a 'living soul', a 'body-soul' or an 'embodied soul'. This sense of harmony and unity is called *joy*, the feeling of boundless elation that stems from the dissolution of the boundary between the body, the seat of being, and the mind, the seat of "thinking, cogitation" (78). In the preceding lecture, as contained by Lesson 3, Costello tells the audience: "[T]here is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (80). Costello views reason as the bounded realm of ideas, a totalising system or camp that has confined Kafka and Köhler's apes or "biological

automations” (66) in a “labyrinth of constraint, manipulation and duplicity” (74). This “narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition” (69) “repudiates the primitive and celebrates the Western bias towards abstract thought” (97).

## 7

Within the discourse of modernity – a discourse that pervades many of the arguments cited in “The Lives of Animals” – the animal, to adapt Giroux’s description of the colonial relation, “is often defined within totalizing and universalistic theories that create a transcendental rational white, male, Eurocentric subject that ... occupies the centers of power” (455). In this sense, “The Lives of Animals” is not just about animal rights, but also about the “[reproduction] [of] the distance between the centres [the humans] and margins [the animals] of power” (Giroux 455). According to Giroux, “[r]ead against this Eurocentric transcendental subject, the Other” (the animal) is “reduced to the imagery of the colonizer” (445). “The Lives of Animals” can be seen, therefore, as a text located within “the wider discourse of power and powerlessness” (Giroux 459). By challenging the fixed categories of human self and animal other, Coetzee is participating in a “healthy suspiciousness of all boundary-fixing and the hidden ways in which we subordinate, exclude and marginalize” (Bernstein qtd. in Giroux 468).

The two lectures make an effort to free the categories of human self and animal other from their explicit oppositional delineations, and practices what might be described as a more heterogeneous approach, “signaling ... difference at the very heart of similarity” (Hutcheon and Natoli “Preface” 444). Identity and difference are consequently rendered “at once ‘near to’ and ‘counter to’ each other” (Hutcheon qtd. in Hutcheon and Natoli “Preface” 444), problematising the notion of fixed categories.

With regard to the subversion of what essentially constitutes the totalising metanarrative of the human species – in contrast to the *petites histories* of the various species of animals – in a text founded on a vast array of overlapping narrative frames, poetry is attributed considerable significance. Poetry is one of the mechanisms through which



“heterogeneous performance”, in the words of Baker, “worries” “the linear, empty space of homogeneity” (546). It expresses these decentred narratives, these *petites histoires*, as part of a quest of “not seek[ing] to substitute one truth for another, one standard of beauty for another, one life ideal for another”, but of “brac[ing] itself for a life without truths, standards, ideals” (Bauman qtd. in Hutcheon and Natoli “Introduction” 3).

According to Costello, poetry can subvert the habit of appropriative observation and categorisation, as employed by masters of the *grand recits*. To understand the true nature of the animal, one should try and imagine oneself into the position of the animal, she lectures. Specifically poetic engagement is mentioned as an ethical instance of trying to understand the animal as a being in its own right, with significance that is unique and autonomous. Costello states that the question to ask should not be: “Do we have something in common – reason, self-consciousness, a soul – with other animals?” (79) – a question that rigidly conforms to the modernist notion of fixed categories. Rather, the individual should look to the poetic imagination, to “poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement” (*Elizabeth Costello* 97-8) with its embodied being:

To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat-being in the first case, human-being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*.

To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal – and we are all animals – is an embodied soul. (33)

The notion of full being can be related to Egudu’s notion of the living voice. In the second lesson, Costello embarks on a cruise to the Ross Ice Shelf in her capacity as the famous writer, on which she delivers a seminar on “The Future of the Novel” to the cruise liner’s guests. She is joined by an old acquaintance, a fellow writer from Africa, Emmanuel Egudu, whose lecture, “The Novel in Africa”, follows hers. Egudu is the

embodiment of virile African masculinity: “He is dark, he is exotic, he is in touch with life’s energies” (53). In his lecture on orality as the African novel’s main characterising trait, “[h]e has spoken with force, perhaps even with passion” (45), as opposed to Costello’s hesitant, doubtful delivery on the novel as “an exercise in making the past coherent” (39).

Egudu believes that “Africans need the living presence, the living voice” (50). In effect, he is the embodiment of this ‘living voice’, the orality of the African novel. With his “effortlessly booming voice” (40), he is said to make one “[s]hudder. The voice makes one shudder. Probably does, when one is breast to breast with it” (57). Another African (a character in “Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa”), Father Msimungu is also endowed with a “baritone voice, surprising in so young a man” that “seems to come from effortlessly deep in the chest” (142).

Egudu criticises the manner in which “literature has consolidated itself, prospered, and become what it is – one of the hugest dimensions of mankind – *by denying the voice*” (45, my emphasis), and consequently denying corporeality. He opposes the African novel’s embrace of the body to the Western novel’s practice of disembodiment: “The African novel is thus”, he claims, “in its very being, and before the first word is written, a critique of the Western novel, which has gone so far down the road of disembodiment” (45).

Costello’s most famous novel, *The House on Eccles Street*, engages with James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and is thus associated with the (Western) tradition of disembodiment of the narrative. She is highly critical of Egudu’s emphasis on the African novel’s corporeality, stating that “there is something about the talk she does not like, something to do with orality and the mystique of orality. Always, she thinks, the body that is insisted on, pushed forward, and the voice, dark essence of the body, welling up from within it” (46). She concludes:

all of Emmanuel’s talk of an oral novel, a novel that has kept in touch with the human voice and hence with the human body, a novel that is not disembodied like the Western novel but speaks the body and the body’s

truth, is just another way of propping up the mystique of the African in the last repository of primal human energies. (53)

Interestingly, Costello, first, criticises the notion of the living voice (in Lesson 2) and, second, then proposes a similar concept, the concept of full being and the living embodied soul (Lessons 3 and 4) which also ‘insists on’ or ‘pushes forward’ the ‘dark essence of the body’:

[t]he way that people live in their bodies. The way they move their hands. The way they walk. The way they smile or frown. The lilt of their speech. The way they sing. The timbre of their voices. The way they dance. The way they touch each other; how the hand lingers; the feel of the fingers. The way they make love. The way they lie after they have made love. The way they think. The way they sleep. (44)

In a method that corresponds in many ways to Egudu’s notion of a fictional mode that engages with ‘the way that people live in their bodies’, Hughes’s poem serves as a record of the subject’s attempt to bring into appearance and share the jaguar’s kinetic consciousness. This attempt is born from the subject’s limited capacity to connect with its own, as well as the animal’s embodied being – ‘limited’ because the human has a different body than that of animals, a body that is endowed with the faculty of reason. On the other hand, given that the human body shares a similar substance and, also, is situated or embedded similarly in the world, the human is able to imagine the animal’s interrelationship with and in the world. It is the relationship between the human and the animal, where both phenomena are present, which provides, not complete, unbounded access to the animal’s ‘living soul’, but an engagement with its singular being.

With this in mind, Hughes’s poem can be considered as an attempt to transcend the boundaries of reason, as well as the boundaries of the body, in the face of alterity, an endeavour that “remain[s] a matter of complete indifference to [its] objects” (96). Note that the poet, like the crowd, “stands mesmerized, and among them the man, the poet,

entranced and horrified and overwhelmed, his powers of understanding *pushed beyond their limit*" (95, own emphasis).

According to Costello, it is "[t]he heart ... the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another" (79) or this "different kind of being-in-the-world" (95) separated from the realm of rational understanding. Such an engagement, a "mixture of shamanism and spirit possession" (98), cannot arise within the boundaries delineated by reason: "Fullness of being is a state hard to sustain in confinement" (78), notes Costello. On the other hand, the encounter is not devoid of reason. Costello, importantly, remarks: "If I do not subject my discourse to reason, whatever that is, what is left for me but to gibber and emote and knock over my water glass and generally make a monkey of myself?" (68). In addition, the philosophical and theoretical natures of the cited arguments lend themselves to intellectual, or rather, reasonable speculation. This emphasises that, although it is an interrelationship with or embeddedness in the world that is shared between humans and animals, it is still the faculty of reason that facilitates the engagement.

It seems that, through its refutation of reason, Costello interrogates categorisation itself. "The Lives of Animals" problematises categorical distinctions and targets the notion of the fixed categories of the human self and the animal by demonstrating the manner in which these categories shift according to the type of approach or engagement. By calling into question the themes of "degraded Otherness", Coetzee's text problematises "notions of exclusionary identity, dominating heterogeneity, and universality" (Giroux 468) or, in other words, destabilises these "monolithic and homogeneous" categories "in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity" (Hutcheon and Natoli "Preface" 444).

What is of importance here is not whether these arguments can be resolved, but rather that these questions are being asked in a manner that sheds light on the problematic nature of reason's confining yet necessary delimitation of the other. In addition, the body is presented as that which enables the *engagement*, but disables the *full communion* with the animal. To my mind, it would appear that the primary condition for a reciprocal

relationship with the other is the co-operation between opposites, a dialectic between the faculty of the imagination (which is presented as a space without limits), on the one hand, and that of reason (a total and totalising space), on the other.

Costello, therefore, succeeds in founding an argument in favour of animal rights on the idea of reciprocity between animals and humans by transcending the objectifying relationship that perpetuates the categories of the human self and the animal other. She embraces a type of animism, sensing that even though the human individual does not have complete access to the animal's being, it can be respected and valued, as well as apprehended through the sympathetic imagination which, along with reason, stabilises a relationship of sorts, one that acknowledges what Merleau-Ponty called the flesh of the world.

## 8

Given my consideration hitherto of delineation in Coetzee's fiction, I was tempted to highlight two predominant concepts in *Elizabeth Costello*, like poetry and philosophy, and align them with 'containment' and 'confinement'. However, as argued in the previous chapters, the enforcement of a predetermined framework would result in an inevitable confinement of the text. Confinement, in the guise of reason, is a strong presence in the text. With regard to containment, however, none of *Elizabeth Costello*'s variety of positions or perspectives on the relationship between self and other can be reduced to the category of containment which, in the context of this fictional text, assumes a rather rigid form.

As the previous two chapters have demonstrated, Coetzee is concerned with the problematic of delimitation. His fictional works consider the ramifications of containment and confinement, of the significance it enables and the alterity it disables. *Life & Times of Michael K* elicits the paradigm explicitly. The text is permeated with images of confinement and containment, of which the concentration camps are the most prominent. Though not as prominent in *Life & Times*, the concept of delimitation features

quite strongly at the level of plot in *Age of Iron*, as discussed in previous chapters. However, the subject of this chapter's delimiting gaze, *Elizabeth Costello*, has proved increasingly resistant to my attempts at translating its consideration of a non-rational engagement with the other into this essay's rational vocabulary. The more I struggled to extrapolate the concept of enabling delimitation from the text's notion of the sympathetic imagination, the more it pressed back, withstanding my attempts at confinement. The reason lies therein that the imaginative aspect of the sympathetic encounter (as opposed to its reasonable dimension) transcends the language of the limit. Containment, as an instrument of reason, proved incapable of engaging with this notion on its own terms.

This brought to light that the framework deployed by this thesis, a framework which initially succeeded in drawing permeable boundaries, had become regularised within the frame of this study, a totalising system that would impose the terms deemed significant by its standards. I considered the possibility, then, that the text could be opposing totality or 'confinement' (having usurped 'containment' into its fabric) to infinity, in other words, opposing restrictive boundaries to limitlessness. The condition for reciprocity would, in this instance, entail a dialectical relationship between the infinite imagination and finite reason. For example, although Costello deems reason a totalising system, in her performance of the sympathetic engagement with the other (in Lessons 3, 4 and 8), she does not achieve a boundless communion but retains differentiation between herself and the animals as demonstrated by her encounter with the little frogs of the Dulgannon. In addition, the postscript emphasises the impossibility of a unity with the world.

The ensuing conclusion was that *Elizabeth Costello* resides in a space between, even beyond, oppositions, refuting attempts, including my own, at subjecting it to reasonable understanding. With regard to the notions of full being and the transcendental imagination, the text appears to surpass the vocabulary, the language of the limit (which Costello relates to reason), exposing the categorical nature even of a framework that allows for the interrogation of categorisation. Costello's ideas about full being and sympathetic possession transcend the limits of the language of limitation and, so doing, defy my assimilation. It follows that *Elizabeth Costello* provides a vantage point on

Coetzee's earlier works in driving the concept of limitation to its own limits in order to engage with the alterity of the other. This repositioning is consistent with Coetzee's general problematisation and destabilisation of conventions, including that of his own fiction.

It seems, then, that, in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee "report[s] from the far edges" (15) of his own oeuvre, destabilising the discursive devices of his earlier works. Costello's belief in beings that are indifferent to her belief or understanding is reminiscent of the impenetrability of Michael K, Vercueil, Friday and the barbarian girl, a characteristic feature of Coetzee's fiction that expresses his awareness of the confining aspect of delineation. Marais writes, for example, that Coetzee's narratives "evinced an awareness of the novel's complicity in western tradition's universalizing drive, its reduction of the other to the same. Hence the emphasis in both these modes on the marginalized, on that which has been excluded by the discourses of the same" ("The Novel" 6). Instead of attempting to impose a meaning on the other, like the medical officer or Mrs Curren does, the strategy of containment is intended to result in the embrace of the indeterminacy of the other, but perhaps it does not altogether succeed, for reasons to which I have alluded.

The difference between Coetzee's earlier narratives and *Elizabeth Costello* lies in the text's relation to the other. Whereas Michael K's containment, for example, entails a detached acceptance of his indeterminacy and impenetrability, *Elizabeth Costello*'s notion of sympathetic engagement or possession is said to bring the self face-to-face with the other. In this sense, *Elizabeth Costello* suggests a way in which the self can engage with the animal other without subjecting it to reasonable delimitation and without bringing it into the order of the same. Of course, this engagement is not devoid of reason – or language, for that matter. This other, like Michael K and Vercueil, is but a gesture to the alterity that lies beyond the borders of the text.

Recalling that Costello's statements are the product of an aging, somewhat irrational mind, it, ironically, seems reasonable – within the context of the eight lessons – that ideas

and impressions are ill defined and often contrasted and compared in contradicting ways. In John's words, "[h]is mother could do with some clarity" (81).

## **Postscript**

*Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* suggests that a reciprocal relationship, a mutual exchange, with the other can only occur by means of an interrelationship between mind and heart, between reason and sympathy. The paradigm of containment and confinement deployed by this thesis has proved incapable of engaging fully with Costello's notion of the sympathetic imagination, given the manner in which this idea appears to transcend the language of delimitation. Although containment is concerned with the establishment of a reciprocal encounter between self and other by means of a permeable boundary, the body, through its sheer materiality, resists such a conceptual containment. *Elizabeth Costello's* notion of the sympathising imagination, the embodied experience of an interrelationship between self and other, does not operate within the confines of the Symbolic system.

The encounter with this fictional text brings to light that containment is but an instrument of reason, incapable of engaging with the alterity of the living body. What defines the text as a literary work of art is the manner in which it "mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will" (98), engaging both reason and sensation. In this series of fiction-as-criticism or criticism-as-fiction, Coetzee gestures toward the text's traces of alterity, its full being and coherent unity that generate the singular dimension which eludes the critic perpetually. In conclusion, it seems that contemporary criticism finds itself challenged by the task at hand, that is, to engage with Elizabeth Costello, the individual, and *Elizabeth Costello*, the text, in a full, responsible and reciprocal manner.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### “AN EQUAL MARRIAGE?”: COETZEE’S CRITICAL RESPONSE IN “THE POETICS OF RECIPROCITY”

What is missing is a passion that quite answers to Achterberg’s passion. In that sense the essay is a betrayal of Achterberg. But what is criticism, what can it ever be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object? How often is there an equal marriage? (*Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* 61)

In “The Humanities in Africa”, the fifth lesson of *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003), Elizabeth Costello writes a letter to her sister, Blanche, describing how she once posed nude for a portrait. The painter, “old Mr Phillips” (150), was a friend of their mother’s who, only recently, had undergone an operation, a laryngectomy. Costello describes this gesture of generosity as an “[act] of humanity”: “Nothing compels us to do it ... But out of the overflow, the outflow of our human hearts we do it nevertheless: drop our robes, reveal ourselves, reveal the life and beauty we are blessed with” (150). In the letter, Costello omits the particulars of a second meeting between her and Mr Phillips, during which she resumes the pose of the painting, “the last of the bosom-offering, the last of the blessing” (153) even though radiation therapy has left Mr Phillips unable to paint. Costello describes the two encounters in terms of “*caritas*” (154):

For that, in the end, is what she is convinced it is. From the swelling of her heart she knows it, from the utter, illimitable difference between what is in her heart and what Nurse Naidoo would see, if by some mischance Nurse Naidoo, using her pass key, were to fling open the door and stride in. (154)<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> This passage is reminiscent of the following extract from *Age of Iron* that evokes the materiality of language. Staring at the word ‘gratitude’, Mrs Curren comes to sense its meaning. The word is felt; it swells or bursts with life: “I write these words sitting in bed, my knees pressed together against the August cold. *Gratitude*: I write down the word and read it back. What does it mean? Before my eyes it grows dense, dark, mysterious. Then something happens. Slowly, like a pomegranate, my heart bursts with gratitude; like a fruit splitting open to reveal the seeds of love. *Gratitude, pomegranate*: sister words” (51).

This term, “*caritas*” (*Age of Iron* 20), also surfaces in a letter written by another E.C., Elizabeth Curren. *Age of Iron*’s narrator, Mrs Curren, writes that ‘care’ is “the true root of charity. I look for [Vercueil] to care, and he does not. Because he is beyond caring. Beyond caring and beyond care” (20).

The two moments provide a point of departure for a concluding discussion of J.M. Coetzee’s notion of an (unlikely or impossible) equal marriage between critic and literary text. According to Levinas, “if communication and community is to be achieved, a real response, a responsible answer must be given” from the self (the critic) to the other (the text). “There can be no free interchange without something to give. Responsible communication depends on an initial act of generosity” (14), writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. Costello’s act of *caritas*, of generosity, can be perceived as an attempt at forging a reciprocal relationship with another human being by offering something of herself to Mr Phillips.<sup>78</sup> Significantly, her gift is of the body, which relates the act of generosity to the heart, the body and to passion – the realm of alterity that, through its sheer materiality, resists the Symbolic system.

Strode describes Coetzee’s narrative style as a “gift” (viii). This chapter will argue that Coetzee’s critical commentary can be perceived in the same light, that is, as a ‘gift’ given to the literary text. Returning to “the problem of the opening” (*Elizabeth Costello* 1), this conclusion will consider the style of reading that Coetzee’s fiction engenders, as well as the manner in which this particular style supplements and amplifies the literary text’s freeplay of meaning.

I have chosen to conclude my critical containment of three of Coetzee’s texts – my attempt at providing a space for these texts that respects their singularity, their acts of gift-giving – with a consideration of “The Poetics of Reciprocity”, a section in *Doubling*

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<sup>78</sup> A similar passage in *Age of Iron* describes Mrs Curren’s letter in terms a gift – specifically something of herself, of her body – to her daughter: “But in this world, in this time, I must reach out to you in words. So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old, fashioned and packed with love, the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard” (8).

*the Point: Essays and Interviews* (1992). The section consists of an interview and four essays, “Achterberg’s ‘Ballade van de gasfitter’: The Mystery of I and You” (1977), “The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess’s *The Strike*” (1976), “A Note on Writing” (1984), and Coetzee’s Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987). These critical works deploy a methodology which resembles the style of reading solicited by Coetzee’s narrative fictions – an intersubjective approach that expands the limits of the literary text in problematising and supplementing its meaning.

### **“The Poetics of Reciprocity”**

As in the case of his fiction, Coetzee’s criticism exposes the rules and conventions of different discursive registers to scrutiny (Attwell 63). Commenting on “The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess’s *The Strike*” and “A Note on Writing”, Coetzee mentions that they “are by no means major pieces of work, and perhaps reflect little more substantial than exasperation on [his] part with a certain automatism of writing – writing unaccompanied by any real thought, any self-reflection” (64). Accordingly, “A Note on Writing” considers the middle voice as an alternative to the non-reflexive writing of the active voice, described by Coetzee as “a particular kind of writing, writing in stereotyped forms and genres and characterological systems and narrative orderings, where the machine runs the operator” (95). The “phantom presence of a middle voice” (94), as located between the active and the passive, “leave[s] the writer ... inside the writing, not as a psychological subject ... but as the agent of the action” (Barthes qtd. in Coetzee 94).

These “shorter, Barthesian pieces” (Attwell 7) appear to demonstrate Coetzee’s concern with the ideological implications and consequent limitations of unproblematised textual devices or, in other words, “power relations as they affect speech and discourse” (Attwell 11). Providing a unique – yet supplementary – perspective on Coetzee’s notion of the novel’s place in society, the Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech suggests an “interest in the rule-conditioned character of discourse” (5), a concern which he relates, directly, to the state of confinement imposed on his writing by his context. Speaking of “the nature and crisis of fiction-writing in South Africa today” (Attwell 4), Coetzee expresses and

explains the “feelings of entrapment, entrapment in infinitudes” (98) experienced by South African writers. With regard to his fiction’s supposed evasion of political responsibility, Coetzee’s speech on “a literature in bondage” (98) serves to justify the belief expressed in his works of fiction that “an unquestioning attitude towards forms or conventions is as little radical as any other kind of obedience” (64). Regarding this conception, the author is obligated to demonstrate an awareness of the power relations embedded in automatised, non-reflexive writing, especially if the writing originates from a context that, like apartheid, is “unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them” (98). Speaking of Kundera and Cervantes, for example, Coetzee argues that “proof of their deep social and historical responsibility lies in the penetration with which, in their different ways and to different degrees, they reflect on the nature and the crisis of fiction, of fictionalization” (67).

On the topic of reciprocity, Coetzee speaks of “a failure of love” (97) in South Africa, given the “colonizer’s ... valorization of land above people and polity” (Attwell 7). He then points to the colonizer’s “denial of an unacknowledgeable desire to embrace Africa, embrace the body of Africa; and fear of being embraced by Africa in return” (97). The speech expresses Coetzee’s consideration of the prerequisites for a “literature of equal and reciprocal relations” (62), if such an address is even possible (Attwell 4).

The Achterberg essay, which constitutes the main focus of “The Poetics of Reciprocity”, concentrates, through a “reciprocal” (Coetzee 62) “embrace” (Coetzee 97), on the poem, “Ballade van de gasfitter”, a “cycle of fourteen sonnets” (58) by the 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch poet, Gerrit Achterberg, “a major figure in postwar Dutch literature” (57) known for his “poetry of compression and paradox and irony, written in tight forms” (57-8).

Apart from the characteristic self-reflexivity regarding the style of reading deployed in his analysis, the essay suggests Coetzee’s intimate knowledge of the poem’s particularities. “I ... found that I couldn’t translate it till I had understood it” (58), writes

Coetzee. In his engagement with the particularities of this text (he provides an individual analysis of each sonnet), Coetzee achieves a critical containment of the poem, noting that his particular reading is enabled by a “[moment] of choice” (88): “just like the process of translation, reading is a process of constructing a whole for oneself out of the datum of the printed text, of constructing one’s own version of the poem. In a clear sense, all reading is translation, just as all translation is criticism” (90).

Throughout the essay, Coetzee emphasises the futility of attempting to solve “the problem of finding stable identifications for the personages” (69), or trying to “pin down the referents of the *I* and *you*” (71), stating that his essay will not ask “*what I* and *You* signify but *how* they signify in the field of language and in the field of the poem” (70). Coetzee explains:

[t]wenty years of inconclusive debate on the ‘Ballade,’ with a record of irreconcilability on the identification of I and You, should warn us that adequate grounds for such identification may not exist within the poem, that I and You here may indeed be ‘empty signs’ filled variously as the axis of utterance (Benveniste’s ‘moment of discourse’) and the point of consciousness that is the *I* move through the poem. (71)

Coetzee highlights the poem’s “axis of utterance” (70) which allows the reader to circulate within the registers figured by each pronoun, from *I* to *You* to *he/she*. The act of reading the poem is characterised by the reader’s futile attempts to fix the meaning of these ‘empty signs’. In a gifted gesture, Coetzee, in his respective analyses of the sonnets, performs the manner in which the reader thinks herself into the poem’s *I* by writing his response in the first person. In turn, the reader occupies or embodies Coetzee’s *I* for a moment, accompanying him in his singular encounter with the poem, an engagement which attempts “to bring the *You* into some fullness of being” (73).<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The style of reading proposed by Coetzee is not unlike the type of interpretation solicited by *Life & Times of Michael K*. My critical response to the novel, therefore, seems to echo the style of reading encountered in “Achterberg’s ‘Ballade van de gasfitter’: The Mystery of I and You”, demonstrating that, in some cases, Coetzee’s fiction and criticism share similar concerns.

By means of a close consideration of Achterberg's poem (and not its critical contexts), Coetzee problematises and supplements the play of meaning generated by the text, offering the reader of his essay an interpretative challenge, in turn. Instead of explaining and reducing the text's indeterminacy, this gifted approach adds texture to the already multi-textured poem as part of an attempt to facilitate a reciprocal engagement, a conversation, between critic and text. In the four essays, Coetzee displays a passion, a fullness, or 'swelling of the heart' that expands the boundaries of the text by giving a particular interpretation, a gift, to the subject of the discursive analysis.

### **“Doubling the Point”**

The title of the book in which “The Poetics of Reciprocity” is situated, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, suggests that literary criticism, as well as the author's intention or commentary on his own works of fiction, is a 'doubling' or, in other words, a supplementary reiteration of a previously established point. This conclusion to my thesis, in its concise consideration of Coetzee's type of critical containment, can, similarly, be considered as an addendum, a supplement, a (post)script or (after)word that 'doubles' the 'points' argued in the previous chapters.

Conventionally, an argument is established by way of a thesis's introduction, developed in the ensuing chapters and brought to a close in the conclusion. This conclusion usually reiterates and summarises the main points of the argument – doubles the ideas, if you will. Conventionally, the argument develops (doubles or swells) from its initial definition. In returning to these ideas, the conclusion has to account for their expansion and elaboration. In other words, it plays an integral role in demonstrating how the ideas voiced in the first chapter, and developed in the ensuing sections, have expanded, only to return to the starting point or opening, enriched.

A similar image appears in *Age of Iron*, when Elizabeth Curren leaves her sleepy suburb, travels to the township, only to return home, but this time possessing an enhanced perspective. Another image of an enriched homecoming can be found in *Life & Times of*

*Michael K*'s opening and concluding image of containment: the teaspoon. Whereas Michael K is initially dependent on his mother's handling of the spoon, the novel concludes with K's independent utilisation of his own spoon, signifying the extent to which K has acquired sovereignty. This 'doubling' also evokes the journey of Goethe's vagabond (as cited in Chapter Two, page 40).

In *Doubling the Point*, David Attwell, the editor, also quotes an important paragraph from *Foe*, drawing a comparison between Foe's return to a planted marker and Coetzee's retrospective return to his critical texts. Indeed, "Coetzee's writings on literature, rhetoric and popular culture, and censorship are his personal markers; taken together, they provide a retrospective itinerary" (Attwell 3), enabled by "the hillock or island created by [Coetzee and Attwell's] ... dialogue" (392).

It appears that both the literary text and literary criticism fold upon or into themselves. The title of the book, *Doubling the Point* (and not *The Doubled Point*), further suggests that the text, as well as my conclusion, is an ongoing process, a journey: an act of folding, of returning to the ideas, impressions and sensations embodied by Coetzee's fiction – and tracing their evolution.

Although I will conclude the thesis's frame with a sentence that closes this particular delineation, every reading of Coetzee's fiction, of *Doubling the Point*, as well as of this thesis, will expand the boundaries established by these texts. The notion of doubling or expanding a literary text by way of critical commentary can be related directly to the conception of critical containment as a gift, as an offering of the self that facilitates the attempt at an "equal and reciprocal" (Coetzee 62) relationship between critic and literary text – even if, as Coetzee suggests, a wholly 'equal marriage' is improbable. However, perhaps one could consider the deferential act of gift-giving as indicative of a different order of "passion" (Coetzee 61), of a gesture that, in fact, transcends the limited interaction between critic and text established by the notion of an 'equal marriage'.

## Conclusion: “I’ll stop there”

In its conversations with four texts by J.M. Coetzee – *Age of Iron* (1990), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) as well as the critical essays published in *Doubling the Point*, “The Poetics of Reciprocity” (1992) – this thesis has demonstrated the manner in which the singularities of each of these texts prompt, expand and challenge the framework that sustains its reading of Coetzee’s fiction. Whereas some critical methodologies attempt to eliminate the characteristic indeterminacy of Coetzee’s fiction, imprisoning his novels in a contextual cage, this thesis demonstrated an allegiance to the primacy of the literary text together with a concern with the ethics of reading. The thesis proposed – in both content and form – an inductive ‘style of reading’ akin to Derrida’s deconstruction, concerned with the continuous modification of its own strategies according to the ‘internal logics of the text’. Comparable to the style of reading employed by Coetzee’s own critical discourse, my reading – in allowing itself to be prompted and guided by Coetzee’s fictional texts – attempted to problematise and intensify, rather than to reduce, the concerns of these texts.

Reading is an act of definition, using delimitation – the establishment of boundaries – to enable signification. This study identified its style of reading as a ‘containment’ rather than a ‘confinement’. The term intended to evoke an adaptable, constructive delineation of Coetzee’s fiction that involves a reciprocal relationship between critic and text. As the thesis’s primary conceptual tool, one that I argued is both solicited *and* thematised in Coetzee’s fiction, containment refers not only to a style of reading, but also to any reciprocal relationship, any mutual exchange. I related it to the relationship between two dissimilar genres (realism and metafiction) and reality in *Age of Iron*, between text and reader in *Life & Times of Michael K*, between self and other in *Elizabeth Costello*, and, finally, between text and critic in “The Poetics of Reciprocity”. The notion of containment accepts the critical challenge posed by Coetzee’s fiction to engage with what Derek Attridge would call each ‘singular event’ or ‘act of literature’ on its own terms.



However, this thesis is only one reading, one event, one *gift* in the lives of these singular texts. In the open-ended words of containment, as uttered by J.M. Coetzee himself, “[t]hat is Part One, as I see it today, in the light of all that has passed between us. I’ll stop there” (395).

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