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The literary text in turbulent times: an instrument of social cohesion or an eruption of ‘critical’ bliss. Notes on J M Coetzee’s *Life and times of Michael K*

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The article is developed as a “counter-cultural” response to the socio-utilitarian formulations around artistic production typically found in current mission statements of the EU Culture Program. In its argument against the instrumentalisation of art, the article builds on the hypothesis that the ethical import of art lies not in the “messages” (e.g. about the need for European social cohesion and “cosmopolitan feelings”) that could be extracted from it, but in its own formally coherent and conceptual complexity. With reference to perspectives on art developed by Jean-Luc Nancy, Roland Barthes and Deleuze and Guattari, a reading is offered of J.M. Coetzee’s fourth novel *Life and Times of Michael K.* that suggests how it could be used as an oppositional intervention through analysis of its outrageously subversive conceptual charge, its abject main character and its self-conscious deconstructivist anti-realist style.

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The general aim of this article is to sound opposition against the instrumentalisation of art, that is, the harnessing of works of art to specific political, social and theoretical agendas, be they 'good' or 'bad'. My hypothesis is that the true ethical importance of a certain calibre of artwork lies not in the 'messages' that could be extracted from it, but in the autonomy and singularity that makes it 'stand on its own' through nothing but its own internal conceptual complexity and formal cohesion. The latter would be qualities that render it 'different' and resistant to simplification and that guarantee its reception as an ever open 'event'. The anti-instrumentalist argument will be offered in a historical context where art is always already implicitly and systematically hyper-instrumentalised, or commodified in the capitalist consumer society. The anti-instrumentalist argument is, therefore, also an oppositional or counter-hegemonic gesture arising from the assumption that something like 'counter-culture' could still at least be desirable.

I offer my arguments more specifically in response to the type of formulations found in mission statements of the EU Culture Programme, conceived of as a "serious social investment" and budgeted for to the tune of €400 million euro in 2007-2013. It lists as its objectives the "cross border mobility of cultural workers, the transnational circulation of artistic output and intercultural dialogue", all of which will be furthered by three strands of activities, namely "cultural actions, European-level cultural bodies, and analysis and dissemination" (European Commission: Culture 2010). It is to the latter that I could attempt to make a contribution, not as a literary theorist, but as a South African writer who has heard successive authoritarian conservative and violently oppressive nationalist governments and their attendant culture police calling on artists to promote social cohesion in their work, a call which, in our context, amounts to simply an injunction to submit to dominant party ideology.

I also write as a student of J M Coetzee's works that I take as examples of irreducible textuality or textualterity (Attridge 2004: 30), the production of which I consider to be the last honourable resort and only defence of progressive authors working in highly contested or agonistic conditions. Such conditions are known to intensify, locally and globally, when social and economic practices

and ideological orthodoxies of political status quos come under internal or external threat. At the risk of conflating widely divergent theoretical frameworks, I would like to demonstrate how one could, on the basis of a few filaments from the perspectives on art developed by Nancy, Barthes as well as Deleuze & Guattari, identify (an approach to) the kind of text that might refuse co-optation in an imagined hegemony fostered by city festivals in the context of the Culture Capital initiative of the EU Culture Programme. One could illustrate how a novel by Coetzee could be revived and ‘used’ as an oppositional intervention by analysing its outrageously subversive conceptual charge, its abject main character and its self-conscious deconstructivist anti-realist style. Obviously, the objection could be raised that such an approach would amount to simply another type of instrumentalisation. The difference would be that, instead of milking the text for the ‘messages’ that might fit a political agenda, the novel’s own undeniable and self-reflexively avowed strategies of unmaking, and ‘making strange’ would be aligned to support a counter-hegemonic agenda. Therefore, it would appear, to a greater or lesser extent, that the instrumentalisation of art is unavoidable; what matters is whose side one is on, the side of capitalist culture drives or the side of those striving to escape commodification by inventing new forms of collective and individual artistic autonomy. In the West, cultural production and artistic critique have long been smoothly absorbed in capitalist productivity and capitalist institutional self-valorisation. Systemic protection and bolstering of capitalism has led to the neutralisation and recuperation of the critical power of art (Mouffe 2007). Strategic intensification of this kind of appropriation is likely if European owned big business stands to lose its competitive edge in the global economy and corporations have to fight every inch, and employ every method and every cultural asset towards strengthening their economic position.

1. Notes on culture and capitalism in a European context: commodity, identity, diplomacy

The ascension of the arts, initially via article 151 of the Maastricht Treaty and consequently in the agendas of the integrationist EU policy documents emanating from the Amsterdam, Lisbon and Europe 2020

strategies, must be attributed to the rhetorical ability of advocates of culture to successfully portray them as vital for the economic strengthening of the EU (Littoz-Monnet 2010). Culture (as industry) and the arts start to feature prominently only in the past decades as instruments towards the creation of Europe as a unitary economic market and as a globally competitive economic bloc (Culture Action Europe [*s a*]). The detractors to these general EU policy goals are widely registered as rising poverty, unemployment, and growing inequality (Farrell [*s a*]). Add to this the potential of social conflict in culturally diverse urban populations, a disenfranchised nihilistically inclined youth and a general dissolution of traditional social forms and relationships in European society, and one can understand why artists and cultural workers could be called upon to invent for themselves an indispensable role as social regenerators and community adhesives.

It is, therefore, fairly obvious that the arts, sorely affected by austerity measures rising from the so-called European ‘debt crisis’, are likely to qualify for EU and national subsidies, via the support from, among others, the international corporations, if their official representatives could convincingly portray them as contributing to the promotion of peace, social cohesion and not only furthering the ideal of a European cosmopolitan civic identity, but also playing a role in national and international cultural diplomacy ventures. These and other cognate and related goals are clearly stated in the European Capitals of Culture initiative and one can well imagine how these goals can come to be reflected in funding formulas for commissioned artworks, music and dance performances, literature, academic contributions and prioritised cultural outreach programmes or transnational collaborations during culture festivals (European Commission: Culture 2012). The aims of the EU project for general European cohesion are also echoed in the national governments’ prioritising of national social cohesion programmes, as is the case in the Netherlands (Bureau Sociale Cohesie 2000).

When the intelligentsia also rationalise the (self-)instrumentalisation of the arts towards government-recommended social goals, one would expect a flurry of protest from the art world in defence of music, painting, and literature as forms of autonomous experimental (self-)investigation and radical (self-)critique. Whereas the notion of *avant-garde*, from which this kind of reaction would have traditionally

been expected, has lost traction in today's world, the presence of artistic "insurrectionaries", willing to publicly question global capitalism, the order of the state and the ideology of neo-liberalist humanism, cannot be ignored (Mouffe 2007: 5).

If one could, therefore, imagine that it might be the popular mainstream arts that could help turn Europe from a post-democratic regime of bureaucrats towards a culture-branded transnational democracy re-invented in the federalist spirit, it can equally be imagined that it could be marginal activist-type artists and artistic collectives that would work to undermine the eventual essentialisms, complacencies, and ideological closures that could arise in such a federation. These agents could reveal the economic interests behind benign-sounding cultural initiatives; subvert the fictions of hegemonic politics, that is, ideas of origin, identity and presence, and question the concomitant mythical figures embodying the true and absolute subject of such a European arrangement.

Although explicit 'totalitarian' symbolical developments do admittedly seem, at present, quite remote in the struggle towards a unified Europe, the likelihood remains that extreme economic and political pressure experienced by large segments of the population might issue in rampant populism and exclusive 'Europeanism' and might propel raging narcissistic personalities into positions of 'leadership'. The current social investment in the arts and culture in Europe might be motivated, to a certain extent, by the desire of the European parliament to immunise the Union against these kinds of developments, signs of which are already borne out by right-wing movements and advocacy groups on the national level. The question remains: which images and figures, symbols and slogans might the Union, for its own part (and with the help of artists), want to employ towards achieving the opposite of ethnic-nationalist laager politics? Finally, and most importantly, in whose interest would this be if not in the interest of the big corporations, the investment banks and the financial markets who have recognised in art the ultimate commodity, the one that "sells all the rest"? (Holmes 2003).

2. Towards an alternative normative horizon for the arts: Nancy, Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari

Having dipped into the slick self-assured official vocabularies in which culture policies are wrapped, one feels almost clownish when retaliating with buckshot from the discourses of the humanities. All the same, I would like to erect, as part of the normative horizon for the criticisms voiced in this article, Nancy's notion of literariness (or art in general) which I shall cursorily gloss, in this instance, from a secondary source (Van Rooden 2007). Nancy's rhetorical question can be formulated as follows: how can one in art and in community establish identity without invoking the danger of totalisation *viz* totalitarianism? Nancy's alternative to this is well known: one can insist on openness through a post-romantic literature of fragments representing a radically fractal notion of community, a community that is always only a becoming and never a completed unitary work, an unmade community. It is the task of literature as event/fragment to express not the foundations, but the groundlessness of human existence.

In this sense, art neither presents something, nor does it refer to the unpresentable; rather, it merely articulates the fact that presentation is happening in a certain mode. If, in the context of this desired fractality, one wants as an artist to reinvent the figure, it will neither be an absolute figure nor total figurelessness, but rather a becoming-figure, or a process of figuration, the tracing of an always-moving figure that is neither a figure of myth nor a figure of phantasm, but a *kairos* that is always an event, an appearance of Being itself without ever presenting any singular finalised being. That something is figured, however, means that nothing is allowed to congeal in a hard and fast what-ness. The that-ness only appears as a style, a modality, so that what is presented is co-original with the way, the mode of presentation. Only the that-ness of an artwork embodies a style. Style is never a quality of a fixed figure with mythological content. Myth has no style. The that-ness of art could be understood as an 'ontological literariness' which would define artistic activity as a setting-in-motion-of-an-event-of-figuration, instead of seeking stasis either in a fixed figure or complete lack of figure. This would mean that the figuration of the figure is in itself no figure or form,

but a force of formation, an energy, a violence or an intensity; it is the Other of form; it is that which always interrupts and destabilises form. The ontological figuration posited by Nancy is not an activity whereby something is produced, but the singular continuous creative act of producing, itself. The world itself, the community itself is, in this sense, an infinite singular mode of appearing, is itself an ontological figuration of Being instead of a completed work. Being is a continuous exposure to the opening of the world, and can as such only be articulated in literature which is its co-continuous inscription. Being, in this sense, is itself a kind of “literature”; it hovers between the formless state of merely appearing and its fixation in a figure (Van Rooden 2007: 77).

The question is whether under the conditions of (self-)instrumentalisation of the arts at the behest of a grand European political project, this fixed ‘figure’, that Nancy rejects, risks being inscribed in literary works. Would the degree to which they bear inscription of the proper ‘figures’ qualify literary works when cultural organisers make selections for prescribed or discussed works? Would inscription of explicit ‘figures’ ultimately qualify works for inclusion in, for instance, a ‘cosmopolitan’ literary canon as part of an obligatory curriculum for all foreigners seeking citizenship and further afield for all nationals, and even ultimately for all European citizens? Could it be foreseen that one day a common European canon could be propagated through the social media? In the light of the decline of multicultural policies and the rise of more or less coercive integrationist policies (Kymlicka 2012: 18), these questions might not even seem far-fetched. A revival of a very old legacy at the basis of European cultural history might be at stake. In this context, Sloterdijk argues that literature as a means towards “taming the beast” and rescuing people from barbarism, knitting them together as members of an elite club of literates who hear the same messages and revere the same canons, has been one of the mainstays of humanist civilisation since Graeco-Roman times and has informed the Enlightenment’s revival of the classics and, beyond that, has also provided a measure of the cultural cement of bourgeois nation states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But, how must one understand a possible renewed interest in literature in what, according to Sloterdijk (1999), must be understood as post-literary, post-epistolary and post-humanistic

times where the co-existence of people has been founded on new bases and where societies can achieve their political and cultural cohesion only marginally through literary, epistolary and humanistic media?

To sharpen the polemics of this argument, one could, therefore, finally ask: would an imagined European city literary festival, benignly aimed at the cultivation of peace in diversity and mutual respect and dialogue across cultures, social cohesion, and the promotion of cosmopolitan feelings, readily select for reprinting and public discussion a book such as *Life and times of Michael K*? Would a writer like J M Coetzee be deemed naturally suitable for interviews and panels in cultural programmes promulgating the notion of the social responsibility of the artist? Would his novels, taken as 'letters to friends' even be recognised for the 'serious play' that they offer in a world where everything but 'ontological literariness' is in demand?

The organisers of Culture Capital festivities would more likely prefer sophisticated readerly (lisible) texts, offering pleasure and enjoyment of a fixed and pleasant identity – for example, the 'figure' of a 'tolerant' and 'art-loving' European cosmopolite. It could be imagined that the organisers might want to avoid difficult, even repellent, so-called writerly (scriptable) texts that, through their contagious self-consciousness, would subvert 'metropolitan' subjectivity; fracture the structures of signification through which the reader identifies him-/herself as such; explode literary codes, and instigate an unhinging form of bliss. Briefly, cultural programme makers might want to prevent civic mindedness from being usurped by *jouissance* in Barthes's sense of the word (Barthes 1973: 36).

In the analysis of Coetzee's text, I will attempt to indicate how a fusion of Barthes's idea of the writerly text with Nancy's idea of the text as an event of figuration might provide a starting point for an oppositional artistic practice of reading and writing. It is indeed a text which, through its meta-fictional and self-deconstructing strategies, coincides with nothing but its style, that is, with its way of presenting its own that-ness. It is essential that, in this instance, one could include in its singular stylistics its manner of performing critical concepts by means of freshly imagined sensations. With concepts engendered in this way, the author does not finalise the figure, but permanently places it in abeyance/becoming as an ever-germinating form of subjectivity.

The sensual *jouissance* proposed by Barthes could, therefore, gain an added dimension of conceptual critique of the subject. The bliss of reading might illuminate the set ‘figures’, myths, opinions and identifications onto which the reader’s self-understanding might be locked. Conceptually perverse, queer or critical *jouissance* is what I would like to suggest, therefore, as a further strengthening of the counter-hegemonic notion of literature that I am proposing in this instance. To flesh this out, I would utilise a third cognate dimension, namely that of the Deleuzo-Guattarian theory of creativity – I would like to show how one could read the conceptual figure of Michael K as a critique of neo-liberal notions of the individual and the capitalist state without reducing the text to allegory.

Would the ways in which a book such as *Life and times of Michael K* could possibly make a contribution to social cohesion necessarily fit in with the Utrecht Principles? (Vrede van Utrecht 2013: 2012). Would it be too far-fetched to imagine that intensive reading of Michael K in Utrecht could link people in an intimate process of experiencing the ravishment effected by excellent writing, and that they might prefer this communal experience to the mass enjoyment of cultural variety spectacles? Although case studies of the effect of art in designated communities are notoriously difficult to set up and would seem to contribute little of lasting value, one should not write off these possibilities (Belfiore 2002). A Barthesian *jouissance* provoked by ‘ontological literariness’ might reinforce the readership’s experience of the openness of ever-nascent community. The critical (conceptual) dimension of this kind of communal *jouissance* would be informed, not by commercial cosmopolitan propaganda, but by style in the modality of violent and intense energy that Nancy associates with fractal literary figuration. The momentary intimate communal aspect of reading-for-bliss could instil the anticipation of an open community, the community of permanent becoming that Nancy denotes as the fractal form of communal cohesion. In these terms, the creative as well as the receptive moments of literary figuration would celebrate the groundlessness of existence, revoking both the affirmative pleasures offered by the texts and the presence of identity. “Enter the Orphic Anarchists of the Peace of Utrecht celebrations!” one might want to exclaim. They might want to dance with the Yes Men on the stage of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Mouffe 2007). The outcome

of such a reading experience might indeed issue in radical critique of consumerism, of the modern capitalist state's ideological and coercive apparatuses for surveillance and control, of the manipulative means with which it secures the economy in the interest of so-called 'free trade', of its shrewdly moralistic-sounding ideas of thrift, industry, and austerity, of its norm of the ambition-driven self-preening individual – not to mention its attempts at domesticating the non-European foreigner into the aureole of liberal humanism and human rights, while simultaneously raising its thresholds against displaced borderless sub-citizens, refugees, *sans papiers* and migrant workers from the global South.

It is certainly not outlandish to imagine that organisers of festive city events and policy developers for the funding of socially responsible literature might want to give a wide berth to literary material of a certain 'wild' cut, while promoting safer kinds of work. What would that mean for literature, for the arts and for society in the long run? As much as literature could be the opium of people swept up in a trance of nationalism, or a smooth mirror for European self-admiration and self-promotion, as much I still rather romantically believe that it is the place where the cry of the haunted soul in the desert can be heard, the soul who, astride on the back of a tiger, will proclaim the abyss underneath, and will point out that the knowledge, values and routines of our everyday life constitute nothing but ashes, a columbarium of dead concepts (Nietzsche 1922: 77-82).

One has to thoroughly peruse the documents of the European Culture Programme for a trace of acknowledgement of vulnerability as a value of artistic form/style, or as a founding idea of an oppositional artistic ethics. Is it because, in directing itself at an erudite, highly educated populace, this idea is absolutely taken for granted, or is it because, in the enthusiasm of a total cultural offensive, it has been totally forgotten? Lucebert, one of the great Dutch poets, reminded us that "alles van waarde is weerloos".¹ The point is that it is the vulnerability of the form and style of self-questioning that is of importance in works of art, even and especially in the clamour of self-assured and benign statements from artists expressing social concern with the wretched of the earth. The challenge is how to secure this

1 Translation: everything of value is vulnerable.

value against appropriation, branding and commodification, and how to make the social concern appear different from a Benetton advertisement.

3. Language, ideology, class and the notion of the socially responsible artist

In order to put into relief the type of oppositional ‘literary’ values I draw from the work of Nancy and Barthes, I would like to quote from the mission statement of the Social Responsibility Series organised by the Centre of the Humanities in Utrecht. The following could serve as an example of how the instrumentalisation of the arts and the social responsibility of the artist are currently co-constructed:

Artists hold a social power in today’s represented and mediated world. Whether in film, music or literature, the artists’ chosen form of expression has the ability to reach a broad audience, whilst communicating their social and political concerns. How do they assume responsibility as an artist, and in which way do they express their political and social concern for current issues such as precarious living, poverty and environmental change, war and suffering? (Universiteit Utrecht, Centre for the Humanities 2012)

Whereas one cannot question the benevolent and progressive sentiment behind such a formulation, one is equally alerted to a certain lack of nuance, a lack that might simply be attributed to the rhetorical nature of a public announcement. However, is it not precisely in such innocent announcements that assumptions are hidden and meaning is ideologically mobilised? The statement strangely fails to differentiate between the controlled functional language in which artists clothe their consciously held opinions and the open and risky procedures whereby they render their materials expressive to a degree far exceeding their intentions. Secondly, it does not make explicit the productive and performative relation of all art to ideology (that is, ideology in a critical sense) (Eagleton 1976, Thompson 1984). Thirdly and most importantly, it does not reflect the fact that class position and privilege might blind urban artists to the questionable act of blithely assuming authority when speaking for, or about the suffering masses of the world.

To say, for instance, as in the statement quoted above, that the responsible artists would “communicate” their political and social

concerns via their “chosen form of expression” reveals the conflation of two very distinct forms of discursivity. Failure to distinguish between the indirect imaginative appeal of an author’s novels and his/her declared political opinions is usually grounded in, first, an under-estimation of the implications of the metaphoric nature of language and its precipitation in the language of fiction; secondly, in a misunderstanding of the status of reference in works of fiction; thirdly, in the disregard of the explorative, associative nature of much of the writerly process and, fourthly, in a disavowal of the non-identical or multiple nature of the subject which is often radically exploited during the artistic process. In my opinion, one has to disconnect the artistic project from other more direct forms of communication – the artist who refuses to instrumentalise his/her work in the service of a recommended social concern might, in his/her capacity as public intellectual, hold recognisably progressive opinions. Indeed, s/he would be able to “communicate” these opinions clearly and unambiguously in essays, reviews, public interviews and other forms of functional rhetoric which are subject to specific standards of disambiguation, clarity, transparency and coherence.

As to the matter of ideology, one needs to first make the superfluous observation that writers through the ages have spontaneously and of necessity responded to their environment and used as materials for their art the facts and incidents of life as they knew it. If not simply part of a bio-psycho-social-information feedback loop of human existence itself, is fiction writing as a symbolical form not a way of ‘answering’ to, or ‘performing’ the most pressing ideas, sensibilities, fears and desires of one’s times? If it were not so, it would have been impossible for analyses from a wide range of ideological critical literary theoretical orientations to have been let loose on novels and poems. These (neo-Marxist, feminist, postcolonial) critiques invariably - and often at the price of reduction of the literariness of works of fiction - demonstrate how, for instance, novels can never escape staging more or less consciously, more or less critically, performances/renditions/executions of the ruling ideologies of their time about, say, matters of race, class and gender.

If this perspective is not somehow included in mission briefs such as the one quoted earlier, one might be led to believe that the call for literature’s contribution to social cohesion and the need for artists to

be socially responsible are motivated by a desire (unconscious?) for a literature that, because of its authors' irreproachable social concerns, would somehow escape the imbrications of ideology. Surely, one would not want to promote a fully transparent literature, a literature that, for instance, allegorises without residue the concepts of a liberalist free-market philosophy, or a literature propagating utopian humanistic fantasies of global peace and harmony, or a literature that domesticates the other as potentially the same?

It must be noted, lastly, that the statement quoted earlier makes no reference whatsoever to the privileged class position encasing the majority of metropolitan artists. It offers no critique of the subsidising of the media through which 'responsible' art would be funded and broadcast; it does not acknowledge the contexts of a-symmetrical power enabling metropolitan artists to ply, export and sell their trade. Is one supposed to accept that artists are cloaked in a natural and universally acknowledged superiority of insight and an authority that begs no explanation? If, on the other hand, the privileged authority of the type of artist that is universalised in the statement quoted earlier is indeed tacitly acknowledged, a further question would be how artists themselves attempt to include, self-reflectively, this authority in the form of their work? What form of story could one, if one is a metropolitan writer with access to all the media, in the first place authorise oneself to write 'about' the abjectly poor, the socially excluded, the displaced, the victims of war and environmental change?

It is the specifically fraught South African political situation that forced a writer such as J M Coetzee to radically problematise, throughout his oeuvre, this matter of the privileged writer's agency and authority to deal with historical inequality and injustice. In his case, part of the (ab-)solution' would consist of the ethically self-conscious writerly procedure called 'prose that thinks', as opposed to prose that illustrates preconceived opinions, and even more exacting, it would consist of (creating the effect of) relinquishing the author's power over his/her characters. These types of solutions point to a kind of discursive writerly process, that, as I will attempt to show, stand greatly removed from any role of 'social responsibility' assumed as a matter of course. They entail a critique of the right, often appropriated without a second thought by artists, to name, to state, to judge, to speak for,

to advocate in the arena of racial and class oppression, exclusion and exploitation. It is this prior move, before blithely donning the cloak of 'responsibility', this gesture of naked self-authorisation and its immediate ethical implications for the way of writing, that seems to be fully eclipsed by the formulation of the statement quoted earlier.

A critique of the so-called social responsibility of the artist strengthens the argument for critical *jouissance* as a writerly practice. I imagine that Nancy's type of artist would resist, for one, the adoption of a socially responsible 'role'. S/he would suspect that even his/her most sincere agreement with lofty popular ideals would entail buying into myths, opinions and exemplary 'figures'. His/her greatest responsibility would be to hone the techniques, enabling him/her to write fiction that is sufficiently complex and hermetic to resist reduction and totalisation, even if s/he him-/herself attempted it. His/her interest in writerly integrity always comes with its own vocational ethical concerns that, I believe, should take preference above the sanctioned dictates of public art policies.

That said, one must acknowledge that everything in material and symbolical culture will be and always has been instrumentalised for the purpose of enhancing power in the field of social force. The majority of authors will know that conceiving of, and writing a novel is a process of distributing their personhood and of investing their work with social agency and symbolical efficacy (Gell 1998). In a sense, novelists operate no differently from butterflies when engaged in the displays of delightful and intimidating 'hill topping' during mating contests. Proceeding to publish a work is a forceful political act in an already contested field, and one knows that once out there, the work will be sucked up and knocked about in the vortex of any and all ideological and/or lucrative uses that can be made of it by parties who dispute each other's dominance in agonistic public spaces. There is no writing that can truly be called un- or a-political and there is no other writer in South-Africa who has come to terms with this fact, interrogating the question of representativeness, the limits of authority, the legitimacy of agency, in such a writerly way as J M Coetzee (Atwell 1993: 3).

4. The hero, the victim or the other: a novel of alterity against a need for the spectacular

Coetzee's fourth novel was written a decade prior to the regime change of 1994, the change that heralded a transition which is still, with every indication to the contrary, propagated locally as one towards a constitutional democracy. Did Coetzee, in this fictive *persona*, anticipate the continued abjection of the earth grubbers under the reign of a neo-colonial nationalist élite?

The story, briefly, is about the desperate peregrinations of a hare-lipped, mentally challenged man with the Kafka-esque name of Michael K who, fired from his job as a Cape Town city parks gardener during a social uprising against the oppressive government, builds a wheelbarrow and sets out on foot along the highway with his sick mother to her vaguely remembered place of birth in the country where she intends to come to her end. His mother sadly dies en route and thus begins her son's search for a place of refuge which he can call home. Michael K ends up barely living in a burrow on an abandoned farm surviving on almost nothing except his own slow thoughts, while tenderly watering his pumpkin plants by night. When a troupe of revolutionary guerrillas arrive on the farm, he hides from them, deciding that, in times of war, somebody must stay behind to tend to the garden. From there on it is a saga of getting arrested by soldiers and repeatedly interred under martial law in a concentration camp and a military hospital, where officials, baffled and outraged by the elusive, nonresponsive resistance that he offers, subject him to relentless efforts of categorisation and identification. Michael K succeeds time and again in escaping from these coercive institutions, all the while getting thinner and more detached until finally he ends up back in Cape Town, where, surrendering to depletion, he goes to die in his mother's former hovel, an unused service chamber meant to house an electric generator underneath a staircase in a block of seafront flats.

From this short summary alone, that reflects nothing as yet of the visceral impact, the conceptual acuity, let alone of the deconstructive ruses and meta-fictional set-up of the novel, it is eminently clear that Coetzee is playing an entirely singular game with notions of 'victim' and 'resistance'. He scandalously proposes a wholly independent and

‘poetically’ subversive victim, whose resistance consists of avoidant yielding and silent withdrawal. He also equips his character with slowly forming counter-hegemonic musings on charity, caring, sharing, real needs, work, time, the state, the need for borders, for property, our relationship with plants and animals, and the subjectivity necessary for the reproduction of society under the law. Taken together, these musings amount to a philosophy of suspicion regarding common sense judgements of ‘the other’, everyday opinions about justice, clichés of liberal humanism and, in the South African context, it debunks the self-glorifying habits of ‘spectacular’ struggle literature, insisting instead on the facticity of abject suffering.

Coetzee’s text would, therefore, frustrate interpretations made by socially concerned critics, be they of the victim-loving or the hagiographic kind. The text thwarts our naive and sentimental compassion for ‘poor outcasts’ and our equally naive fantasies of the future as a consensus of the victorious. This is exactly the reason why the work was rejected by ‘organic’ intellectuals during the concluding phases of real historical political struggle. In hindsight, it is a compliment for Coetzee’s novel that, apart from all the predictably disgruntled parties (Atwell 1993: 92), none other than his future fellow Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer, took the bait. Her criticism arises from an ideological aesthetic position that cannot tolerate unsettling and unresolved imaginative explorations of South Africans’ anxieties without at least a clear moral judgement, or political self-positioning unambiguously inscribed in the work itself and emanating from the implicit author (Gordimer 1984). She seems to suggest that the worth of literature does not reside in the ruthless fictional imagining of the South African ‘wound’, but in the idealistic stitching that would close the gash and in the balm that would prove to soothe it (Donadio 2007).

If European literature-for-peace enthusiasts would wonder what kind of literary writing about less grievable lives (Butler 2009: 38) would produce “concerned” citizens, they could, therefore, consider reading ‘obscure’ literary forays into civilisation’s ‘wound’. One could advise that, by including ‘sombre (or in the Kantian sense, ‘sublime’) stories in the literary activities planned for 2013, a literary ‘twin’ would be provided for investigations of the ‘dark’, colonial and commercial rearrangements accompanying the conclusion of the 1713 Utrecht Peace Treaty. Instead of domesticating precarious lives

for cosmopolitan literary consumption, 'responsible' artists taking part in these festivities might be encouraged to catapult, like Coetzee, the idea of the human far beyond the frontiers of comfortable identification with the other and force the reader to embrace the most abject vulnerability and suffering within him-/herself. By critically interrogating artworks that explicitly assume and advertise social responsibility, counter-hegemonic cultural activists could stage the need to keep the notion of the human itself mysteriously and subversively alive so as to undermine cosy notions of who and what we are, or think we are, as rulers and as subjects, as rejects and as abjects of each other. What remains to be clarified, in some detail, are the exemplary strategies whereby a South African novel from the 1980s realises this alterity to such an extent that it currently still provokes one to hold its weird mirror to one's face, as a shield against the deafening discourses of sameness.

5. The conceptual *persona*: prose that thinks versus prose that opines

If the point of my argument is to highlight the special resistance of self-conscious fiction to ruling orthodoxies or to theoretical reduction, Coetzee's work presents one with singular challenges, because of its insistence on ideas. Since his first Booker Prize for *Life and times of Michael K*, Coetzee has generated a stupendous amount of critical work, mostly because of the extremely fertile dovetailing of the formal and thematic concerns staged in them and the frameworks of enquiry dominating the study of literature over the past decades: issues about colonial and postcolonial identity, the construction of subjectivity, and the historical determinations of human social organisation. As such, it has offered a rich catch for academics attempting to fish out from the texts the elements and problems articulated in these disciplines. Time and again it is proven that Coetzee has pre-empted the critics in staging the historical and symbolical conditions for the production of his texts (Vermeulen 2010: 269). Globally, intellectuals agree that his novels display not only an intellect of extreme prowess fully in command of all the contemporary theoretical fields, but also a literary phenomenon of specific originality. One could say that Coetzee's novels are original,

because they are deliberately ‘philosophical’ without in the least being abstract. They deeply engage philosophical ideas of domination and subjection, the power and authority of fiction, language and truth, of violence and suffering, of master and slave, without producing reading obstacles for the non-expert reader. It is, in fact, the very shape of these ideas that intensify the unsettling effect of the work. The ideas can only have this effect by being conceived, mobilised and vitalised in a non-instrumental writing process, that is, a process in which the materiality of language and the deferral of meaning are fully indulged. Although conceptualised to the hilt, the figure of Michael is no mere coat for prior authorial opinions. The character is fully developed in experiential terms and grounded in compelling turns of the narrative that unfolds in naturalistically portrayed space and time. Coetzee himself is clear about this when he states that:

it is naïve to think that writing is a two stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. One writes, he says, because one does not know what one wants to say, writing reveals to one what one wanted to say in the first place [...] Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing (Atwell 1992: 18).

He insists that these truths are not the truths of history, and that the author allows the novel “to work out its own truths outside the terms of class conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which historic disciplines erect themselves”. Protesting against the “colonization of the novel by the discourses of history”, he states that “storytelling is not a way of making messages more, as they say, ‘effective’. Storytelling is another mode of thinking” (Coetzee 1988a: 4).

I take the author’s insistence on “thinking” and “truth”, terms clearly denoting the realm of philosophy, as license to introduce, at this point, Deleuze & Guattari’s (1991) theory of creativity. It is especially the notion of the conceptual *persona* that proves to be heuristically fruitful (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 61-83). In distinguishing the ways in which creativity functions in the fields of art, philosophy and science, they claim the notion of the conceptual *persona* exclusively for the domain of philosophy. As examples, they cite Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, Plato’s Socrates and Nicholas of Cusa’s Idiot (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 64), *personae* utilised to dramatise and narrativise concepts.

They argue, on the other hand, that novelists work with aesthetic figures, like captain Ahab in Melville's *Moby Dick*. These figures are, according to them, exclusively portrayed as stylised, heightened, new-fangled 'blocs of sensations', worked up through the artists' craft from material that is rendered fully expressive. To distinguish them from everyday perceptions and affections, Deleuze & Guattari (1991: 65) name these artistically modelled original sensations "percepts" and "affects". The occasional merging of the fields of philosophy and art, they hold, could be illustrated by, for instance, the hybrid work *Igitur* by Mallarmé (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 67). Any reader, however, who would compare the language used in *Igitur* by Mallarmé to that wielded by Coetzee, would immediately recognise the difference. *Igitur* exhibits abstraction, obscurity, wordiness, a less than fully imagined literal situation and a free-floating voice that never solidifies into character-effect. The reading instruction Mallarmé gives at the outset declares this as "intended": "This Story is addressed to the Intelligence of the reader which stages things itself" (Mallarmé 1982: 91).

In Coetzee's novel, however, the conceptual *persona* is fully staged in naturalistic terms, although he is portrayed in an anti-realistic distancing voice that prevents the reader from appropriating his emotions (Attridge 2004: 50-1). Coetzee's fiction differs from philosophical or abstract allegory in that it is, in most instances, sumptuously dotted with detail. Although in the case of *Life and times of Michael K* the naturalistic city-scape is 'futurised' in a violent suppression of social unrest, the writing does not succumb to historic allegory. Michael K exemplifies the life of one individual fugitive among convoys of refugees leaving the city, while a local reader would also see in him the outline of a permanent South African psychosocial type, the homeless vagrant.

One could suggest that Coetzee, while avoiding the trap of a Mallarméan mode of abstract writing, succeeds in combining elements of a conceptual *persona* and a literary figure in the design of the character of Michael K. As a hybrid conceptual/sensate figure, Michael K therefore opens up an additional combinational option for the analytical *instrumentarium* employed by Deleuze & Guattari: he is a conceptual figure sporting certain features that enable his author to create a new experiential region, the region of human life at the outer edges of physical and cognitive coherence.

This region, however, is constituted in a writerly compound of multiple levels, so that the figure of Michael K remains radically open, a figuring rather than a figure, a kairos rather than a 'truthful', mythical identity. This radical openness distinguishes Coetzee's character from Nietzsche's Zarathustra who could, because of his abstract allegorical traits, be appropriated by German national-socialist thinking in a time of economical and identity crisis (Van Rooden 2007: 82). Coetzee avoids the possibility of this kind of ideological appropriation by a threefold articulation of this new experiential region, a literary articulation that prevents a final interpretation of exactly what it is that Michael K is experiencing and by extension what Michael K stands for. His sensations can always simultaneously be related, first, to real-life morbid symptoms; secondly, to a pre-reflective form of 'Being-unto-death' and, thirdly, to a becoming-other that reaches into the sphere of the non-human.

On the first level, the instances of Michael K's bodily self-awareness can be read as the typical symptoms of starvation, trauma, exposure and shock in homeless or displaced people: a slow, tentative drifting mental grasp of things, wavering decision-making, vacant attentiveness without desire or aversion to people and surroundings, diminished appetite and interest, minimal interference in, or exchange with the material world, a hypersensitivity to sound and movement, interspersed with dizzy spells, a primal mute resistance to being captured and restrained in the private moments of dying, a distant mode of caring for, and nurturing of the self. As often in Coetzee, the naturalist level of the narrative is strictly upheld to the very last closing moments of the book when Michael's final withdrawal coincides with the terminal burrowing or hide-and-die behaviour of certain animals.

At the same time, though, and often in the same sentence or phrase, these 'symptoms' are written as though they arise from an independent force of self-negation in a victim who subverts his vulnerability through radicalising and poeticising, by his own hand, in his own person, through his own understanding, imagination and effort, the very intentions of his torturers: to denude, to rename, to correct, to isolate, to silence, to classify, to ration, to humiliate and finally to 'dissolve' his outsider existence. Out-outsidering his outsider-ers by wilfully wilting into non-existence, by choosing death and shrinking into nothingness is the way in which Coetzee, through

his character, flushes his readers from standard notions, not only of victimhood, but also of heroic revolt against oppression.

It does not end here, however, for this death-seeking behaviour in the main character seems only a threshold to a still further metamorphosis, a euphoric aliveness to negation as a condition of fastening onto a beyond, while not moving, not eating, sleeping, leaking into a zone of indiscernible non-human becoming. The writing accelerates and intensifies in these moments where bliss envelops the main character; the reader is enraptured by the stature of a “giant” or “monument” of sensations, rising paradoxically from the wrecked body of a feral human prey (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 167-78).

The point is that none of the three levels are ever allowed to dominate at the exclusion of any of the others, so that the reader is suspended in an unresolved amalgam of emotions: common sympathy with a homeless person, revulsion at a self-abasing will to death, and wonderment at the cosmic, almost numinous, reaches of an unheard-of becoming. The artifice of Coetzee’s language draws the reader into this indeterminate region of experience, and makes him/her complicit in unfamiliar feelings, perceptions and cognitions (Attridge 1994). In Deleuzian terms, the reader is made party to a deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of concepts of suffering and precarious living, an unmaking of opinion and received messages, including taboos of South African political orthodoxy and Christian-humanistic platitudes.

It is hoped that I have made clear that it is only at the risk of radically reducing the carefully conditioned openness of the text that *Life and times of Michael K* could be read as an ethical-existential encyclopaedia of precarious living. In such a ‘socially concerned’ reading, one would gratefully find everything covered, from derelict improvised shelters, to perilously caught and scavenged food, to symptoms of displacement, hunger and physical exposure. Equally insufficient would be a philosophical reading in which one could console oneself by finding that Michael K embodies a “principle of Being, a state of existence prior to knowledge, rooted in a minimalist principle of survival” (Head 2009: 31). What is revealed is not a principle of survival, but a perverted version of the existentialist notion of ‘Being-unto-death’. This is not to be understood in the

Heideggerian sense as a state of enlightened urgency, but as a state of dumb animal suffering of the inevitable, a being suffering-towards-death (Vermeulen 2010: 270). Whether this ontology of suffering could be considered a “deconstruction of the deconstructionist elusiveness” of the main character is a matter of debate (Head 2009: 31). Interpretation of what Michael K stands for remains inconclusive, because of the indomitable energy of fabulation, of creating the other as an event, a happening, as has been convincingly argued by Attridge (1994). It is in this quality that resides the novel’s difference, its literariness, its excellence, a quality that is very badly tolerated or appreciated by instrumentalists of every hue. In this novel, and this is the point, one could suggest that the text maintains its literariness, its difference, without relinquishing its conceptual critique; it is a textual happening of idea-saturation in the sockets of the visceral, a becoming-incarnate of ideas in compounds of sensation, releasing a figure of literature that is “too alive to be liveable or lived” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 171). This will be the closest I can get to answering the question as to what kind of conceptual art a naturalistic literary novel can be without descending into allegory. It is finally the very openness of the text as a sensate conceptuary that involves the reader in the recognition of a new possibility of being, that of a contrarious, partly euphoric, counter-victim existing at degree zero – a moment of insight into suffering that could be profoundly liberating and even life changing. Anonymity, silence, exile, and cunning might be the only forms of resistance that artists themselves can consider in these times; emulating Michael K would entail being an escape artist, a hunger artist resisting consumerism.

Coetzee becomes a writer of ‘classic’ or ‘resistant’ novels by insisting, first, on his situatedness, engaging the specific questions of his time and place, and then exploiting them counter-hegemonically, with no other view than to create preposterous literary effects and to displace moralistic rhetoric and theoretical discourse alike in the course of pursuing his writerly ‘truths’. This autonomy, the fact that the text, in content and in form, gives itself its own *nomos* or law, explains why, four decades after its first publication, a never-ending stream of commentaries still, and in vain, attempt to stitch up Michael K into the latest nomenclatures of ‘bare life’ and ‘*homo sacer*’.

6. A note on text analysis

The perennial problem of literary criticism, to make explicit in functional language how the novel creates its effects, is exacerbated in all of Coetzee's superbly opaque novels. One could, of course, attempt to unravel one by one the delicate semantic and syntactical niceties of the text, or to list and describe all the traps and sluices of image and mood that compel us to carry on reading word by word, sentence by sentence, page after page in a state of uncomfortable arousal. Needless to say that such an undertaking would not only want to tell "the truth of literature that literature itself cannot tell" (Attridge 2004: 64), but also dampen, through its longwinded translation into functional language, the fleeting tremors that, ahead of conceptual comprehension, grip the body of the reader. What remains, after this task has been passed up as too difficult, is to excavate the realm of the concepts. At the risk, therefore, of stuffing the main character back into the camps that he spent his life avoiding and of fastening onto his author an explicitness that he has expertly sabotaged, one could attempt a mapping of Michael K's 'features' by applying the operational categories identified by Deleuze & Guattari for the philosophical *persona* to the conceptual figure. This might enable an articulation of Michael K's oppositional creatureliness into a conceptual syntax within which to further elaborate the three levels of sensations set out earlier.

7. Michael K as 'slow man': handicap as 'potency'

Among the features of the conceptual *persona*, as distinguished by Deleuze & Guattari - pathic, existential, juridical, relational and dynamic - pathic features seem to be of primary importance in the characterisation of Michael K; his pathology is a device for harvesting surprising literalisations and ambiguities: handicap as empowerment, disfigurement as blazon, vulnerability as autonomy, and all the moves of connecting nothingness and suffering itself to potency. This ambiguity, it must be stressed, remains mobilised throughout the text and is never allowed resolution. This will be taken as understood, even if the following reading tends towards allegorical clarification of the notion of 'Being-towards-death', and its sequel of becoming-other. A clear and explicit allegory of 'idiocy' is not what keeps us alive to

the obscure fate of Michael K; rather, it is the risky suggestion that affliction and suffering make him abnormally honest, perceptive, thoughtful, ecstatic and prophetic.

The disfigurement of his hare-lip compromises suckling, together with his hampered speech and slow mind, make him a candidate for institutionalisation; it determines his inability to form relationships with people, but creates space for a consoling relationship with plants and with himself as gardener. His dynamic features, the shy, avoidant behaviour and his shunning and hiding movements arise from these same defects. In the same instance that his handicap marks him as a 'special case' for discipline and punishment, it enables his escape. So silent and so shadowlike is he, so anonymous and negligible, that his absence, in body or in spirit, is only noticed long after he has departed. From his simple-mindedness follow, similarly, the features of his innocence and his vulnerability to unjust treatment, qualities whereby he is slyly promoted by the author to the position of judge and conscientious of the very law that seeks to subject him.

Michael K truly is Coetzee's first 'slow man', a figure of physical and mental suffering, repeatedly encountered in several guises in Coetzee's work, what Polet (1993: 89-97) would call the basic *Döppelgänger* or personal myth structuring his work.

7.1 Pathic features: pathology as access to the post-human

As an effect of his idiot concreteness, Michael K is portrayed as intensely aware of his physical being. He easily abandons himself to eating, staring and dozing. Swamped by 'animal' aspects of his being, he comfortably drifts into indeterminate, non-distinct, passive, fleeting or opaque states. Often Michael K, through his susceptible naive imagination, experiences something Deleuze & Guattari would describe as becoming animal, and by extension, becoming plant, becoming stone, but this always in the tenor of depletion and deprivation. The idiot is decked out with heightened animal senses (Coetzee 1983: 140), with plant-like reactions to water and sun (Coetzee 1983: 136), with earth-like experiences of passivity (Coetzee 1983: 137), with awareness of the fibrous connective qualities of his own flesh (Coetzee 1983: 242), and finally with the sensation of dissolving into

the transparent fleetness of water, air, light and shadow (Coetzee 1983: 245).

In this way, the backward Michael K is raised to the height of a prodigy of the senses – his slowness and disfigurement are transformed into impersonal powers of material long-suffering-ness and uncanny clairvoyance. Throughout the novel, the ambiguous valence of these characteristics abides; they arise from deprivation and lack and, as they point to morbidity, they simultaneously release sensations of a pre-reflective amplitude of being.

As it is beyond the scope of this article to argue the case of Michael K as a post-humanist novel (Atwell 1993: 97), one could suggest that it offers a critique of ideas of separateness, self-possession, identity, the unity of the subject, and discretely measured controlled time. It likewise questions the control we believe we have over our bodies, thoughts and will, our lack of communion with the being of plants, animals and even mineral life, and the suppression of the longing for death as a final ‘home’.

Michael K’s ‘pathological’ sensations of becoming-other are formulated in understated poetic language which, through an incremental metaphorical layering, gathers conceptual weight. Coetzee uses literalisation of the meaning of ordinary words as a technique that forces functional language into poetic conceptualisation. A particularly startling example of this is the literalisation of the words “dim” and “benighted” (Coetzee 1983: 54). These terms used descriptively for Michael K’s passive mental state are later refashioned to depict the idiot figure as a shamanic twilight hunter-gatherer, a genius-being of obscurity who reads the dark landscape and finds his way at night through “the pressure of presences upon his eyeballs and the skin of his face” (Coetzee 1983: 158).

What wrenches the heart of the reader all along is that s/he knows that Michael K is no wizard equipped with sweet magic realist faculties, no eco-critical prophet with a green agenda, but an outcast who is grovelling as best he can towards a place where he can finally come to rest.

7.2 Existential features: the abject re-included

If Coetzee the writer is part philosopher, he certainly, with this character, uncovers original modalities of existence. The author selects subtle forms of integrity for his character; a personal fate privately and stubbornly appropriated and persistence in marginality. In his depiction of the effects of starvation, such as feelings of weakness, paralysis and semi-comatose or delirious periods, Coetzee maintains a convincing layer of fictive realism in his character, while equipping him with a visionary steadfastness in death.

Death for Michael K, however, is not suicide, the well-known nihilist-existentialist exit option – his author has in mind something much more radical. Coetzee designs for his character a conscious living of death in detail, in obscurity and without skipping a beat, a hundred per cent forsaken and infinitely self-forsaking. Rarely has there been a novelistic character embodying so acutely the notion of life as a “temptation to exist”, to speak with Cioran (1956/1968). At the same time, the author takes great care to mount in his character discrete and intense, wholly unpremeditated gestures of care, spontaneous nurturing and protection, evoking the Heideggerian register of care as an existential. Michael K tends his mother, his pumpkins and children, and a wounded man who crosses his path with instinctive protectiveness (Coetzee 1983: 98, 90, 124, 132, 155). It is also in this salvaging of a minimum caring community that the author fashions the closing scenes of the book, where Michael, having found signs of habitation in his mother’s former hovel under the stairs, dreams of companionship with a little old man who will return with him to the farm where they will exist on teaspoons of water drawn from a well. That the author is offering a death fantasy, rather than a glimmer of hope that Michael will survive, seems to me corroborated by the logic of withdrawal that motorises the entire narrative.

The consistent references to the bliss of passivity, the peace of sleep, the loosening of the grip of consciousness, the yielding up to time and oblivion seduce the reader by the existential truth that death essentially belongs to life (Coetzee 1983: 113). Slowly, in the course of the novel, the notion that life, as suffering, might of all things mostly desire death, is validated (Coetzee 1983: 93, 171). Therefore, if there is no “will to power” in Michael K, then neither is he comparable

to Nietzsche's instrumental puppet Zarathustra on an emblematic mountaintop in an emblematic midday swoon: "But all joy wants eternity, wants deep, deep, deep eternity!" (Nietzsche 1969: 333).

In addition to fixing the longing for eternity in psychologically recognisable states of vertigo, related to physical depletion, Coetzee also takes care not to idealise death as a beatific transportation. The novel's insistence rather is on the abject, the slow eruption of the corpse right under its owner's still living eye, the waning of the flesh, the morbid bowel, the slowing of the heartbeat, the leaking of fluids, the diminishing body temperature and the dissolution of mental coherence (Coetzee 1983: 242). This character, however, is no political fasting hero; he is a casualty of the state, one of the many lives that the state and society simply rubbish when they cannot enslave him to its economy or have finished exploiting him, an insight that Michael K verbalises in one of his few speeches about his own mother (Coetzee 1983: 186). The difference, in this instance, is that Michael K succumbs to this fate but for 'reasons' that he steadfastly, in the midst of this suffering, erects as his own. This ambiguous death fundamentally challenges our defensive perceptions concerning finitude and mortality; it provides a violation of our sentimental life-prioritising sensibilities, but it also critically suggests a scandalously South African *ars moriendi*.

7.3 Peregrinations in search of a place called 'home': another type of allegory of writing?

The elusiveness of Coetzee's main character is concretised in the dynamics of radical withdrawal. He is a true athlete of retreat (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 172). He absconds from every space, place or circumstance that limits or incarcerates him while falsely presenting itself as a 'home' – internment camps, hospitals, and schools. All of these fake homes manifest an institutional rationality of 'care' and 'protection'; all of them are regimes intent on keeping people alive. The novel reads like a litany of a dying man's efforts of escaping, retreating, bolting, slipping off, tiptoeing away (from the city under martial law, from concentration camps, from the prison clinic), roaming out to the most barren and desolate area of the country, fastening on a deserted farm, minimising traces of his existence, covering his tracks,

camouflaging his dwelling, diminishing his stature, hiding and skulking in bushes, under culverts, in hovels and ruins, hibernating in his burrow and finally retreating for his final sleep into a spandrel space under a staircase, feeding to the last fluttering of consciousness a dream of another retreat into the countryside.

The dynamic of withdrawal that constitutes the narrative's spatial sequences seems to fit the idea of plot developed by Brooks (1992): the erotic desire of the reader to follow metonymically the twists and turns of the plot, to read "for the end" is subtended by the desire for closure and (metaphoric) resolution, which, according to Brooks, can be conceived of as a parallel of the death instinct, the drive of living matter to return to the "quiescence of the inorganic, a state prior to life" (Brooks 1992: 51-2).

The deliberate repetition at the beginning and end of the novel of the metaphor of the teaspoon, the implement with which his mother feeds her hare-lipped baby, to Michael K's death fantasy of drawing up water from a well shaft with a teaspoon on a string (Coetzee 1983: 245), illustrates Brooks' conception of the dynamic interplay in any plot between metonymic and metaphoric dimensions. While the former, according to Brooks, is aligned with the pleasure principle (in the form of plot-bound narrative postponement), the latter coincides with the death drive (in the form of narrative closure) (Brooks 1992: 29). Of course, in Coetzee, these dimensions are often conflated, the plot points realised in metaphor, the metaphors strung up in sequences.

In the dynamism of constant withdrawal, Michael K is conceptualised as an instance of the reluctance of organisms to enter the suffering, the oscillation/rhythmic dilations of life, and of their tendency, after a period of postponement, towards stasis and oblivion. One could suggest that, in this sense, *Life and times of Michael K* could be an allegory of all biological life and, therefore, all suffering, relativising the exceptional status attributed by human beings to human life and suffering. Coetzee's subsequent concern with the lives of animals can certainly already be detected in this novel from the frequent references to Michael K as a snail, a hare, a mole and many references to the dumbness and vacancy with which beasts suffer their lot.

7.4 Juridical features: vulnerability as conscience and critique of the law

Insofar as he is always found guilty by his persecutors, arrested by soldiers and deterred in institutions of discipline and punishment, the figure of Michael K is set up by the author as an interrogation of justice in a situation of war. As a ragged man rising from the earth, a ghost, a burrower, an insect man, a stone, Michael K personifies something even beyond 'original innocence'. Yet the fact of his denuded and harmless existence qualifies him as legally undesirable by martial law. He is labelled an illegal loiterer, a waif without permanent abode, a non-entity lacking references or identification; he represents, in current terms, a true embodiment of the *sans papiers*, exiated from a war-ravished area, and on that basis alone, inexhaustibly punishable and punished by law. Coetzee sets up the desperately compromised camp doctor responsible for Michael K's physical rehabilitation to declare him a prophetic conscience of war, its walls and fences, its rules, drills and prisoner categories. "I am not in the war", Michael K says simply, rejecting this grand role (Coetzee 1983: 189).

If war is the direct cause of Michael K's flight into the countryside, his wasted body holds another more general indictment; it can be considered a literalisation of the human 'waste' produced by the voracious state. Fired from his lowly post as municipal gardener, rejected by the urban economy, rubbished and subsequently punished for being rubbish, Michael K's story is one of the double extinction often suffered by the lowest classes at the hands of capitalism.

Coetzee carefully sets up his character as judge of what Lemaire (2010) would call the "Promethean" values of Western capitalist society: the values of excessive striving under regimes of "self-betterment", self-punitive discipline, regular work in clocked up time, private property, the deep exploitation of the soil for profit, the falseness of overly principled and rigid thinking in the field of practical morality, and the mind/body duality, to name but a few. In a clear reference to the chapter in his book *White writing* (1988b) that deals with the European rejection of the 'idleness' of indigenous peoples, Coetzee elevates Michael K's idleness to the natural state of the human being. He depicts him, formerly easily at a loss for things to do, entering into an alternative rapturous relationship with

time, where nothing needs to be done. The passage is worth quoting at length as it illustrates how prose ‘thinks’ abstract concepts in imaginative experiential language:

But most of all as summer slanted to an end, he was learning to love idleness, idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour, surreptitious thefts to be enjoyed sitting on his heels before a flowerbed with the fork dangling from his fingers, but as a yielding himself up to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body, circulating in his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids. He was neither pleased nor displeased when there was work to do, it was all the same. [...] He was living beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessed neglected corner, half-awake half asleep. Like a parasite dozing in the gut, he thought, like a lizard under a stone (Coetzee, 1983: 158).

The modes in which the character Michael K slowly acquires the conceptual status of judge are, as exemplified in the passage quoted above, less modes of argument or dialogue than those of reverie and ecstasy. These are the states redolent with “percepts” and “affects” of languor and rapture which undermine the reader’s prejudices towards the abject outsider and censorious social perceptions of the lazy man, the irregular, and the homeless.

The concept of the judge is released poignantly when Michael K turns his very subjection to punishment into an opportunity for freedom, turning its strictures quietly and invisibly against itself. The following passage once again illustrates how Coetzee manages to cultivate ambiguity in passages of metaphoric saturation. In this instance, the punished schoolboy turns into the Buddha of Prince Albert, a godforsaken town in the South African semi-desert known as the Karoo.

Often in the course of his retreats into the wilderness he slacks into a posture, eyes closed and hands on his head, once forced upon him as punishment in the school classes of his youth, and which already as a young boy grew to lose its meaning as punishment and became an avenue of reverie; [...] Now in front of his cave, he sometimes locked his fingers behind his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing (Coetzee 1983: 94).

A judge of war through non-participation, a judge of labour through idleness, a judge of striving through passiveness, and still the conceptual options for erecting a human norm that opposes the law

are not exhausted. Once again, it is through metaphors of body that Coetzee fashions Michael K into a judge of his own death sentence. The moment comes when, during Michael K's last days, strung along in the company of prostitutes, a bottle of alcohol is passed to him. Through evoking *Ode to Nightingale* in the Keatsian cadence of: "A languor spread from his heart, bringing a blessed numbness to his head" (Coetzee 1983: 243), Coetzee, in a surprising move, through the association of hemlock, evokes the self-chosen death of none less than Socrates. Through his ugliness, poverty, non-conformist and 'out of place' behaviour, Socrates constituted a radical questioning and judgement of the self-assured Athenian jury that condemned him to death. Accused of impiety and corrupting the youth, he slipped in the end from the confines of the state, performing his own death in an act of self-release from the suffering that life is, leaving his judges, like formerly his interlocutors, in a state of moral doubt (Hadot 2005: 69-79).

It suffers reiteration, in this instance, that Michael K's death is not portrayed as an ironic Socratic suicide, or any other favourite existentialist or stoic option of self-termination, but something much more radical: a living of death to the quick, in total desolation, with refined awareness of all the stages up to the last evanescent wafts of consciousness. Coetzee offers the pathic-existential features of Michael K that condition his relational, dynamic and juridical features as an extreme ethical experiment, one that erects a fictive foil, against which the reader can assess 'normal' options available to him-/herself as a compliant subject of the state. In this sense, the novel itself functions through its main character as a conceptual maieutic, a Socratic questioning of the effects of physical and structural violence sanctioned by state laws.

The outrage and condemnation that befell Coetzee's novel in the 1980s was mainly provoked by a White author's depiction of a Black man as a powerless handicapped idiot lacking the motivation to fight his oppressors. Hardly any of the novel's ethical torque could be truly acknowledged during the initial moments of reception. In a sense, one could speak of this novel as a "spandrel" of fiction. It will probably often lie dormant for certain periods until, through the violence of new local or global developments, it is rediscovered as an instrument of divination. There is no doubt in my mind that this novel would

still be found subversive by the current South African Department of Arts and Culture. It only needs to be pointed out to them that millions in South Africa are still 'Michael K'd' into 'superfluousness', left to perish in the squalor of poverty – this time not through the bureaucratically ordered fascism of an apartheid government, but through the fascism of wilful neglect practised by a governing elite in the name of a constitutional democracy.

7.5 Relational features: autonomy and moral pragmatism

If the law is of the father and sows division, separation and fragmentation, who is the mother and what does she stand for in this novel? Coetzee answers this question in terms of Michael K's relational features. The question with which he has battled since his childhood, "Why was I born", becomes revealed to him when his mother turns ill: "he had been born to look after his mother" (Coetzee 1983: 8); he understands. He has no relationships with other women, he does not attach to people generally, and he remains, however grateful for small kindnesses, indifferent to their charity. His main relationship is with his garden, his pumpkin plants, which he regards as his children, with the earth, its water and its nurturing capacities that are all extensions of his mother whose ashes he had dug into his garden as a starter pack of ritual compost:

He thought of the pumpkin leaves pushing through the earth. Tomorrow will be their last day, he thought: the day after that they will die, while I am out here in the mountains. Perhaps if I started at sunrise and ran all day I would not be too late to save them, them and the other seeds that are going to die underground, though they do not know it, that are never going to see the light of day. There was a chord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam and must be cut. It seemed to him that one could cut a chord like that only so many times before it would not grow again (Coetzee 1983: 90).

The relations into which Michael K enters are so tentative as to forego any guarantee of permanence of progeny. Not even his brothers and sisters, as he calls his pumpkins and melons, provide him with a sense of continuity; their seeds are scattered from the packet onto which he holds until the end. Coetzee uses the issue of Michael K's relations with people, animals and plants to offer an ethics of independence, a

Tao of being careful as doves and clever as snakes, dismissing everyday notions of principled helpfulness, support and charity, as well as the icy male heroics of comradeship. Rejected with great finality is a relationship with anybody who would try to fix him into a meaning or classify him into a category.

7.6 The conceptual figure and his conceptualiser: the novel as prison and escape hatch

In *Life and times of Michael K*, a White intellectual from the upper classes chooses as his character, as his man, a poor, presumably 'coloured' handicapped man caught up in a war. This is who he makes into his 'instrument' of thinking and writing. As author and master of this character, he is the one who sets up his narrative confines, in camps and hospitals; he is the final warder and discipliner of Michael K; he starves him to death; he makes him faint with exhaustion; he is his torturer, his very sympathetic and extremely curious selfish torturer who wields this character's emaciated body like a probe into the thickets of thinking about freedom and the freedom to choose death rather than compromising his own inclinations. If anybody has made Michael K into a body servant, it is Coetzee himself. How do you write about freedom with a good conscience when you have determined every move of your character?

We remember Coetzee's Nobel Peace Lecture in which he philosophises, yet again by means of fiction, on the relationship between the author and his character, whom he refers to in this piece as "his man".

How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? What name shall he give this nameless fellow with whom he shares his evenings and sometimes his nights too, who is absent only in the daytime, when he, Robin, walks the quays inspecting the new arrivals and his man gallops about the kingdom making his inspections? (Coetzee 2003)

If we stand back and take up the clues of the distancing narrative style in *Life and times of Michael K*, and if we remember the escapes that Michael K makes time and again, we can ask whether Coetzee is not the kind of writer whom we can expect to fix an escape hatch for his character from the prison of the novel.

And indeed he does; he writes a meta-fictional escape hatch in the shape of the camp doctor, a writer (albeit only of letters to Michael K) who makes a huge and obsessive effort to try and crack his ward and to get his story, his motives, his meaning out of him. In this way, Coetzee by proxy professes that he, the author himself, does not know what his character means, and that Michael K is the Other of writing, or maybe the Real, a non-human force erupting into fiction.

On the story level, Michael K remains his own person in refusing to be imprisoned in any way, either in the real camps or in the nets of meaning cast by the camp doctor who runs after him pleading for answers. Ultimately, we must agree with Atwell that Michael K symbolises the limited provisional freedom, not of any political nature, but of writing itself (Atwell 1993: 92). Coetzee does not tell us this; he stages these difficult self-reflexive meta-fictional concepts inside the narrative, as part of the story of his main character. The novel “presents us both with the story of K and with a struggle for control over the meaning of that story” (Coetzee 1983: 94). However, these two dimensions are not offered separately as a story and a commentary. Right up to the meta-fictional dregs, Michael K remains both a conceptual and a novelistic figure, a conceptual figure.

Could one conceive of Michael K as the sparring partner of the writer, a kind of *alter ego*, not in any superficial sense, but as a figure that is projected as transcendental Other or conditional Other to the writing process itself, the reluctant, elusive point of lack, or resistance, coaxed and lured and wrestled by the writer, yearned after, as the productive but finally hidden source of all new meanings?

I suggest that the power of this book has to do finally with how meaning is dependent on the inchoate and the ineffable, with how the discriminating mind is dependent on the unconscious, or as Deleuze & Guattari (1994: 118) would say, on chaos and the infinite speed of the virtual. Contact with this sphere is what writers live for and for which they are prepared to take considerable risks (Coetzee 1983: 172). In these moments, their characters, as finite creatures, seem to be restored to infinity (Coetzee 1983: 197). In this instance, the risk goes even further; Coetzee tries consciously to write Michael K as silent and forever unspeaking, unyielding Other. He refuses, as an ethical writerly gesture, to be his master (Anker 2006). It is for this palpable

sense of risk, refusal and daring, the sense that immense forces are being wrestled with, that one can read this novel again and again and be moved without knowing exactly why. He is in us, this Other, this Michael K; he is, for lack of better words, what the soul wants.

8. Conclusion: a hard and a soft way of understanding the social responsibility of the writer

It could be that a South African writer like myself baulks at the formal mission formulations concerning the social role of the arts – precisely because she tends to understand them, perhaps wrongfully, in a strong prescriptive sense, which is the sense in which she got used to them – during the apartheid times (prescriptions from Afrikaner nationalists and their censors), during the struggle times (prescriptions from the Cultural Desk of the ANC), and during the post-apartheid times (prescriptions from the Department of Arts and Culture): artists should make artworks that are socially responsible, that is, their work should express clear messages of concern with a prescribed list of social values and ills and should, in unambiguous terms, promote a certain sensibility and ideals of social cohesion.

There is a second weaker sense in which the statement of the Centre for the Humanities could be read as far as literary fiction is concerned. One could take one's cue from Appiah's conception of narrative (as opposed to "reason") as the innate practical capacity that "grounds our sharing" of life. What makes the cosmopolitan experience possible, according to this view, is our common "grasp of a narrative logic that allows us to construct the world to which our imaginations respond", a common good which can be found "up the Amazon, the Mississippi, the Congo, the Indus and the Yellow rivers, just as it is found on the banks of the Avon or the Dordogne" (Appiah 2005: 257).

If taken in this weaker sense, one can read the mission brief quoted earlier as a simple invitation to talk with each other about books, music and pictures in the context of our times and to learn from and enrich each other's interpretations and responses. This implies that a conversation without domination is possible between people from different cultures and that this would naturally and spontaneously

promote the kind of cosmopolitan society to which Europe's cultural capitals aspire.

I have attempted, through an analysis of Coetzee's text, to ground the intuition that conceptually ambiguous and linguistically 'strange' works that resist instrumental interpretations would best stimulate vitality in reading communities, simply because they will provoke tougher and more inconclusive conversations, and unpredictable interpretations. The ideas proposed in them could not be taken as advertisements for culture programmes. I would disagree with Appiah that 'reason' has no role in this case, that simply the spontaneous grasp of "narrative logic" is a prerequisite for communal sharing. I would like to imagine that a soft communicative universalism of the kind he proposes could be disciplined and challenged by the risky explorative reasoning of critical, 'conceptual' and writerly writers.

Where does all of this leave us? Recent austerity measures in Europe have hit the arts where it hurts. Right-wing denigration of the arts as a leftist hobby of the élite has added to the injury. Increasing pressure to sacrifice artistic autonomy to needs for 'communication' and 'cohesion' betrays an urgency to pacify unruly elements and emasculate and co-opt critique of the status quo. Under such conditions, appreciation of the dissensus produced by serious works of art would be difficult to sell to 'peace-makers'. Maybe the answer is in not trying to sell it. It might be time to start a samizdat where the voice of the "people to come" can be intoned (The Invisible Committee 2009), a voice shunning both the orthodoxy of opposition and the triumphalism of subversion, cultivating rather an authority of irrelevance when it comes to "cosmopolitan peace". For whose "peace" would that be anyway? A "peace" towards what? Sponsored by whom? By those drilling in the arctic for gas? By those destroying the lives of people in the Niger Delta? Marginal artists are not the only ones recognising that, in the midst of fast traffic and shiny surfaces, history is again slowly erupting over the face of Europe. The thin silent ghost of Michael K is becoming visible on the streets of London, Paris and Utrecht - from down South these cities are indeed starting to resemble Johannesburg's suburbs (Von Holt 2012: 4).

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