

**Unavowable Communities: Mapping Representational Excess in South African Literary  
Culture, 2001–2011**

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## Abstract

This thesis takes as its subject matter a small field of activity in South African fiction in English, a field which I provisionally title the post-transitional moment. It brings together several works of literature that were published between 2004 and 2011. In so doing, it recognises that there can be no delineation of the field except in the most tenuous of senses: as Michael Chapman asserts, such “phases of chronology are ordering conveniences rather than neatly separable entities” (*South African Literature* 2). In attempting to take a reading of this field, I draw on discussions of the innumerable post-transitional flows and trajectories of meaning advanced by critical scholars such as Ashraf Jamal, Sarah Nuttall, Louise Bethlehem and others. In this thesis, I trace the “enigmatic and acategorical” (Jamal, “Bullet Through the Church” 11) dimension of this field through several works by South African authors. These works are at once singular and communal in their expression: they are singular in the sense that they are unique literary events<sup>1</sup>; they are communal because they share a particular force in their writing, a force that resists thematic bestowing. The schism between these conflicting/contiguous poles forms the basis of this thesis.

I examine the works of a diverse selection of South African authors, finding in them a common, if discontinuous, seam in their treatment of excess, by which I mean the irreducible surplus that always demarcates the limits of representation. I find that these works each engage a movement towards the aporetic moment opened up by their characters’ experience of the traumatic. To be sure, these particular works of literature are notable for their exploration of ideas of alterity, loss and the capacity for survival in the routines of ‘South African’ lives. I use literature as the primary site of navigation for this enquiry because, as the scholars cited above have observed, literature is often a generator of meanings and a space

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word ‘event’ very deliberately, drawing on both Derek Attridge’s sense of the term (to describe literature as a performance that is always singular and unique) in *The Singularity of Literature* and Alan Badiou’s use of the word (as that moment which calls the subject into existence or being) in *Being and Event*

where complex ideas about identity are explored and played out through the medium of the everyday. I recognise here that in the post-transitional moment, literature's affective capacity in the world of action is limited – in Simon Critchley's terms, it is 'almost nothing.' My thesis seizes this almost as the site of exploration. Taking as its starting point the existential question 'have we learnt to imagine ourselves in other ways?' I propose a number of positions from which these post-transitional works of literature might be read. The first chapter attempts to give account of the theoretical problem that attends to the reading of that which exceeds language's capacity to invest with meaning. I use works by Diane Awerbuck, Annelie Botes, Shaun Johnson and Kgebetli Moele to inform my argument. In the next chapter, I explicate the problem of excess via a reading of Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* (2009). I then trace the aporetic nature of Otherness as it occurs in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009), paying particular attention to the ways in which that novel performs a refusal of meaning. Finally, I read Ishtiyag Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* (2005) as a work that posits the failure of alterity as a launching point for future ethical action.

The burden of this thesis, as I see it, lies in the apophastic nature of its subject matter. In embarking upon an exploration of the incommensurable, my argument is for an ethics of reading that seeks to explicate the ways in which literature works by thinking through its affective capacity the better to affirm its performative dimensions.

#### **KEY WORDS**

Aporetics, Altermodernity, J.M. Coetzee, Shaun Johnson, Mark Behr, Ishtiyag Shukri, Kgebetli Moele, Annelie Botes, Diane Awerbuck, Post-transition, South African Literature, Alterity, Ethics

## Opsomming

Die onderwerp van hierdie proefskrif behels 'n klein veld in Engelse Suid-Afrikaanse fiksie wat ek voorlopig met die term "post-oorgangsmoment" sal aandui. Dit bring verskeie letterkundige werke byeen wat tussen 2004 en 2011 gepubliseer is. Hierdie kunsmatige afbakening hou rekening met Michael Chapman se stelling dat "phrases of chronology are ordering conveniences rather than neatly separable entities" (*South African Writing* 2). In 'n poging om hierdie aangeduide veld te lees, put ek heelwat uit besprekings wat tans gevoer word oor die ontelbare betekenistrajekte van die post-oorgangsmoment deur kritici soos Meg Samuelson, Leon de Kock, Ashraf Jamal, Sarah Nuttall, Louise Bethlehem en andere. In hierdie proefskrif skets ek die "enigmatic and acategorical" (Jamall, "Bullet" 11) aspekte van die aangeduide veld soos dit uiting vind in verskeie werke van Suid-Afrikaanse outeurs. Hierdie werke is terselfdertyd alleenstaande en gemeenskaplik in hul uitdrukking: hulle is alleenstaande omdat hulle unieke literêre gebeurtenisse verteenwoordig en gemeenskaplik omdat hulle 'n spesifieke impuls deel, 'n impuls wat tematiese kategorisering teenstaan. Die kloof tussen hierdie opponerende/naburige pole vorm die grondslag van hierdie proefskrif.

Ek ondersoek die werk van 'n diverse seleksie Suid-Afrikaanse outeurs en vind 'n gemene, dog diskontinue, soom in die manier waarop hulle oorskot hanteer, dit wil sê, die onreduseerbare surplus wat alle representasie begrens. Ek vind dat hierdie werke elkeen 'n weg na die aporetiese moment oopskryf deur die karakters se ervarings van trauma. Hierdie letterkundige werke word ook gekenmerk deur hulle verkenning van idees soos alteriteit, verlies en die oorlewingskapasiteit in die roetines van 'Suid-Afrikaanse' lewens. Ek gebruik literêre werke as die primêre navorsingsveld vir hierdie ondersoek aangesien die letterkunde dikwels as 'n genereerder van betekenis dien en as 'n ruimte funksioneer waar komplekse idees rondom identiteit deur die medium van die alledaagse verken kan word. Ek is bewus dat die letterkunde 'n beperkte affektiewe kapasiteit in die wêreld van handeling in die post-

oorgangsmoment besit – dit is *bykans* niks, soos Simon Critchley dit stel. My proefskrif betrek hierdie *bykans* as brandpunt vir die ondersoek. Ek stel verskeie posisies voor vanwaar hierdie post-oorgang literêre werke gelees kan word deur die beantwoording van die eksistensiële vraag of ons geleer het om onself op ander maniere te verbeel as uitgangspunt te gebruik. Die eerste hoofstuk poog om die teoretiese probleem te omskryf wat ontstaan as ‘n mens probeer om die oorskot van taal se betekenisgewende vermoë te lees. In die daaropvolgende hoofstuk belig ek die probleem van oorskot deur Mark Behr se *Kings of the Water* (2009) te lees. Daarna skets ek die aporetiese aard van Andersheid soos dit in JM Coetzee se *Summertime* (2009) voorkom, deur spesifiek ook aandag te skenk aan die maniere waarop die roman ‘n weiering van betekenis aanbied. Laastens lees ek Ishtiyaq Shukri se *The Silent Minaret* (2005) as ‘n werk wat die mislukking van alteriteit as ‘n beginpunt gebruik om toekomstige etiese handelings te rig.

Die hooftema van hierdie proefskrif lê myns insiens in die apofastiese aard van die onderwerpsmateriaal. Deur ‘n ondersoek na die onmeetbare te onderneem, staan ek ook ‘n bevrydings-etiek van lees voor wat poog om die manier waarop literêre tekste werk te verhelder deur die affektiewe vermoë van literêre tekste te bedink.

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In a work dedicated to alterity, it would be uncharitable to not extend my appreciation to those who have, through my interactions with them, deepened and furthered the thinking of which this thesis is the result. I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Shaun Viljoen, whose expertise, professionalism and patience was indispensable and greatly appreciated. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Professor Mike Marais, Professor Leon De Kock, Dr Daniel Roux, Erica Lombard and other members of the Rhodes and Stellenbosch University English departments with whom I have shared the thoughts and ideas that ultimately engendered this project.

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# CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	i
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iii
<b>Writing to the Moment: A Preface</b>	1
<b>Chapter One – Amfortasian Wounds: Mapping South African Headspace</b>	15
The Demiurge	23
Literature and the Sense of an Event	27
A Rumbling of Things Unknown	31
<b>Chapter Two – In the Dark Back of Time: Mark Behr’s <i>Kings of the Water</i></b>	79
Telling Secrets	82
Unworking Memory	88
Degrees of Dishonour	103
Memory Repeated in the Superlative: Mourning and Living On	119
The Infinite Demand of the Aporetic	131
<b>Chapter Three – Learning to Live Finally: J.M. Coetzee’s <i>Summertime</i></b>	139
The Dredging Machine	139
To Live	151
A Tale Without a Body	163
Unworking Knowledge	179
Late Style	185
<b>Chapter Four – Clean Spaces and Contagions: Ishtiyaq Shukri’s <i>The Silent Minaret</i></b>	187
<i>Saudade</i> : the Politics of Disappearance	187
Precarious Enrootings	196
Inventing Presence	215
<b>By Indirections Find Directions Out: a Conclusion</b>	235
<b>Work Cited</b>	239

## Writing to the Moment: A Preface

Inquiries into the poetics of mourning ordinarily begin by framing a set of definitive characteristics, a field within which the study will proceed. If this thesis diverges from that, it is because it is broadly conceived as an attempt to dislocate and analyse the apparatus in which it is involved, namely the South African literary canon in English. It proposes that the familiar ways of thinking and talking about South African literature in English tends to limit what we can say, and how we can say what we choose to say, about the novels that populate the field. That being the case, this thesis proceeds as a thought-experiment, a means to open up a new space for thinking about what is valuable in literature. In mounting my argument, I strongly implicate excess<sup>2</sup> (by which I mean the irreducible surplus which always demarcates the limits of representation) in the mechanisms of loss and recovery that characterise the literature under discussion.<sup>3</sup> The analysis in this thesis builds on work I have done concerning the place of the cultural in contemporary South Africa – that work culminating in a Masters dissertation and a journal article.<sup>4</sup>

In this study, I explore an artistic preoccupation within key articulations of ‘South African’ literary culture, concerning the difficulty of making sense of the open-ended, temporal, and always conditional state of what it means to be ‘South African’<sup>5</sup> in fictional representations of the contemporary moment. My examination of literature and literary

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I utilize the registers of ethics and alterity in various ways. Where they relate specifically to the constitutive state, the terms are capitalized – hence, ‘Other’, ‘Self’, ‘Same’ and ‘Excess.’

<sup>3</sup> When I speak of excess in this proposal, I am utilizing Jacques Derrida’s linguistic theories as a touchstone for my definitions. Derrida argues that presence and meaning are never present in the utterance, but are rather endlessly deferred (“*Différance*” 63). Every utterance generates an excess, an irreducible surplus which remains to be said, yet cannot be said. This excess is the realm of the other, which haunts every utterance as the unsaid. As a result, each utterance must be endlessly supplemented by more utterances, which must themselves be supplemented and so on *ad infinitum* (Derrida “Of Grammatology” 1826). I reference Derrida not as an appeal to authority, but in order to demonstrate useful points of connection between ‘theory’ and ‘literature’.

<sup>4</sup> Mbao, Wamuwi. “Inscribing Whiteness and Staging Belonging in Contemporary Autobiographies and Life-Writing Forms.” *English in Africa* 37: 1, 2010 (63–75).

<sup>5</sup> When this term appears in quotes, it is for the purpose of conveying the provisional nature of the term.

culture in South Africa is grounded in literary and cultural debates which critics have engaged (and continue to engage) in, with regard to writing around the dialogic of loss/closure.<sup>6</sup> It is the conflicting/contiguous nature of this dialogic that forms the entry point of my study. In particular, the relationship between the singularity with which the various novels I gather engage the subjects of loss and closure, and their inevitably shared performance of ‘South African-ness’<sup>7</sup> is one which requires considered scrutiny. Such an examination necessarily reckons with the influence of the political in the daily lives, and thus the representations, of the various publics that ‘make up’ the ‘South African Culture of Letters.’

To speak of such a ‘Culture of Letters’ is to risk attempting to unite the incommensurable, for it is certainly true that ‘South African’ artistic identities and cultures in the contemporary moment are often divergent, and in constant flux. Even to announce such a project is to risk fetishising completion and totality, attempting to insert order into the innumerable flows and trajectories of knowledge. Indeed, several critics have recently questioned whether the term ‘South African Literature’ can be pronounced in any but the most conditional of ways<sup>8</sup>. Louise Bethlehem, Phumla Dineo Gqola, Ashraf Jamal, Leon De Kock, Sarah Nuttall, Imraan Coovadia and others working within the cultural field have each (and in distinct ways) theorized the condition of South African literature. Following on from these critics, it is my contention that the ways in which ‘South African’ literary identities are

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<sup>6</sup> In referring to this dialogic, I reckon with the accumulated reserve that accompanies these terms. Moreover, my argument is not that closure is always the respondent of loss in some binary equilibrium, but that this is the dominant paradigm in which knowledge is produced in the works I examine.

<sup>7</sup> The obvious point to be made is that the tag ‘South African’ implies all manner of implicit codes, demands, investments and value-judgements. The question I pose is thus not simply how each claimant to the tag justifies that claim, since such claims are by their nature conditional and subject to negotiation, but how it occurs that multiple different claims, each by multiple different actors, tell (to a greater or lesser extent) similar stories.

<sup>8</sup> For examples, Michael Chapman’s introduction in *Current Writing* 21, and Leon de Kock’s “South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction” (273–274). There is a vast critical industry at work here, with debates and issues worthy of considered elucidation and scrutiny. In deference to the limits of time and space, I have necessarily simplified what is a complex and ongoing corpus of work.

read has shifted from a post-Apartheid occupation with questions of “where/who is here?” and “what is now?”<sup>9</sup> to the post-transition questions “what do we do here?”, and “how do we use the now?” In other words, how to produce meaning from the myriad individual artistic representations of South African identity? This takes the form of exploring how artistic representations are inhabited by meaning, and how those meanings function in local and global social and political contexts.

This trend has been observed in recent articulations within the critical literary academy. Here, one notes the recent work of Michael Chapman, who pursues the question of how best to forge a path through the open signs and signifiers of ‘South African’ literary culture (*South African Literature* 2009); a similar thematic of ‘working through’ is diverted by Louise Bethlehem in *Skin Tight: Apartheid Literary Culture and Its Aftermath* (2006) towards the problematics of the body in literature, by Betty Govinden towards a theoretic of memory and nostalgia (2008), and by Ashraf Jamal towards a questioning of sociocultural textures as they appear in art (2004; 2005). From these works, it emerges that there is no common measure, no neutral area from which to perceive a ‘South African narrative’ arts. The literary academy is thus responding to texts, the works of various South Africans, which provide an arresting collage of representations, together constructing an untidy and always-dissembling image of what it means to be South African. How then, does my own attempt to think through this Byzantine structure proceed? If, as David Foster Wallace suggests, “human beings are narrative animals” (“Fictional Futures” 8), my thesis seeks to understand how South African society countenances its selves in times/occasions of loss/closure through narrative art forms. Have we learned to imagine ourselves differently? And if not, why not?

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<sup>9</sup> See Lewis Nkosi’s “The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic” (240–258); Rob Nixon’s 1997 article “Aftermaths – South African Literature Today” (64–77); Dorothy Driver’s “Transformation Through Art: Writing, Representation, and Subjectivity in Recent South African Fiction”, published in 1996 (45–52); as well as “South Africa: Under a New Dispensation?” by the same author (2006). Other notable texts are Zimitri Erasmus’ “We Are Never Only South Africans” (1996) and Sue Kossew’s *Writing Woman, Writing Place* (2004). These texts provide varying articulations of the critical directions taken in ‘South African’ literary studies in the Post-Apartheid and Post-Transitional periods.

The particular narrative art forms I choose are notable for their exploration of ideas of loss and the capacity for survival in the routines of 'South African' lives. I use literature as the primary site of navigation for this enquiry because, as the scholars cited above have observed, literature is often a generator of meanings and a space where complex ideas about identity are explored and played out through the medium of the everyday. If texts are sites of meaning, then it follows that meaning is arrived at in the encounter between text and reader, an encounter that is itself criss-crossed by the significations and symbols of culture. In the texts I examine here, however, what is most strikingly apparent is an abyssal failure of meaning. In these novels, meaning is rendered meaningless. I contend that reading these novels enacts an aporetic encounter with alterity: the reader is located in culture's modes of understanding, but a certain passivity inheres to the act of reading that which is aporetic. To read these texts is to be acted upon in a way the reader has little control over, to be taken over in the act of reading by something inchoate. This is an idea I develop throughout this dissertation, and I suggest that a non-intentional mode of reading might emerge as a way to profitably understand how Otherness is to be approached.

I enlist these ideas not to form a coherent theory of reading which is prescriptive in allowing the abyssal to be brought over to our systems of knowledge. Rather, my aim is to illustrate that the presence of these texts says something about the nature and place of the cultural in contemporary South Africa. Of course, approaching South African literature through the figure of alterity is not in itself new. The failure of intersubjective relations, the failure of the self to exceed the limitations of its position in society, has been a pathologically recurring concern in the history of South African literature. Similarly, the notion of non-intentional reading has been developed fruitfully in South African literature, most notably in the work of Mike Marais. In this respect, my thesis follows on from (and is influenced by) the important work conducted in this area by Marais, David Attwell, Derek Attridge, and others.

I find that the ethical experience of reading proffered by these scholars is useful for contending with that which resists the illumination of knowledge. As such, there are points of overlap in the theoretical trajectories where much of the work done in this area has tended to focus on the writing of JM Coetzee, I attempt to turn this optic towards other writers that have emerged in recent years. My argument is that if the present moment is characterised by new forms of uncertainty and precariousness, then this ethically engaged reading must reckon with the social and political changes and upheavals that have marked the contemporary South Africa: Are writers addressing these irruptions, directly or indirectly? If so, how have these changes affected the way we imagine life in South Africa? Are there points of connectedness that might be discerned? What might such an ethically engaged reading be, in the face of these questions?

Implicit in my attempt to answer these questions is the argument that to read with an eye to revelation is to perform a profoundly unethical act of violence to relationality. By this, I refer to a mode of reading that seeks to uncover, unveil or expose some sort of transcendental truth about the world the text seeks to represent. Such a mode of reading is premised on the primacy and pride of an imperialistic selfhood. This in turn seeks, qua Levinas, to “exclude the transcendent, encompass every Other in the Same,” and therefore to eliminate otherness and exalt the self as autonomous and all-powerful (“Philosophy” 93). This fact has not escaped the notice of critical scholars, with a large selection of South African critical cultural enquiries taking place under a rubric that seeks out new ways of representing the excess which has constantly eluded representation in the current moment. Sarah Nuttall (2009), Louise Bethlehem (2006), Meg Samuelson (2007, 2008) and Ashraf Jamal (2005), to name a diverse selection of critics within the South African academy, have written of the need to find newer and more complex conceptual registers through which to read South African literary culture within the context of a wider (often global) modernity.

Each of these theorists insists, on the dense imbrications (and thus the non-totalisable nature) of the cultural imaginary, and each has contributed to the creation of spaces of self-reflexivity in which to understand new relations of representation and society not founded on dialogical binaries.<sup>10</sup> My thesis is inflected by the work of these and other scholars as it attempts to make meaningful connections with the subjects of loss and reconstitution as they are thematised in ‘South African artistic representations.

Beyond connecting to these local scholars, my work draws into its orbit the theories of thinkers whose temporalities exceed the boundaries of the local and the Now. The philosophical theories of earlier thinkers like Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Erich Auerbach, and Edmund Jabès and later theorists like Jacques Derrida, Nicolas Bourriaud, Judith Butler, Alain Badiou, Simon Critchley and Slavoj Žižek are drawn into a symphonically perceptive theoretics which elucidates my conception of the ethics of alterity, the better to illuminate the aporetic spaces this work is seeking to enter.

To be sure, the written engagement with the aporetic in South African literature in English provokes questions that are bottomless, unimaginable in depth. In this thesis, I attempt to conceptually communicate how loss is cast through the engagement with ‘states of Otherness’ (other selves and other states of being); with the estrangement of the protagonists of these texts from the world; or with states of afterness which instantiate themselves in the *Augenblick* of the aporetic encounter.

While this dissertation turns on the state of South African post-transitional literature’s engagement with the trauma of apartheid history, I must mention that my argument resonates at several points with the project of much post-Holocaust literature. In particular, my use of Paul Celan’s work to think through the radical unsettlement of the self that occurs in the process of mourning points to the many points of connection between these literatures.

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<sup>10</sup> To say this is not to gloss the considerably different (and expansive) theoretical trajectories employed by the academics I use in these examples, nor to deny the importance of their contributions to the field of South African cultural studies.

With this in mind, the two states of mourning that concern me in this thesis are, firstly, the mourning for a past or disappeared state, time or place. Secondly, the mourning for one who has died, disappeared, or ceased to be, and what it means for those who survive that individual. The reader finds that these states intermingle and cut across one another in the novels, as the protagonists of these texts enact the performance of engaging with (or attempting to know) ‘states of Otherness’ through their various struggles to countenance loss.

The specific tenor of these representations of loss and recovery lies in the way they each invoke the universal in their attempts to come to terms with the loss that is experienced. This may take the form of invoking communal memory, or various other attempts to call back another time in which this loss was not present, attempts which in most cases call on others to share in the responsibility of bearing witness to the state of Otherness.

In this sense, my title paraphrases Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*<sup>11</sup> and in so doing alludes to that work’s concern with whether a truly hospitable community can ever exist, given that communities are premised on exclusion. Here, I note the impossible (because still always to be completed) task of apprehending alterity which manifests through discussions of loss and recovery in narrative art. The hypothesis here is that the idea of a South African ‘Culture of Letters’ is precisely such an impossible community, but one in which there is a continuity which can be seen in the adherence to an economy of the same. This economy, I argue, marks the narrative arts examined here the way metastasised melanoma would mark a body in the terminal stages of skin cancer’s complications. This can, I argue, readily be seen in the will to a system that speaks itself in the idiom of same/difference. It can be seen in the fraught relations with alterity that occupies Ishtiyāq

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<sup>11</sup> Note here that Blanchot inverts the phrase from its original ‘la communauté inavouable’, suggesting a degree of uncertainty around the formation of community: in other words, does the community give rise to the Unavowable, or does the Unavowable form the community?

Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* (2005), the novel I examine in the last chapter of this dissertation. And it can certainly be discerned in the drawn-out frustrations induced by the silence of the Other in Shaun Johnson's *The Native Commissioner* (2004), or J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009). Finally, it can be observed in Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* (2009), in which the protagonist engages with death and Otherness in equal measure, against the fraught background of the South African farm.

Ultimately, this thesis responds to the problem by offering a speculative ethical position, or set of positions, from which to think through (and think out of) the writing of South African English literature in the contemporary moment. It asks what is refracted at the fictive moment in several novels where human knowledge and certainty breaks down, and what the affective capacity might be of a non-intentional reading of this literature that in its passivity acknowledges the intrinsically indiscernible nature of various states of Otherness. My contention is that a critical examination of representation in the South African cultural imaginary must necessarily involve an interrogation of the ceaselessly fraught dialogical encounter between self/selves and Other that speaks through local narrative arts and their engagement with the large and immediate canvas of South African history. As Paul Celan writes, language has to "pass through its own answerlessness" ("Bremen Speech" 391). The language through which the self articulates itself always-already speaks into a lacuna occasioned by the dialogical encounter.

This lacuna is invariably situated at the point where communication becomes impossible. In the novels which form part of this study, the attempt to span this void is beset by the temporal distance imposed by loss. Loss presents the self with an impasse, in which what is silent (and/or absent from representation) frustrates the will of the self. In my dissertation, I propose that the representations I examine are often characterised by a *failure* to recognise the ultimately irreducible nature of the Other, such that they proceed as though

the attempt at communication would in itself demonstrate a capacity for redemption. As such, I argue that these literatures are caught in a self-exultant textual economy which generates its own excess. The metastatic efficiency with which this entrapment spreads is what leads Ashraf Jamal to speak of the South African Culture of Letter's "contemptuous disregard for mystery, its fanatical belief in closure, [and] its festering recourse to pain" ("Bearable Lightness" 102). Rather than attempting an ethical relationship that unconditionally affirms alterity, the particular literatures discussed in this thesis construct the ethical turn towards the other as an act that can be learned or instructed through the rituals of loss, mourning and recovery.<sup>12</sup> They also articulate the process of making contact with other selves (or those selves that have ceased to be) as if it were a teleological end in itself.

Thus, in Shaun Johnson's *The Native Commissioner*, we witness the process of living on as a teleological sifting by Sam Jameson through stratigraphic layers of narrative to chart the truth behind the death of his father, the Native Commissioner who lends his title to the novel. The search culminates in the realisation that the Other is part of the constituting act that produces the self. By implication, the author conceives of alterity as that which may be assimilated into discourse. Of course, that act of assimilation is also an act of discursive violence upon the Other: to render the Other in terms of the Self is to destroy the alterity of the Other.

Ultimately, the literature is ceaselessly caught in this performance of its own doubt-affirmation-doubt. While the crisis occasioned by this tendency is undoubtedly problematic, it is not merely that. What of the possibility that this failure, debased though it may be, may fulfil an ethical function by curtailing the self's ability to complete that which must necessarily elude completion? That is, the affirmation itself may emerge from the very space of failure. It is from this idea that my thesis proceeds: might there be ways of writing or

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<sup>12</sup> Here, the 'turn' rises out of failure/stymie as a possibility, minimal though it may be, of ethical action.

reading about encountering the Other through loss/closure that do not seek to apprehend the always-slippery Altermodern dimension of 'South African' character?

In moving toward this particular optic, I consider texts that attempt to make the imaginative leap to an appreciation of the non-substantive dimension in 'South-African-ness'. The works of literature I read here are novels which work against the constraining effect of knowledge-systems, against symbolic containment. From what I have stated, this thesis may appear a work of negation, a work *against*, rather than *of*, knowing, and an engagement with what is never fully present. Certainly, in the four chapters that make up this thesis, my recurrent concern is with the limitations of the reading subject, positioned as we are by the historical moment that conditions any attempt to read outside of it. I propose that thinking through this bind requires an attentiveness of reading in the encounter with that which is anomalous in literature, that which constantly or unconsciously resists what its form compels. Ishtiyahq Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* and Kgebetli Moele's *The Book of the Dead* (2009), for example, both provide alternative entry points, undoing the fixations with binarised temporalities, interrupting or troubling traditional epistemic trajectories and positing instead a method in which "a certain fluidity not available in settled states abounds, which no doubt heightens possibilities for exposure, contest, contradiction, and outright collisions of assumptions and interpretations (Lâm, "Feeling Foreign" 870) I propose in this dissertation that the response of the self when confronted with the silence of the lost Other ought to be based on an affirmation of alterity that proceeds with due care to the ultimately irreducible nature of the task. Here, several theories concerning the work of mourning form vital touch points for this dissertation. As the central texts I subject (I use that word knowingly) to scrutiny deal with loss, and more importantly how the self lives on, survives, or is transformed 'after' this event, I want to argue for a mode of reading these discussions of loss, as they appear in the selected works, as a textualisation of the dialogical relationship between

self and other, in order to realise a more hospitable treatment of alterity. I argue that the absence which is inscribed in mourning, the excess wherein the relational other resides, means that representation can never find closure. Therefore, the work of mourning actively resists closure even as it appears to seek it out.

What, then, is to be done? My argument here is for an ethics of reading in which “a certain fluidity not available in settled states abounds, which no doubt heightens possibilities for exposure, contest, contradiction, and outright collision of assumptions and interpretations” (Lâm, “Feeling Foreign” 870). Such an ethics allows a limited and always provisional means of thinking through the double bind that presents itself in the reading of these texts. To be sure, the novels with which the various chapters are concerned evince an understanding of the need to escape the dialectical loop in which they find themselves, caught between an inability to speak and an inability to be silent. Even as they resist speaking, something still remains behind in the unsaid. That irreducible, unknowable ‘something’ is what this dissertation attempts to approach. Of course, to approach the unsayable through language is to always fail to grasp what we seek. Therein lies the paradoxical work of this project: how to approach the unsayable, when the unsayable is that which only manifests in the reader’s moments of inattentiveness?

The texts under discussion, Diane Awerbuck’s *Gardening at Night* (2004), Anneli Botes’ *Thula Thula* (2011), Shaun Johnson’s *The Native Commissioner*, Kgebetli Moele’s *The Book of the Dead*, Mark Behr’s *Kings of the Water*, J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime*, and Ishtiyaq Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret*, were selected because they each stage an engagement with alterity that occurs via the cipher of the past. While there is a considerable difference in the presentational surfaces of these texts, my argument is that the notion of a lost Other which simultaneously demands and eludes representation is a constant feature across these works. In Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret*, for example, the characters find themselves in an aporia between

speech and silence occasioned by the inexplicable disappearance of Issa. Not only is Issa's disappearance a staging of the loss mentioned above, but each of the surviving characters seeks to find out more, as if by speaking more they would be able to solve the mystery of Issa's disappearance. The resolution of the novel suggests that speech cannot uncover alterity in a successive movement, but instead obscures that which it attempts to elucidate. Similarly, Michiel Steyn, protagonist of Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water*, finds that 'belonging' – an axiomatically important marker of identity within the *plaasroman* genre of which this text is a modern recasting – becomes a complex concept when so many of the grounding points upon which it (belonging) rests are rendered unknown.

The conclusion I draw from this study of the ethical relations at work in these novels is that 'the Other' cannot be inscribed in any form of dialogical relation to the self: it is not only different to, but always more than, the same. I argue that the transcendence of alterity might be grounded in this very excession. To say this is also to note that the excess is that which cannot be anticipated. It unsettles precisely because, as the textual encounters in the works of Behr, Coetzee, and Shukri demonstrate, the other cannot be grasped within a priorly formed system of linguistic conceptuality. Shukri's novel, for example, is constituted by a series of individual narrations from those characters directly affected by the disappearance of Issa, the absent-protagonist of the novel. Each of these narratives presents a recollection of Issa, but each has no ability to recover him or to trace his whereabouts with any certainty. His disappearance prompts a katabatic descent<sup>13</sup> into memory by those who knew him – but their efforts to come to an understanding of what has happened to Issa end collectively at the precipice before the lacuna.

The same might be concluded of each of the prosopopeial characters – The Native Commissioner, John, and Issa, respectively – at the centre of the texts by Johnson, Coetzee

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Maurice Blanchot's discussion of the task of memory via the Myth of Orpheus ("The Gaze of Orpheus": 99–104). Orpheus is tasked with a responsibility which he must necessarily fail to fulfill.

and Shukri: the self's constant attempts to understand these Others – which is ironically *both* a will to knowledge and power *and* a desire for the other in its otherness<sup>14</sup> – constantly enacts the story of Orpheus' descent to the underworld to recover Eurydice. Like Orpheus, the self's attempts to know more result in failure, surely demonstrating the limitless excess of alterity, preventing closure even as other actors seek it out.

My reading of these texts proposes that language's failure to represent what it seeks to represent, its failure to capture presence, functions as a check which circumscribes the self's imperialistic freedom. The absence which inheres to language, the excess which cannot be said but must be said, means that language can never be total, nor can representation find closure. For this reason, the other can never be fully represented and therefore possessed; it remains transcendent and unsaid. However, rather than viewing this point as a site of impasse, I argue that it presents the possibility of a third way – towards historical ambiguity, towards a flux that is neither nostalgic nor future-driven.

The primary method of analysis involves a reading of several narrative art forms, which articulate gradations of 'South-African-ness' through a poetics of loss/closure. The list is not comprehensive, but rather attempts to examine as aleatory a selection of works as is possible within the thematic rubric of the dissertation. To this end, I have selected examples from the field of contemporary South African fiction, but will also reflect on other art forms where necessary. These texts are notable for the ways in which they trace the contours of a diverse South African-ness abutted by loss and mourning: Johnson's novel is no more and no less a narrative of South African experience than Shukri's, although they stylise their subject matter differently. They need not be aware of each other as cultural artefacts in order to fulfil the loose criterion I have put in place, because it is precisely this alienation from one another that guarantees their performance of 'South African-ness'.

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<sup>14</sup> According to Levinas, for all the self's attempts to contain otherness by reducing down into intelligible concepts and language (what Levinas calls the Said), it cannot do so, for the exposure to the face of the other (an encounter which Levinas calls the Saying) jars the self and dissolves the basis of its pride ("Philosophy" 107).

I argue in the dissertation that it does not suffice, when discussing so broad a span of cultural area, to impose a cautious restriction in dates, cordoning off an arbitrary 'so far' for discussion. Thus, while there is a theoretical restriction in time-period of 2000–2010 upon the textual forms under discussion, in practice, these texts overflow their boundaries. This is because the selected texts are always in dialogue with those texts that have come before and those texts which come after.

The rationale guiding my choice of texts is the notion that there are various works of literature which have fallen under the radar of South African literary criticism over the past decade. The choice of what is incorporated into the critical canon and what is left out is of course deeply imbricated in structures of control and authority. Thus, the texts I have selected are (with the obvious exception of the Coetzee work) lesser-studied narratives which seek to enter the political through the personal in ways that use the interplay between representation and excess as sites for examining loss and mourning. On their own, they may not be capable of accommodating a rigorous interrogative critique. However, read in a way that focuses less on a rational accounting of the text and more on the indistinct and elusive phenomena that encircle the reading act, they allow a closer approach to the issues raised. To be sure, the selected texts are notable for the ways in which they portray the task of coming to know the Other and the self through the effects of loss. This engagement with loss may take the form of a re/assertion, reclamation, displacement, or a resultant complication of selfhood. I perform an attentive reading of the many fragmented images of South African culture that emerge through the depictions of loss and its aftermath in the chosen texts, a reading which seeks to present the texts as always more than simply repositories of subjective human experiences. I argue that this approach permits theoretical space for a less restrictive map of enquiry, one which displays the nuances and contradictions implicit in the crafting of identity.

Throughout this thesis, I invoke the figure of ‘the reader’ as the generic experiencing subject in the encounter with the work. I am aware that to do so is to invite questions of who such a reader might be. My argument, as it is developed throughout this thesis, is that the reading subject is discursively situated by what she reads. The subject engages in an experience that is at once singular and situated in language/culture. Of course, to speak of ‘the reader’ in this way is to engage with one of many possible stories of reading, at the risk of occluding several others.

It is not my intention to argue that the hermeneutic practice I adopt allows a closer approach to ‘the truth’ of the South African experience than others: that experience cannot be reduced to any organising principles. Such an attempt is ultimately pointless. If anything, I am aware of the necessarily tenuous ground on which many of my assertions rest, aware of how this work is ineluctably implicated in the very exercise it seeks to write against. This tenuousness, however, points to the incompleteness of totalities, the insufficiency of their closure. The radical negative insight which forms my reading praxis interrupts the assumed finitude or completion of cultural theories. That is, by challenging its own foundational claims, it challenges the nature of all such claims.

## Chapter 1

### **Amfortasian Wounds: Mapping South African Headspace**

*We know the meaning of the singular thing only so long as we content ourselves with knowing it in the midst of other meanings: isolate it, and all meaning drains away. It is not the thing that counts, you see, only the interaction of things; and, of course, the names . . . (Banville, Doctor Copernicus, 23)*

This thesis seeks to map the distinctive ways in which South Africans in a particular historical moment tell stories about themselves. In doing so, it stitches together a selection of literary texts whose differing trajectories give voice to certain beliefs about what it means to undergo human experiences (death, most notably) while existing within a South African milieu. With this propaedeutic chapter, my aim is to examine why it is that this storytelling is pre-eminently positioned within the axes of South African literatures, rather more prominently than in other art forms.

My argument proceeds from a self-negating space, by proposing the existence of an Unavowable community. It is clear that to invoke the idea of a unitary South African literary culture in all but the most tentative of senses is to risk elision and approximation. That is, there is a risk of championing the order of the Same, where the endless and unknowable difference is reduced, fenced off, and made quantifiable and exchangeable via a narrow medium. As such, there is a need for vigilance where such declarative terms are deployed, particularly as they attempt to expose the dynamics of who views and who is viewed, who controls and what is controlled, who looks and who or what is looked at, and what is determined in this act of looking.

The argument in this chapter does not suggest that there is one unified community of thought where the literary occurs in this country. Instead I propose the existence (an existence without existence) of an inoperative community founded on the unknowable, a community which may be glimpsed in the intimations of alterity that speak through its productions. To term this community the South African Culture of Letters is to give a name to the context of

its occurrence, rather than to fix the narrative practice itself. This is because the field is a vast and diversely populated space in which the local and the transnational mix and mingle in so many various narratives that to attempt to fix some contained, readable category of South African literature is to come to the same illumination of futility that strikes Giambattista Marino in Borges' "A Yellow Rose."<sup>15</sup> In this regard, my thesis isolates a very particular dimension – English South African writing – in what is a dense and multi-layered field, for critical interrogation.

That dimension is one that has seen a great deal of change and development in the transitional years post-1994. These years saw a marked shift away from literature that was concerned with displaying an urgent fidelity to the political history that was being made at the time, and more concerned with the telling of personal narratives. In this regard, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of the late 90s has been remarked upon as an important milestone in promoting the importance of individual narratives, particularly those accumulated unheard, marginalised and oppressed stories. Hailed as the "impulse of an entire nation finally bringing its past into proper perspective" (Jacobs, "Life Writing (South Africa)" 878), the surge of personal narratives in the years after 1994 was widely seen as a movement of reinvention for the nation.<sup>16</sup> That much of this emergent fiction took its pulse from the TRC, with its focus on the recent past, was evident in its focus on the turn inward and the need to give account as potent guiding trajectories. Evoking Walter Benjamin's assertion that storytelling is "the locus classicus of the theory of forgetting" ("The Work of the Translator" 413), South African literatures in the aftermath of the TRC sought to play a

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<sup>15</sup> "Then the revelation occurred: Marino saw the rose as Adam might have seen it in Paradise, and he thought that the rose was to be found in its own eternity and not in his words; and that we may mention or allude to a thing, but not express it; and that the tall, proud volumes casting a golden shadow in a corner were not — as his vanity had dreamed — a mirror of the world, but rather one thing more added to the world." Borges "A Yellow Rose" 38.

<sup>16</sup> See Njabulo Ndebele's comment, in the early days of the TRC, quoted in Michiel Heyns' "The Whole Country's Truth": "And so it is that the stories of the TRC seem poised to result in one major spin-off, among others: the restoration of narrative. In few countries in the contemporary world do we have a living example of people reinventing themselves through narrative" (quoted in Heyns 44)

role in the wider nation-building process by bringing closure to its wounds via the process of storytelling.

What emerged during this period was a variety of narratives that attempted to tell individual, as opposed to communal, truths about the past. These truths were often traumatic in their content, as what was previously hidden or repressed was brought into the light of the present. Texts such as Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998), Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006), or Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) were exemplars of this trend. These "wounds become writing" (Jabès, *The Book of Questions* ii), took place in the interlocking clasp of the Apartheid/Anti-Apartheid past and the transitional/post-transitional moment, as healing and national solidarities were sought out. In as much as there were fruitful gestures at healing and resolution in the works of fiction, others suggested that the path onwards might not be so easy to forge. As such, the term transition refers here more to a zone of activity in which the narratives above played out, than to any unified movement of transformation.

There is, of course, a bleeding between these categories such that fixing a time frame becomes a matter of slippage: the post-transitional as the aftermath of the after. Krog's text is written in contemporary stride with the TRC, while Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* was published in 2001, and Wicomb's published in 2006. Nevertheless, in the decade that elapsed since 2000, there was a shift, a change in texture from texts such as these, to other texts where the relation to the dense, stagnant political incident of Apartheid was tangential at best. These are texts which inhabit a landscape of afterness, a place that is often "outside of any Apartheid/anti-Apartheid narrative" (Chapman, *South African Literature* 1). They are texts where the national and the local are succeeded by the transnational and the global, or altered in their expression to become new modalities. In the work of writers like Imraan Coovadia, Mandla Langa, Niq Mhlongo, Shubnum Khan, Anne Landsman, Zinaid Meeran, Kgebetli Moele, Kopano Matlwa, Yvette Christianse, there are new and more diverse registers, different

conventions of form to the well-established ones of the past, and “less grim parameters” (De Kock, “Does SA Lit Still Exist?” 77) than before. In these texts, we are confronted with changed and changing subjects in situations that exceed the specific concerns of the political, or engage with more contemporary concerns, which are well-documented. Where the Apartheid past is reconsidered, as in Peter Harris’s *In a Different Time* (2008) or Chris Marnewick’s *Shepherds and Butchers* (2008), other more unfettered logics of engagement with the past are discernable. It is a literature of afterness, with all the complexities that accompany the position of having survived, having lived on, or having succeeded something.<sup>17</sup> It embraces its status in the present while holding within its connotative field the terror of the unrealised future and the still-glowing hope of the transition.

However, while this shift has been a desirable and noticeable contribution to the deepening of the South African cultural terrain, it is my contention that this contemporary South African literature, in the full diversity of its afterness, is haunted inexorably within itself by an aporetic literature which returns obsessively to matters of silence, of absence and of death. This post-transitional literature tells stories through registers of alterity: of the incommensurable; of the unknowable; or of encounters with the radical Otherness of the Other. The stories I have selected for analysis are contemporary texts in which excess is the focal unsayable, the visible invisible or the absent presence at the centre. In J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* (2009), Mark Behr’s *Kings of the Water* (2009), Ishtiyag Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret* (2005), and the other novels that are utilised in this thesis, there is an attempt to give account, to give meaning and texture to aporetic experiences, and as such there is, in each case, a significant aporetic event around which the narrative is developed. The works question what remainder is left in the afterness of the moment, what ghostly echoes from the past continue to speak themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> See Gerhard Richter’s *Afterness: Figures of Following*, 2.

My central preoccupation, then, is with the occurrence or manifestation of what might variously be termed excess, the Invisible, or the ineffable, in these works. Undergirding my approach as I describe it above is a desire to examine why the story of the post-transitional moment, in this particular iteration, is so often told within registers of alterity: of the incommensurable; of the unknowable; or of encounters with the radical alterity of the Other. These narratives, variously told, are South African literature's bad conscience. They are the intransitive within the post-transition's movement. They appear time and time again, even as other more diverse South African literatures, such as the ones named earlier, bring themselves into being.

My argument in the chapters that follow is that these motifs continue to stage and mediate the representation of the self's responsibility to the Other. Their creative form has allowed for a conceptual expansion of what it means to inhabit the open-ended, temporal, and always conditional state of being South African in the transitional "now" moment, a moment that always fails to preserve its truth in the act of writing, as per Hegel's demonstration:

To the question: What is Now? , let us answer, e.g. Now is Night. In order to test the truth of this sense-certainty a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth; a truth cannot lose anything by being written down, any more than it can lose anything through our preserving it. If now, this noon, we look again at the written truth we shall have to say that it has become stale.<sup>18</sup>

The 'now' moment in this post-transitional contemporary literature is always preserved or frozen as the 'has-happened', an empty gesture to a point in the passage of time that always slips away. To say this is to point to the presence of fissures in meaning at the very surface level of these novels, where the 'now' moment "is something other than the one pointed to, and we see that the Now is just this: to be no more just when it is" (The 'now', the contemporary moment, is the always-already happened).

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<sup>18</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 60.

It can be seen from this that the stable self-containing system of ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’ are more fruitfully collapsed into a new temporal model that foregoes a linear, teleo-chronological path, the better to do justice to the disordered play of time in these works. The novels I have selected are all concerned with the moment of afterness – they recall the Benjaminian notion of the *Nachleben*: survival; living on; living after; returning after the disaster; afterlife; a strong sense of labouring to find a future, but being borne back ceaselessly into the past of the lived moment.<sup>19</sup> They use storytelling, giving account, as a way of unstitching the aporias of the past.

Implicit in this line of thinking is the understanding that storytelling is a form of expression that has significant symbolic weighting for South Africa. It has been commented on in various quarters that South African literary culture, for so long located and given agency by the ostensible need to document the “larger” historical circumstances of the time, has struggled to shake off the primacy of history. To argue that South African literary culture ‘has failed to access the self-reflexive moment’, a claim provocatively deployed by Ashraf Jamal, might risk over-generalising. But Jamal’s claim captures a type of disappointment, a palpable sense that things are not, or not quite, as they should be.<sup>20</sup> It is a sense of disappointment characterised by Simon Critchley as a sense that “something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed. One feels that things are not, or at least not the way we expected or hoped they might be” (*Very Little* xvii). In this case, the idea that South Africa’s English literary culture has failed to access the self-reflexive moment follows from the conception of the rainbow nation as that idealised space in which individuals can move frictionlessly towards self-knowledge. This conception, which Jamal elsewhere characterises

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<sup>19</sup> Pace F. Scott Fitzgerald: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (*The Great Gatsby* 115).

<sup>20</sup> Jamal proposes, in a later paper that “this disaffected mood [. . .] has never satisfactorily addressed a latent sensation that South Africa as a country suffers *the unease of never having begun*. (“Bullet Through the Church” 16)

as “a cultural transparency: *see where we have come from; see where we now are; see where we are going*” (Jamal’s emphasis, “Bullet Through the Church” 11) is an idea that presumes a knowable community. It is also an idea that is undermined by the spectral presence, the echoing voice that constantly calls from the past, the erased non-presence that slips into the folds of time as it extends ever onwards.

And so this project is in part an attempt to trace this nagging disappointment that dogs the South African literary imaginary, a failure that has at its root an enduring faith in the possibility of finitude. I tentatively speculate that any perceived failure is to be located in the ways this country’s literary culture has attempted fruitlessly to access its self-reflexivity, as it has sought to find a transcendent voice for its selves in the complex context of a shifting historical moment. If we were to argue that South African literary culture is in the thrall of something inchoate yet powerful, invisible yet pervasive, would there be anything fruitful in attempting to trace the contours, the presencing of the unknown at the boundaries of the known? How would such a tracing be conducted?

It is around this question that my thesis is framed. While Jamal’s approach is to reject the fraught narrativising of Coetzee and the elegiac/tragic tone of authors whose works focus on the aporetic encounter, my contention is that by following the subliminal path through these works’ negotiation of the aporetic encounter, we may glimpse a way out of the bind of disappointment. The texts that are examined in this thesis are a step away from the “clear-if-complex identities, resolved-if-unfinished stories, [and] fulsome-if-attenuated tensions” Jamal perceives in much of the literature written in the nation’s name (“Bullet Through the Church” 19). My argument is that the radical inconclusiveness – the refusal of meaning – in the works I examine in the other chapters trips up the movement of disappointment Jamal speaks for. They frustrate conventional forms of reading, which emerge as too formulaic or prescriptive. A different response is needed, a tracing that reconstructs the meaning of the

meaninglessness, or a means of “conceptually communicating that which refuses conceptuality and communication” (Critchley, *Very Little* xxiii).

My approach, as it appears here, is to tap the fictive impulse as it appears in the selected works. The works I have selected are not meant to be taken singularly as micro-points on a map of South African literatures, or to be read simply as smaller components of a large picture. Instead, what I attempt is an aleatory gesture, beyond the veil of critical engagement that serves as a directive for my procession through these works. Through close readings of texts that are disconnected and divergent in theme, I draw out the network of metaphors, allusions, silences, corrosions and omissions that anchor the narrative process of these works. There is a conceptual ‘looseness in the mechanism’, as Blanchot would term it, that I use deliberately for the free play that is essential to this project. An inhabiting of the silences, breaks and ruptures, and a stress on the always-conditional, an approach that subverts the impinging authority of the interpretive statement, and the confidence in a teleological/causal order that underpins it. It allows us to enter a realm where, in Blanchot’s words, “the void becomes an achievement [...] and perhaps thought shows through” (Jabès, *From the Book* xxvi).

It follows that the tracing to be conducted is an abyssal journey, one that requires a new way of thinking through that proceeds without destroying the enigmatic nature of these works of literature. These, to be sure, are texts that require a mismeasure of response from the reader, a renunciation of explicit theoretical cohesion (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 18). That response takes the shape of a ‘distanced nearness’, to take a phrase from Adorno, which I believe allows us to perceive the complex contours of this haunting literature. To read in this way is to work against the ineluctable and unavoidable movement of intelligibility. Edmond Jabès characterises this metaphorically as the reader’s

unconscious refusal to enter any house directly through the main door, the one that by its dimensions, characteristics and location offers itself proudly as the main entrance,

the one designated and recognised both outside and inside as the main threshold. To take the wrong door means indeed to go against the order that presided over the plan of the house, over the layout of the rooms, over the beauty and rationality of the whole. But what discoveries are made possible for the visitor! The new path permits him (sic) to see what no other than himself could have perceived from that angle. (*From The Desert 3*)

To be sure, these are books which, to borrow a turn of phrase from Michael Chapman (*South African Literature* 10), instantiate the manner in which the traumatic “then” and the post-traumatic “now” retain symbiotic power over the construction of the self. They record the estrangement of knowledge that occurs in the unsettling instant of the aporetic encounter. In the subsection that follows, I discuss this encounter as it occurs in the literature. In particular, I consider the meaning that emerges in the writing of the aporetic.

### **The Demiurge**

The texts I utilise demonstrate that trauma, or the traumatic encounter, bequeaths a propensity to return to the scene or sight of this trauma. In each of these texts, we are made aware, in a Blanchotian sense, that the traumatic event is always erased, always subject to disappearance. When a loved one is lost, or a traumatic rupture occurs, the event is always recorded in memory as a gap, a lost moment that must be recovered. It is an aporia that demands to be supplemented. That supplementation occurs through the retelling or recounting of events around the trauma, invariably events from the country’s past that somehow have a bearing on the topical moment. These are all texts in which the South Africa of the old dispensation is returned to, with the ordinary social detail of life in those times being subject to a raking-over in narrative in order to, in the words of J.M. Coetzee, “tell an essential truth about the self” (“Confessions” 252).

In a local sense, the afterness of the great symbolic overturning of Apartheid, and the narrative-generating work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have occasioned a

noticeable shift away from the oft-uttered “When do we get there?” mode of reasoning, towards a contemplative “Where/What/Who is here?” framing. This shift is described by Shane Graham as “a collective sense of loss, mourning and elegy, as well as a sense of disorientation amid rapid changes in the physical and social landscape” (*South African Literature* 1). That loss can occur, that human life is annulled so easily that we can lose or be separated or estranged or turned away from other people is reason enough for this sense of loss (Butler, *Precarious Life* xvii). It is through the aporetic encounter with the lost other, these texts aver, that we feel most keenly a sense of the self’s precarity.<sup>21</sup> But this narcissistic apprehension on its own is not a sufficient condition for establishing an interpersonal ethics. In a Levinasian sense, this interpersonal ethics must begin with an awareness of the precarious life of the Other (Butler, *Precarious Life* xviii). And so, the narrative unfolds, drawn along by the undertow of the desire to glimpse the face of the lost Other.

That desire brings about a community of narratives which are an attempt to hear beyond what we can hear, and which enact a decentring of the self. In the shards of their images, we are invited to discern the invisible, to glimpse for a brief moment the uncanny or the ineffable, as it disappears into its Orphic unintelligibility. They are works that suggest the impossibility of distilling or crystallising the inchoate nation. In their relation to excess, a relation that is always fragmentary, always incomplete and always-already inadequate in the moment of its realisation, they evoke Harry Levin’s suggestion that “[t]o live through such a period of change is to be confirmed in the realisation that the word ‘contemporary’ in its literal meaning signifies ‘being temporary together’” (*Memories of the Moderns* 18). These are contemporary texts, as the title of the thesis avers, and they are texts in which the present always comes as the aftermath of an elsewhere that is lost to us, this loss leaving us to question how we might move forward in the wake of what we now know. These haunted

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<sup>21</sup> See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* 1–19, 128–153.

works are caught in an endless movement of trauma and after-trauma that more often than not circles back over ground that has been covered before. From this irresolvable non-movement comes the title of this chapter: these novels exhibit Amfortasian wounds, traumas that cannot be resolved or healed and thus propel a restless, endless narrative-making that focuses on the trauma that cannot be consigned to the past.

This prolific story-making involves a degree of risk. In attempting to give texture to the uneven state of afterness, the work risks disappearing into its own elsewhere, being subsumed in solipsism or caught in the brambles of its inconsolable desire for fullness and resolution, as Amfortas is absorbed by the irresolvable agony of his wound. Writing the ordinary/everyday experience of the self, the writer also risks betraying that ordinariness by portraying it as a synecdochal miniature of a bigger picture, the intimacies readable as fractal conditions. The work is at constant risk of being beset by an ethically vacuous redemptive impulse.

We in our turn are also at risk of being swayed by the redemptive impulse, if we are tempted to scour the work for its salvific conclusions. If we have moved away from the belief that illocutionary force<sup>22</sup> is the pre-eminent prerequisite for literature emerging from the South African cultural milieu, there is still a perceivable need for literature that affirms: however unconventional the text may be, and however unsettling, there is still a normalising drive that speaks itself in the appreciation of these works as contributing something important to the task of representing the irreducible, frail, inexplicable non-state of being 'South African'. 'South African-ness' in all its intangible-ness becomes the expository agent. The irony lies in the anti-constructedness of the construction: South African-ness affirmed by (and in) its incommensurability.

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<sup>22</sup> Illocutionary force is the emancipator power of narratives to create new forms of power to fight back against past and present injustices.

The selected works dance on the margins of this risk in varying ways, therefore “redeeming us from the temptations of redemption” (Critchley, *Very Little* xxiv). My claim in this thesis is that these works return us to the inescapable presence of the Unavowable or incommensurable about our society. This movement of return, always frustrated, often stymied or problematic in its iteration, is the undertaking of these novels. They invariably involve a death, or a disappearance – some central, disruptive event or set of events around which the work is constructed. The ordering form of the book provides the reader encountering the work with the means to follow this process of making sense. Even in the case of the texts examined here, where narrative is treated perfunctorily, or subject to disordering rhythms and cadences, the narrative thread endures as a means of proceeding, even if that procession is a constant returning or looping back to the point of commencement.

These texts, which deal in varying ways with the aporetic, each require a reading that is open/hospitable to the invisible, a reading that is as much an unwilled ‘act’ of listening for the unsayable as it is following the sayable narrative. It must also be said that each of the texts I use in this thesis is remarkable for the ways in which they recount, not only the narrative that occupies the space of the text, but the work of writing as well. The writers in each case are straining to say something, to master their writing and place it at the service of the narratives they are creating. These are books in which the silences, indeed the very whiteness of the pages, reverberates and throws up ghostly echoes around the text itself. As a reader, part of my task is to follow in the writer’s footsteps, being attendant to the varying and different ways Coetzee, or Shukri or Johnson draw out the void and silence that lurk in their writing. To read in this way is, *qua* Jabès, “becoming aware of a scream”, the stifled scream of the unanswerable traumatic disruption the author is attempting to give an account of. It is to approach the work as a site of “silent tears” of Amfortasian wounds “in a world torn with departures” (Jabès, *Jabès Reader* 13), “the place of unending questions, of

fragmented speech [. . .] and of a writing forever circling back on itself” (Jabès, *Jabès Reader* 11).

It is in this way, perhaps, that the afterness of the after may be read: not the futile act of trying to pin down an ultimately irrecoverable meaning, wherein the reading and the theorising it engenders are mechanisms of erasure; but instead the acceptance of the narrative as ruined, incomplete, fragile in its aporetic surfacing<sup>23</sup>. It is a standpoint that is always, in an Adornian<sup>24</sup> sense, impossible, a standpoint of impossible redemption (a redemption without the Orphic transgression of Otherness), but one that refuses to remain unthinkable and thus demands taking up. That taking up is, in a sense, a self-undoing practice, a blind reading akin to groping blindly through a darkened chamber. In the next section of this piece, I address this blindness as it presents itself in the texts to be examined. I suggest a means of reading from a different relational vantage point, an ethics of reading grounded in incompleteness.

### **Literature and the Sense of an Event**

*Without language nothing can be shown. And to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible.* – Maurice Blanchot (*The Writing of the Disaster* 23)

Francois Brunet speaks of a “post-Romantic advent of literature as the culturally sanctioned expression of the creative self.” While South Africa’s cultural capital has demonstrated exceedingly well its ability and willingness to make forms its own, to empty them out and invest them with different meanings, and to use every available cultural dimensions in which to re/present the varying and manifold occurrences of everyday life, it is seemingly to literature, *ab ovo*, that the most distinctive tasks of documenting, mapping, re/telling and re/inventing new creative narratives of self has fallen. The idea seems to be that in harnessing

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<sup>23</sup> See Blanchot’s assertion that “the demand to write, does not struggle against presence in favor of absence, nor for it in pretending to preserve it or communicate it” (*The Step Not Beyond* 32).

<sup>24</sup> See Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 247; 283.

literature as an imaginative act in order to give account of ourselves, we are accessing something more creative than other textual mediums, a horizon of possibilities more unlimited than that presented by other mediums.

Why should this be so? Or, to phrase the question another way, what is it about literature that distinguishes it from other forms of art? Many of the thematics pursued in the transitional and post-transitional literature of South Africa are transmutable: they can be transported to the media of film or music without difficulty. Is there anything, then, particularly provocative in acts of literature that compels us to privilege it above other art forms as a means of telling our stories? Does its structuring, ordering nature provide a more accommodating place for the re/telling of different selves? These questions form a ring around a more localised question which appears to nullify itself at the moment of its instantiation: are certain forms of cultural expression seen as better-suited to shaping the nation's identity? The written word in its embodied form is largely monochromatic. It seems, at face value, an inadequate medium for truth-telling. Its inadequacy is one of form: compared to music, film, or other forms of public culture, literature seems, on the surface, a less suitable servant of variousness. It is a received form – a condition of afterness – in all its post-Apartheid and transitional iterations, certainly: the idea of the redemptive confessional narrative is neither new nor unique to the 'South African condition'. For example, the struggle of self-disclosure witnessed in Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water* is preceded by Rousseau's truth-telling narrative in *Confessions*.

And yet, despite these shortcomings, the novel form provides a mode of re/presenting relational connectivities between self and other that has dominated cultural output in this country. As a mode in which to map the ways in which selves are made, "their superficial unity and hidden fragmentation" (Smith, "The Limited Circle" 1), or for investigating the porous border between self and Other, literature has certainly carved an eminent place for

itself in our cultural consciousness. The novel works, and works *well*, as a means to talk about alterity and the ways in which silenced or erased voices are willed into representation, because the literary use of language therein amplifies the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the word. The novel form allows one to approach the vast and complex processes of human inner life, to draw it out and give shade and perspective to its form, and to show off the sedimentary processes of time. Its methods allow for an illumination of the interior life of the subject in ways more finely textured than other narrative forms. In Anneli Botes' novel *Thula Thula* (2011), say, the novel form allows the author to show off the effects of involuntary memory in advancing the narrative.

Of course, that process is frustrated in the novels I examine, where narrative teleology is constantly frustrated, and where narrative itself proceeds haltingly, hesitantly and in circles. These novels, that is, do the work of narrative with little concern for completeness, always in the conditional mode and always undoing or interrupting the work of revelation. They have each at their centre a rupture in the nature of being that allows us to glimpse, however briefly, the uncanny. It is this sense of the uncanny that draws one further into Coetzee's *Summertime* or Shukri's *The Silent Minaret*: the nature of its indescribability fascinates the reading subject. We are reminded of Blanchot's words when he states that "the in-adequacy of language runs the risk of never being sufficiently inadequate . . . otherwise we would have been satisfied with silence long ago" (Blanchot *Orpheus* 129). We are moved to grasp further at the ungraspable, to seek more information about the insubstantive materiality of the unsayable.

To say this is again to emphasise how the novels examined here point beyond themselves, beyond what they say, to what they *cannot* say. In doing so, they inscribe a form of distance between themselves and the reading subject, resisting the totalising impulse of the reading event. But, crucially, this movement of estrangement beckons to the reader even as

the work retreats from interpretation. That is to say, the distance of the work invites a new sort of proximity, a proximity premised on what remains once “we learn to shake off the delusions of meaning and achieve meaninglessness” (Critchley *Very Little* xxiv). In the estrangement of her blind groping with the lack of meaning that occurs in these texts, the reading subject cannot but glimpse the uncanny, the non-presence of that which is indeterminate. In doing so, the reading subject is rendered passive in her encounter with the novel’s impersonal alterity. The reader of the work is drawn into a distanced nearness with it, a relationship that avoids swamping the alterity of the work beneath the ordering impulse of the familiar: rather than identifying the work with herself, the reading subject has been identified with it. If the reading subject yields the authority of her position to the text, she will have overcome the estrangement between the reader and the literary text.

In this way is the work revealed before us, “with its rifts and crevices” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 27), in its corroded and damaged incompleteness. As described here, the reading act cannot be anything but a non-intentional act: the reading subject is acted upon by the work. To read in this way is to renounce the safe vantage point of the traditional readerly gaze; it is to render oneself blind, and thus vulnerable to that which eludes classification.<sup>25</sup> The reader waits, without knowing what she is waiting for, or if whatever it is she is waiting for will arrive. It is a form of waiting marked by its irremissibility and its impersonal nature. There is nothing to suggest that the arrival of the unexpected will be pleasant; indeed, there is nothing to suggest that what is unexpected will arrive at all. And if the Other should arrive, there is no guarantee that the reading subject will recognise this arrival. Because the alterity of the Other is not comprehensible without the movement of interpretive closure, the moment of the encounter, the Derridaen *Augenblick*, is discontinuous with time, irrecoverable, “refractory to the simultaneity of the present, something unrepresentable, immemorial”

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<sup>25</sup> In Derrida’s terms, we might speak here of the arrivant (*Aporias* 33–35).

(Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 38–50). It is that which interrupts temporal experience, as of an involuntary blinking. The alterity of the Other, I posit, resides in an unilluminable darkness, a past that cannot be brought into the light of the present, yet refuses to rest in the forgettable past. It is that which signals its melancholic presence nonetheless, as catachretic. Because it cannot be recalled, the encounter is that which haunts the self.

My focus in the following section of this chapter is with various novels that self-reflexively stage this haunting by alterity as a psychic wound that does not heal. I briefly show that Diane Awerbuck, in *Gardening at Night*, circles around the aporetic in her novel's exploration of the impossibility of dwelling in one's home. I then argue that in Annelie Botes' *Thula Thula*, a similar impossibility of home is staged, although in this novel the aporetic moment encircled is a long-concealed shameful trauma. In the next book I examine, Shaun Johnson's *The Native Commissioner*, I engage with this novel's radical ambivalence before the idea of redemption. In Kgebetli Moele's *The Book of The Dead*, the possibility of self-knowledge is defeated by the horror of death's impossibility, an impossibility narrativised in this novel's exteriorising of Death.

### **A Rumbling of Things Unknown**

Diane Awerbuck's *Gardening at Night* is a novel about apprehending certainty from the unknowing opacity of subjectivity. The work, an exercise in speculative fiction, is a narrative whose title points to the displacement of the familiar and the everyday that occurs when a traumatic event disrupts the order of the quotidian. In the aftermath of the phantasmatic arrival of the unsayable which is "not quite experience, not yet concept" (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 181), we are pitched into a new and unsettled consideration of what the everyday might be. It is an experience that *Gardening at Night* suggests is characterised by restlessness

and disturbance, a sense of displacement that trouble's one's notion of being at home in the world.

The moment of rupture/disruption occurs early in the novel. Diane leads an ordinary childhood existence in Kimberley. These moments, as we read them, are the few moments of constancy that exist in the text. The narrative's first account of loss comes soon after, when Awerbuck's father leaves the household after an argument with his wife. The young Awerbuck has "the cards of his death" (48) dealt out to her by her mother. This idea that death is a chance event is overshadowed by Awerbuck's sense of the alienation in which her father kills himself, away from his family and alone (48). She finds that "[i]t's weird to read your own surname on a headstone" (48). This moment of death makes her home a space of displacement, forever reminding her of that which she cannot (at this point) imagine: that her consciousness might one day cease to exist. Her father is 'replaced', as it were, by a car salesman who divorces his wife to marry Diane's mother. This Afrikaner interloper to their English world changes the dynamic of their home space, his presence making the home unfamiliar and shaking Diane's faith in the ability of the home space to keep out that which is unwanted.

In this novel, then, trauma inaugurates a loss of innocence. Diane learns that the reason her stepfather is so concerned with class and social standing is that he comes from a stunted, inbred and alcohol-saturated family of 'poor whites' where violence and brutality are an intimate part of the home space: Awerbuck relates in languorous detail how her stepfather is abused as a boy of fifteen by a friend of his mother's (97). The stepfather's family history is percolated with depravities of the sort discussed by Marlene van Niekerk in *Triomf* (Trans. 2004), but here Diane's narration is a somniloquy that slips through the matrix of the perverse. So when her stepfather's father returns from work and murders his mother, Diane narrates this climax of grotesquerie as follows:

... one evening his father came home and he was wild with Klipdrift and rumour. He took out his gun and he pointed it at his grey wife, who sat at the kitchen table with her tea and wearily repeated that she wasn't seeing anyone else. At the sink my stepfather turned around. One day he would stop his father. But this time was different. Maybe it was the smell of sex in the house that burned up into his father's stunted sinuses and made his head ache in bursts like electricity; maybe he was tired of this conversation. So he shot her twice and she slid down the chair on to the floor. He made sure she was dead and then he walked back to The Stationmaster's Arms where his brandy was still on the bar. And he did not ever say sorry. (98)

If Awerbuck's characterisation of the Afrikaans working-class is obedient to the desiccated clichés of novels past, she nevertheless lifts this trope out of "the matrix of fascination/revulsion" (Jamal, "Bearable Lightness" 102) it usually occupies. The perverse is displaced, made ordinary and thus stripped of its over-determining force. Conversely, the ordinary is made strange, filtered through the limiting gaze of the first-person consciousness. Diane's failure to sympathise adequately with this man who has entered her life is exposed when this unknown facet of his life is revealed to her. As the novel progresses, the point that is returned to again and again is that the foreclosing action of the subject's knowledge must be resisted. As one of the mechanisms that enables difference (the 'I' defines itself first by naming the 'you'), knowledge is shown to be an enabler of negation and indifference. By first showing how Diane's attitude towards her stepfather is conditioned by her own limited positioning in culture, and then divesting Diane of the ability to pre-suppose this visitor, the novel suggests that we be attentive to the circumstances that press upon the self in its process of coming-to-be.

Furthering this suggestion is the novel's representational strategy: what we read is presented as being actively mediated by the adult Diane from her point in the present, with droll summations on characters and happenings issuing forth from this voice, cutting in on what is read, intimating to the reader that what we read has been transformed through its appearance in language. Diane is not so much the experiencing self of the traditional bildungsroman as a point of convergence for incidents that have left echoes of their occurrence in the world. The narrative exposes the intentionality behind the ostensible

realism of subject-centred consciousness. If there is a flaw that emerges, one that Awerbuck is not successful in writing out, it is that this laying-bare of the artifice of subject-centred narrative is an attempt to write a non-positional space from which to observe the country. Such an attempt fails because Diane's position is deeply invested in her discursive project. The manifestation of the singular voice is a literary mannerism deployed to coax the reader into accepting that the individual about whom we are reading is somehow just that – individual. Every event that occurs is thus integrated into the framework of the story Diane is telling about her life as it has come to pass. We read these ordinary moments, excised from their temporal context and placed in a new extemporal context, as a supplement that invests the narrator with a sense of selfhood and allows her to give account of herself in the present. Each moment is immediately the subject of a modifying disquisition by this voice, a narrative process that explains away any of the processes of self-doubt or questioning that accrue to human life, with the result that the reader experiences the novel as a suffocatingly impoverished version of some non-existent real.

Nonetheless, what appears at first as a negative resolves itself if the reader abandons the interrogative approach in favour of the 'wrong door'. Such an approach exposes the gaps that exceed the narrating voice's attempts at controlling the grounds of her self-identification. The self's desire to return to itself, to make a home for the self it narrates into being, cannot be fulfilled. The novel thus instantiates a gnawing lack that calls into question the ontological fixity of the assurances through which community (and by extension the self/other divide and its limitations) are perpetuated. For instance, we see that in Diane's life assumptions about the fixity of the home space are constantly overturned or rendered untenable: her father leaves; the stepfather arrives; the stepfather leaves; her mother falls ill. We are returned to the Adornian statement: "Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible." Diane can no longer dwell in the safety of her own knowledge, but is moved to enact a restless identification with

others. As she moves out into the world, her ability to empathise is constantly checked by the unexpected actions of others. Throughout the novel, Diane enacts a series of what Nicolas Bourriaud terms “precarious enrootings” (*The Radicant* 55): she engages with people around her, but these engagements are always limited in their closure by the unexpected alterity of these people. As her interactions throughout this novel show, alterity is that which interrupts the limiting closure of knowledge. The doubt thus occasioned presents itself as a new way of interacting with the world, in which getting to know people only makes them less knowable.

To be sure, all is aleatory in Awerbuck’s work: the bloodied and the bizarre, the pervasive psychic seam that runs through small-town South African life, flits in and out of the narrative. Boys commit loathsome acts of animal cruelty in the dead of night, bludgeoning dassies with cricket bats. One of them falls from the bakkie they are riding in:

he twists around to look at the dark patch where they have just been and falls out of the bakkie, flat on to his back. There is a singing sound in some vertebra below and he is numbed by the laughter and clumsiness of his friends as they haul him up and, in the process, snap his spine completely. (99)

Awerbuck excels at sentences like these, where revelation is deferred and then given over without sublimation. She casts a cold eye to the prevailing notion in her community “that adversity is somehow conducive to spiritual growth” (99). For her, such thinking is a form of fatalism that reveals itself as such in the heavy-drinking, swaggering self destructiveness of the men in her town. This self-blinding logic leads Awerbuck to muse that “[t]here are an awful lot of people in Kimberley who think that tragedies are tests from the almighty” (127). She herself is not prepared to be subjected to this test, finding greater sustenance in learning to live. In a discussion of the ethics of survival, Derrida brings light to exactly this sustenance, which Judith Butler illuminatingly discusses in her essay on the philosopher’s ethics of survival: “survival, *la survie*, is . . . the affirmation of a living being who prefers living, and hence surviving, to death, because survival does not refer to what is left, what remains, it is the most intense life possible” (“On Never Having Learned How to Live” 28).

Death is not easily escaped, however: it is the negating moment that is everywhere, threatening and following Diane as she travels. It strikes the young and the aged alike, and so Diane's movement through the narrative swings between life in its most affirming capacity and death at its most empty. It leaves her to document and to write on, to continue to live. As the narrative progresses, the deaths grow in frequency, but each occasion allows Awerbuck the opportunity to survive on. That is, from each occasion where death is declared, Awerbuck's living speaks itself. If she cannot die, then she can emerge from the deaths she describes.

As such, the text consists of two trajectories: the recounting of death, which enables the narrative to progress, and Diane's living on in the aftermath of these moments. These bands mark the narrative and run past it, exceeding the traditional boundaries of the autobiography by dis-figuring the ostensible one to one relation between experiencing life and the narration of that life. In this respect, the narrative of *Gardening at Night* treats ideas of which no presentation is possible. That is, rather than attempting to sustain the illusion that the events being retold are exactly as they appear, Awerbuck seeks to make the creative nature of her project evident. It is a novel in which dialogue is secondary to action. In this respect, the novel comes closer to the reality that eludes other similar narratives, by not engaging in the artful deceit of the reader. While it does so, it rejects the teleological outcome of autobiography, dismissing it as “[a] miracle cure, a snake oil surprise where we rise from our emotional wheelchairs like Christopher Reeve” (243). Diane sets up a precarious, provisional dwelling for herself in her imagination. From this vantage point, she spectates on her life, caught in a world where contentment exists *pari passu* with a nervous awareness of the fragility of such contentment.

This nervousness finds its expression in the number of life-affirming symbols that proliferate in *Gardening at Night*. Symbols of pop culture from the 80s and 90s compete with

essayistic descriptions – of Rhodes University, of Spur restaurants, of the men that Diane interacts with in her journey towards herself. Meaning is always deferred or diffused through anecdote, through opinion and the musings of the narrating self. “Knowledge is king”, reads Diane’s declaration at the end of the novel, and the narrative overflows with other-centred knowledge, a restless and restlessly creative thinking-through occasioned by the actions of those she comes into contact with.

It is this fidelity to creativity that marks *Gardening at Night* as going against the conventional strictures of autobiographical writing, as James Olney expresses them (*Metaphors of Self* 48). That is, Awerbuck writes in a sustained dream-like poetic register, a register that recalls Blanchot’s concept of the essential night, “the spectral night of dreams, phantoms, ghosts” (Critchley, *Very Little* 36), one that conveys her emotions and feelings in ways that make the narrative irremediably personal. This somniloquent treatment can be glimpsed throughout the novel, undermining the call for fidelity to history, with the false assumptions implicit in that call. What Awerbuck undertakes instead is a willing suspension of reality. She chooses to maintain the illusion of immortality, a retreat from the tyranny of epistemology. In doing so, she resists the insidious force of what Derrida describes as “the seen-before . . . antistubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance” (*Disseminations* 70). The novel’s cursus terminates in a moment of transfixed immobility before the deferred ultimate revelation that death gives texture and contour to living.

This is the crux of the novel: in opening itself up to the uncanny it calls into question the reality of the status afforded to works that purport to be as realistic as possible. It rejects the regimental ordering of memory that seeks to disguise the creative nature of its own processes, and in so doing actually comes closer to the ‘reality’ of individual subjectivity than those narratives which reject, or are compelled to reject, the creative impulse. It is a narrative

in which very little seems to happen, but what *does* happen alters its protagonist's history in ways that are beyond her control.

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Annelie Botes' novel *Thula Thula* is a more katabatic exercise than Awerbuck's novel. It takes as its *historia rerum gestarum* the story of Gertruidah Strydom whose parents Abel and Sarah have just died in a bizarre road accident. The novel opens as Gertruidah returns from their funeral to Umbrella Tree farm, and begins the process of expunging the dead parents from her life and the family farm. She is watched all the while by her love interest Braham, the domestic worker Thandeka, who has worked on the farm since Gertruidah's father was a boy, and Thandeka's daughter Mabel. The narrative swings between the women, each adding their individual fragment to form the jagged, uneven narrative that is *Thula Thula*.

As with Mark Behr, Botes disrupts the notion of the Rousseauian space in the narrative's confrontation of a long-repressed trauma in the life of Gertruidah. The latter longs "to reach back into the safety she remembered from when she was a little girl who still believed in fairies and the tooth mouse, before she'd begun to fear the turning of the doorknob at night" (9). That moment becomes a psychic metaphor to which the novel is bound; an insomniac's fearful vigilance against the unwelcome hallucinatory intrusion of memory signalled by the turning of the doorknob. The novel constantly foreshadows a horrific trauma it is deranged by, but cannot come to terms with. This memory, as we discover over the course of the narrative, is one that cannot be wholly recuperated, but demands representation nevertheless, and so it is delivered to the reader by way of a series of flashbacks. The work's reticence in revealing the nature of the aporetic horror, a horror that is not the death of Gertruidah's parents but what that death allows to echo, calls forth the great risk to the self that comes in the act of giving account. The self risks being emptied out in the act of giving form to the inchoate pain of the traumatic, and the trauma itself risks being

erased under representation. In *Thula Thula*, it is presented to the reader as non-speak, as moments of memory which invade the narrative, circling the primary narrative trajectory.

The seam of memory in this work of fiction is unpicked as Gertruidah mourns for “22 broken years” (9). For Gertruidah, the trauma is an aporia instantiated by the death of her brother Anthony in a tragic accident. That is, it is an unanticipated moment of visitation by the aporetic that is beyond historical time. She questions whether “your life can turn on a knife’s edge in the second when you look over your shoulder at Hermanus, and slowly disintegrate? Can one second last twenty-two years? (78) Her unanswerable questions anticipate the non-intentional nature of the self’s encounter with the alterity of the Other. This alterity cannot be rendered as a knowable object for intentional consciousness, cannot be rendered as presence. The *Augenblick*<sup>26</sup> of this encounter is a lapsed moment or discontinuity that cannot form part of Gertruidah’s retentive past. It is a silence that overflows the gaps and spaces of Gertruidah’s conscience and thwarts Braham’s attempts to get close to her.

Gertruidah, to be sure, has been subject to a gross betrayal of trust and of relational being. Abel, who abuses Gertruidah sexually from the age of four until she is in her twenties, has betrayed the relationality between father and daughter. In a foreshadowing of the fraught relational bonds discussed elsewhere in this thesis, Botes’ novel shows what happens “when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger” (Edkins 4). The narrative cannot be sustained; it folds in on itself and constantly returns back to the lacuna of the disruptive trauma.

Thus, while we read in the novel’s stop-time present about Gertruidah destruction of the farmhouse’s interior, a symbolic emptying out of the troubled/troubling space, the

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<sup>26</sup>Levinas brings this term into critical use; literally, the ‘blink of an eyelid.’

narrative blinks back to various highly charged episodes from Gertruidah's childhood in which her father molests her sexually. These points of deconstruction are placed in the service of Gertruidah's survival, her living on after the long suspended night of trauma. The destruction of the symbols is charged with symbolic meaning: the drawer in which Abel kept the sex toys with which he tormented her is part of a dressing table that belonged to her grandmother (96–97). She works tirelessly, as if by keeping still she would risk being overtaken by the shadow of memory she is trying to evade. However, this movement carries no guarantee of safety, though it proves momentarily protective. She is in a state of perpetual restlessness, and nothing is spared. The farm's kitchen, traditionally a symbolic space of nourishment is emptied: eggs, her mother's prize preserves – all is purged (121). For Gertruidah, everything carries the stain of her abuse. Even the family bible, which she cannot bring herself to burn, she vows to bury in the garden (132). She does not sleep in the house until it is purged and cleansed, preferring instead to sleep in the truck, its attendant shed, or the stone dwelling in the mountains that has been her secret refuge since her early childhood. That Gertruidah is so at home in the mountains, in nature, testifies to her desire for a space uncontaminated by meaning, unmediated by terror.

It is terror that defines Gertruidah's experience of the farm, incarnadining every element of life therein. The reader is aware that all the things Gertruidah destroys are the symbolic minutiae of Afrikaans farm life, and these are inseparable from their contamination. Gertruidah's actions are thus a radical attempt to unfound the base of her trauma. Her estrangement from the farm space as it traditionally exists – the farmhouse as the locus from which identity radiates outwards – is corroded by her stripping away at the layers of meaning and exposing them for the contingent bearers they really are. For Gertruidah, the farm has almost *never* been the space of hospitality, has almost always been a space of threat and risk. Gertruidah has always hungered for a place of her own, but even in the secret stone dwelling

she claims in the mountains, she is not at ease. This refuge must always be kept secret, guarded against discovery. Botes scripts a seismic cracking of the very foundations of the postmodern plaasroman: the notion that selfhood can be forged on the farmland of white South Africa is perverted. For Gertruidah, her sense of self is deranged, ruined and destroyed by the farm. The novel's treatment of this issue is a riposte to the nostalgia that underpins other rewritings of the plaasroman genre. The farm, as it appears here, cannot be recuperated simply through gestures of return: a deterritorialising purging must be carried out in order to cleanse it of its past.

Botes uses the present tense second person to render Gertruidah's actions as close to the reader as possible. In these moments, we follow Gertruidah closely as she moves through the farmhouse at Umbrella Tree, taking in the small but crucial details as she notes them. The effect of this proximity is to increase the jarring nature of the stream of memory that intrudes as she goes about her destructive tasks. Botes does not shy away from the corporeal specificities of the sexual violence meted out to the young Gertruidah: each passage in the novel's stop-time is bracketed by a passage from the past in which the trauma comes into view. What begins as a disordered speaking of memory, intersplined with deranged fairy tales, quickly becomes the horror of graphic sexual and corporeal detail. The deleterious effects of Abel's abuse on her body are made scatologically real in the way the novel lingers over Gertruidah's damaged anal sphincter, a detail that forcibly links Gertruidah with her anally-obsessed mother who is debilitatingly dependent on laxatives. The trauma of this ongoing abuse is "at once singular and never-ending" (Moore, "Speak You Also" 91), an uncanny event that is always-already repeating itself (101). The novel proceeds in a temporally indifferent manner, the novel-present being cross-cut with looping extra-temporal memories that Gertruidah may or may not be remembering in order to empty out her memory of that which happened.

It is here, in this motif of cleaning out, that Gertruidah comes to a point of self-knowledge. The divestiture of her addled past, and the erasure of the falsehoods that accompanied it, are necessary to displace the ‘somnambulistic sureness’<sup>27</sup> that accrues to transitional and post-transitional farm narratives, with their dioramic images of white life in the farm space. In these gestures, there is some kind of truth for Gertruidah, a Bourriaudian seizing of the existing forms of being to make them function on her behalf.

As Gertruidah searches the house, her excavation unveils a gnawing need to understand Sarah’s part in the devastating betrayal of relationality that has been visited upon her for twenty two years. She recollects her fraught relationship with this woman and comes to the conclusion, standing on the fragmented edge of the abyssal, that she did not know who her mother was at all. Through its aporias and silences, whose meaning the reader can only grope towards by gathering what lies at the edges of these gaps, the story accesses her inner being. She is affected, even though she tries to resist it, by her mother’s story, which is revealed in fits and starts by the narrative. In so doing, Gertruidah loses the distance, and the authority to impose distance, of the position she has adopted towards her mother over the years. Sarah’s story steals upon Gertruidah stealthily, without her knowledge. We see that as the narrative progresses and Gertruidah contemplates her mother’s life story, she is taken over by that story and made to question the subject position from which she judges Sarah. “So some things won’t be thrown away after all”, she thinks (132). Gertruidah retreats from her former position, is able to place herself in the feelings of her mother.

Thus, as the narrative progresses we see Gertruidah laying aside items – a wedding photo, a shell saved from a day at the beach – that speak against the foreknowledge she carries with her of Sarah as an uncaring mother. Each item she lays aside confounds her wish to condemn her mother outright. A feeling begins to creep over Gertruidah, a sense that her

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<sup>27</sup> The term is Albie Sachs’s, taken from his “Afterword: The Taste of an Avocado Pear” (145).

mother too has her own tragedy, and this unrecoverable sensation interrupts her desire for vengeance.

Importantly, the work's interruption of Gertruidah's vengeance also implicates its reader. The disruption of surety felt by the protagonist, a sense that disturbs the reader as it disturbs her, results in a form of sympathetic dissonance that checks any uncomplicated identification with it. Even as the reader is impelled by the presencing of Gertruidah's traumatic and abusive experience, causing her to respond sympathetically to the protagonist, she is simultaneously and deliberately discouraged from condemning Gertruidah's parents. That is, the reader is required to read beyond the economy of the text before her, to grope further into the darkened room of the work in order to better perceive what has been misrepresented, silenced or left out.

Aiding Botes' efforts in this regard are the narratives that are threaded into the weave of writing parallel with Gertruidah's actions in the novel's stop-time present, provided by two women who work on the farm. Thandeka and Mabel circle the trauma and gradually disclose information about the Strydom family, the novel emphasising their ambivalent external-internal engagement while Gertruidah carries on with her intensely private ritual of cleansing. Thandeka has been on Umbrella Tree farm since Abel was an infant. It is from her that Gertruidah's inarticulate trauma is given details and shaded in. The reader learns from Thandeka that Abel's depravity can be set down to his patrimony. Abel's father, the original Strydom patriarch, was a cruel man whose favour Abel spent his years fruitlessly trying to earn. Her narrative gives clarity on details that Gertruidah's only glances off: that the seed of Abel's cruelty was planted in his early years. It is also from Thandeka that we learn how Abel served his military duty on the Border as a *recce* and returned a changed man, clutching a string of ears and horrifying stories about killing terrorists (68–70). These are familiar stations in the transitional/post-transitional novel, and it comes with little surprise from the

reader when Thandeka, on the third day of Gertruidah's immolating ritual, tells us the circumstances of Anthony's death, and how the 'accident' is traceable to Abel's masculine pride in his son (236–237).<sup>28</sup> Thandeka's is the voice that speaks out in the novel's darkness.

Thandeka, it emerges, slept with Abel, and the fruit of this illicit union is Mabel, who lives on the farm and provides the third narrating strand. Mabel diverges from being a tragic trope of miscegenation, being a curiously intact figure.<sup>29</sup> Her positioning on the periphery of Gertruidah's narrative partly accounts for this, as does Botes' refusal to depict her in the tragic mode. Crucially, amid the all-pervading tragedy – so tragic as to seem commonplace – of Umbrella Tree farm, the perversion of Mabel's birth is rendered part of the scenery, if not quite normal. She is raised by her mother and Sarah and functions in a mostly externalised role as a voice of reason, drawing Gertruidah out of the katabatic darkness she resides in. Her communication with Gertruidah is a successful employment of the instruction given to Orpheus – she does not look upon Gertruidah, communicating her advice by way of notes left at the boundary of the farmhouse or at Gertruidah's stone dwelling in the mountains.

The three women are all caught in the invasive and destructive libidinal orbit of the Strydom patriarch. Botes plunges steadfastly into a particularly troubling trajectory in works of South African literature, namely the reluctance “on the part of their authors to disentangle themselves from the anxieties surrounding the female reproductive body that were enlisted during the Apartheid era in the service of hetero-patriarchal discourses of racial, and ultimately economic, exclusivity” (Strauss, “Intrusive Pasts” n.p.). The embeddedness of Thandeka and Mabel's erasure within the received discourse of white writing seems a

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<sup>28</sup> There is a parallel here with the Troy Blacklaws' *Karoo Boy* (2004), where the protagonist's brother is struck dead by an errant cricket ball tossed by their father. That novel uses that traumatic incident as an entry point into the stunted, nightmarish world of rural white South Africa. In both these novels, the symbolic death of the favoured son instantiates the other child's banishment from the idyll of home, into the nightmare-world of knowledge.

<sup>29</sup> By contrast, see the character of Popi in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), or Mikey in Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, as examples of the archetype Mabel diverts from.

flagrantly clumsy part of the novel's composition. The reader is troubled by the scant attention Thandeka gives to her own grief: why, we might ask ourselves, is Thandeka so composed in the face of the appalling accident? We know that her husband perished in the same accident that killed Gertruidah's brother. Nor is Thandeka particularly forthcoming on the subject of the incident between herself and Abel that results in Mabel being conceived. In one sense, this character helps preserve the novel's unique alterity, its heccaeity before the reader. But I would suggest that their placement is an authorial concession to the limitations of answerlessness, and its attendant lack of efficacy is thus in some way justified: the story must capitulate to the foreclosures inherent in the novel's form.

In reading the story as it is laid out, with its secrets and unavowable revelations, the reader is made aware that there are problems at work that are of a complex, contradictory and reflexive nature. If the plot's conceit is that Gertruidah's history remains murky and half-concealed, then is the author not betraying the protagonist's fractured selfhood further by placing in the novel two characters whose sole function seems to be to lay bare the narration? On a practical level, the binds of narrative are inescapable: if the tale is to be communicated it must do so through the routines of the novel. However, one could argue that the work would function differently indeed if Thandeka and Mabel were not placed in so didactic a capacity by their author. My contention is that it would not function *less* well, if this were the case. As it stands, the novel seems all too ready to cast aside the aleatory movement of the work, its flight away from the ordering impulse of explanation. Gertruidah's disordered, damaged narrative – a narrative that occupies the disfluent space of history – bumps against the loud history that makes its presence known in Thandeka's explanatory speaking. In creating the opportunity for the reader to access this "secret life" (114) by reproducing the history via a series of flashbacks, has Botes not betrayed the narrative by revealing what seems decidedly anti-revelatory? Thandeka is a particularly contrived and quite unnecessary *deus ex machina*.

It is perhaps unavoidable that Botes as the writer is implicated in the very process her narrative wishes to resist, even as she attempts to create different ways of narrating the aporetic: the power held by the rhetoric of revelation is, to judge from *Thula Thula*, difficult to escape. Taken alone, Gertruidah's narrative offers to the reader only the ceaseless presence of its own mystery, its own irreducible fugue-experience, locating the reader in an experience of the uncanny heightened by Gertruidah's absence of explanation. Without the explanatory context provided by Thandeka, the novel would invite not some illusory possibility of closing down meaning under the aegis of "understanding" what has happened, but precisely a liberatory reading.<sup>30</sup>

Essentially, Thandeka's words, a speaking that attempts to bridge the aporia, to cross the gulf of silence, cannot but fail to do what they attempt to do. By this I mean that Thandeka tries to contemplate the 'damaged life' of the Strydom family from the standpoint of redemption, but this standpoint is an impossible standpoint precisely because there is no external, undamaged point from which to observe. The trauma in *Thula Thula* is monstrously all-encompassing. It engulfs all who encounter it.

As I have argued, Botes' novel also implicates its readers in the traumatic narrative, compelling us to do what the work itself cannot do. That is, it compels us to ask the question long before Gertruidah poses it to herself: "What had made Abel a monster and Sarah too?" (287). The answer seems to readily compose itself before the reader's gaze: Through its composition and unveiling of various objects of fact, *Thula Thula* suggests to the reader that perpetrators of violence and abuse do not act alone or without cause. Indeed, it actively courts the reading that Abel in acting is acted upon, and therefore that apportioning responsibility for his deeds is a complicated matter. The reader, in turn, is impelled to make the reductions that inevitably accrue to the literary imagination. But this initial reading turns out to be

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<sup>30</sup> For Blanchot, "Reading either falls short of understanding or overshoots it" (*The Book to Come* 1).

impertinent. Braham reveals that Abel was never a recce, and so the horizon of expectations which the reader brings to this weighty fact (a fact Gertruidah herself has never questioned until the truth is revealed to her) must be discarded. The domesticating impulse of reading is frustrated: the ostensibly crucial details the work reveals are ultimately unilluminating. The reader has thus circled and returned to *Thula Thula*'s representational problem, which is of course the novel's starting point.

To be sure, this is an inhospitable narrative for the reader. It murmurs its details sullenly, letting slip only enough to add a little more shape and contour to the constantly developing picture. Gertruidah is eternally "terrified of walking the old paths" (276). The reader is impelled further into the dark room, despite the revulsion brought forth by what is uncovered. The novel inscribes proximity in this way, with the reader being made acutely aware of the invasiveness of the interrogative reading. And if such a reading is carried out, the novel then undermines its heccaeity in the afterness of its perception. That is, it addresses the reader with a series of fragmented slipways that suggest the possibility of completion. The urge to auto-complete is thwarted. If the reader is to proceed, she must read against the worldliness offered up by the work, its invitation to read it in series with other work of literature, to bring one's knowledge gleaned from other works to this one. In a Jabèsian sense, she must gain entry to the work by other means, but each reading method remains located in language.

What this novel demands from its reader, I argue, is an intense attentionality to the accumulation of threads and strands that make up the story. This of course differs from the knowing posture of the interrogative reading. The reader of *Thula Thula* is granted access to the contours of Gertruidah's conscience, and is acted upon by the heinous abuses visited upon her by Abel. Certainly, the reader may share Gertruidah's coldness towards her dead parents. However, Gertruidah's limited sympathy – her need to care for her own damaged self – is

juxtaposed with Thandeka's other-centred narrative. In hearing the stories of Abel and Sarah, the reader is able to historicise Gertruidah's abuse, and to realise how her parents, perpetrators though they may be, are themselves victims of a wider abusive system. As I have noted above, in acting against Gertruidah Abel is himself acted on by a wider symbolic discourse that speaks through him. In arguing this, I must emphasise that Thandeka in no way absolves Abel of his personal responsibility: she is rather stating that he is not completely responsible. Thandeka enacts a reading of the situation in which her proximity to the violence enacted on Gertruidah is emphasised. She exhibits a wider sympathy, an unconditional sympathy, which the reader is impelled to follow.

We are returned once more to the notion of the darkened room. The reader must perceive all objects indiscriminately, or risk an inadequate (because partial or biased) reading. It is, of course, an impossible demand to make upon the reader, but this work makes it nonetheless. It asks that we sympathise unconditionally by hearing the stories of both Gertruidah and Abel, that is, both victim and perpetrator. The reader must do as Thandeka does, enacting an ethical sympathy towards Abel that recognises him as being damaged, deformed, in his own way. Critically, Thandeka does not do this at Gertruidah's expense: she is able to sympathise with Gertruidah, and in so doing to identify with her. The space between them is narrowed by Thandeka's own aporia, her betrayal of Samuel and his subsequent death in the accident.

Recounting the day when both her husband and Anthony were buried, Thandeka says " . . . I want to forget. But you cannot just carve out parts of your memory and think that you won't bleed. Although sometimes you don't bleed to death, you just bleed yourself clean" (235). This, it seems to me, is the novel's proposition of what is needed: an excising that is neither neat nor painless: on the contrary, an insuperable excision that cuts out the gangrenous rot of the Amfortasian wound and leaves a raw and shredded presentness. Of

course, then, Gertruidah's near-exsanguinations are necessary for her to find another way of living in the world. If she wishes to establish an ethical relationship with Braham, she must rid herself of a betrayal that comes from the blood (literally). The four days she spends in isolation are a carving out of memory, to be sure, a slicing into the pained psyche in a fatalistic and risky manner. That risk is embodied in the makeshift pyre constructed from the innards of the farm house – the proximity of the fire risks consuming the farmhouse. My thinking here is in line with Babha's when he declares that "the negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where 'presencing' begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (*The Location of Culture* 9).

Gertruidah's conscience is of a piece with the pain that circles it – it is scored and marked with the psychic scars of her past. Each graphic description, every horrific moment of abuse recounted with a narrative ambivalence, demonstrates that the work cannot function in service of the aporetic moment it seeks to call forth from the darkness. It has to proceed by allowing the shadow to creep upon it. With each piece of furniture and each belonging that is added to the heap on the front lawn, the house ceases to hold the meanings that have trapped Gertruidah for so long. The secrets of the past are blasted violently into the present day, and by destroying them brutally and with little explanation, Gertruidah untethers herself from the shameful memory of the abuse inflicted on her. As the furnishings of the inhospitable farmhouse smoulder, she ascends to the stone house once more, an ascent out of the fugue state of the past four days. She quotes Sylvia Plath – a quote that seems to be the novel's animating impulse:

*I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead/  
I lift my lids and all is born again  
(I think I made you up inside my head)(269)*

The narrative ascends from its fugue state, and Gertruidah is able to take upon herself the assertive agency of Plath's final line. It is an awakening, to be sure, one that carries no

guarantees but is, nevertheless, a grasping towards survival, towards the possibility, restless and risky, of living on. Gertruidah is now able to affirm her life, even though that affirmation is enacted with no guarantee that the past will no longer speak itself. This is a point enunciated by Judith Butler: “the yes-saying of affirmation is not based on evidence; it proceeds with indifference to evidence, and it takes the form of the ‘yes’ (“On Never Having Learned to Live” 30).

*Thula Thula* certainly ends with an affirmative yes-saying. That being said, the novel lolls noticeably in its final pages. It gives itself over to the work of revelation all too easily, so that once the plot has been laid blisteringly before the reader the story loses its force and becomes too easily encoded. Put another way, it gives over too much to the order of the Said/sayable. Once the final secret has been made knowable, the narrative seems perilously close to suggesting that revelation (to the self and to the reader) is all that is required to transform the ruined home into a space of recovery. It suggests – with its final image of Braham coming to the farm and the suggestion that they will finally be together – an all too-easy return to a cohesive and recovered selfhood that can confine the acts of violation to the past and gesture forwards to a redemptive future. Her survival is emphatically brought forward and laid before the reader, a redemptive gloss that disingenuously suggests that the stain of trauma is always eventually alleviable: “one day Abel’s image will fade. One day, the clock ticking inside her head will grow silent. One day she will make a beautiful memoir that she will never want to bury” (304). It is curious that a novel which makes a game of resisting the scrutiny of the reader turns in its last pages towards the reader with future-directed conciliation upon its features. To do so is to suggest that the present is a neutral, empty space whose purpose is to be filled with the despair of traumatic memories from the past on the one hand, and the hope, possibly unfounded, of some redemptive future.

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In turning to Shaun Johnson's *The Native Commissioner*, I engage a text that is both similar and quite different from the previous two works. This book, like Awerbuck and Botes' texts, enacts an engagement with the processes of memory while being ambivalent about its own powers to effect change. It is a work of *autre-biography*<sup>31</sup>, a book that I have covered in some detail before,<sup>32</sup> but it is also a book so densely layered that each event of reading is like discovering the book anew. The important distinction I note with *The Native Commissioner* is that it is marked by an elegiac tone that differs markedly from the restless vacillating between knife-edge and languor of *Gardening at Night*, or the transgressive seething of *Thula Thula*. While the sort of solipsistic writing employed in Botes' novel draws very quickly to the limits of its expressivity, *The Native Commissioner's* similarly idiosyncratic but less fetid narrative is written in a more cautious, always qualified voice.

Indeed, Johnson's novel's strongest quality is its dextrous wielding of the provisional mode. While many of the works that emerged from the period in which *The Native Commissioner* was published exceed the shaping influence of the local, or "inhabit a landscape outside of any Apartheid/anti-Apartheid narrative" (Chapman, *South African Literature* 1), *The Native Commissioner* enters a literary conversation with the works of J.M. Coetzee, to which it is palpably indebted, and in the way it reticently melds intensely private, *autre-biographical* concerns around the past with a wider present-day concern for hospitality and belonging. That past is written into the novel more explicitly than Awerbuck and Botes choose to, and the work examines the fraught nature of the South African self in muted ways that disrupt the perverse primacy of the Apartheid optic. That the novel has been included in

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<sup>31</sup> The term is JM Coetzee's, connoting a degree of distance between the 'I' that narrates and the authorial self. The term engages the complexity of constructing the self that is evinced in the act of autobiography. See Coetzee's dialogue with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (392). For a considered engagement of this concept, see Margaret Lenta's "Autrebiography: J. M. Coetzee's 'Boyhood and Youth' (157-169).

<sup>32</sup> See Mbaio, W. "Inscribing Whiteness and Staging Belonging" in *English in Africa* 37:1, 2010, 63–75.

several secondary school and university curriculums since its publication is in itself suggestive of the novel's lucidity as a representation of South African history.

Johnson's novel tells the stories of past and present alike. In contrast to the previous two novels, which base themselves in the twilight of Apartheid, *The Native Commissioner* occupies itself with the period in South Africa's history when the British Empire was receding and the National Party was beginning to weigh in. In so doing, the work attempts to show how the effect of time is sedimentary, a shoring up of layers rather than a clearly-defined step from one period to the next. The work calls forth the self-reflexive conscience, by attempting to access the fragmented, aporetic psyche of the colonised, traumatised individual as an intrinsic part of the narrative, the better to find some means of "grasping what it ethically may mean to be neither here nor there" (Jamal, "The Third Space" 117). There is constantly the suggestion that something is unhinged in both Sam Jameson and the commissioner himself, but this very derangement, I argue, allows Johnson to make rhisomic contact with the pulse of the white English South African ethical indeterminacy.

*The Native Commissioner* begins with Sam Jameson standing on the threshold of a story that is not his own. He is a lawyer with a family of his own, positioned in the rippling aftershock of a moment from his childhood that he has no words for. The catalyst for the account we are given is his discovery of a box of his father's old effects. Sam is presented to the reader as the author-narrator of an archaeological excavation of the buried past from "the privileged enclave" (2) of his white South African family. He occupies the present as a site of affirmation, a space where speaking can begin and the silence of the past be broken at last.

To speak, as I argue throughout this thesis, is to place oneself at risk. Sam Jameson is facing an existential crisis due to the unresolved tragedy of his father's death, which has forever altered his life and left him prone to "periodic episodes of depression" (46). The unresolved past – a secret his family has never spoken about – retains its influence on the

present because it creates a fluidity of time in which memory and pain interweave incessantly and disruptively. George Jameson, we discover, maintained meticulous notes on his career, a stack of letters, reports and other documents that becomes an archive when Sam discovers them mouldering in a box in his basement forty years later.<sup>33</sup> Sam's approach here is to allow the box of notes meticulously collected by his father and stored for forty years, to be opened so that they may speak. He notes that the impetus behind his delving into history is "an overpowering sense of something having been rescued arbitrarily, at the instant before its predestined oblivion" (4). The task before him is to exhume his father's life story from this silent "rotting fused mound of carefully ordered paper and memory trinkets" (4). To make the contents of the box escape their boundaries will not be an easy task, but it is nonetheless one that is required of Sam. That is, he must enact a process of relational memory-making, being attentive to the gaps and silences presented to him, waiting for a story which mostly precedes his existence, to come forth.

That story is contained in a box which his mother Jean had packed and kept closed ever since the family moved to Joburg (in the aftermath of George's death). It is, as Sam calls it, "her magpie's work, capable of calling back the unknown dead" (4), and it is therein that Sam hopes to locate his father's story. The box – the "biggest and sturdiest cardboard box she can find" (272) – is given to Sam by Jean with instructions that he should only open it when he is ready (4). The novel's present is that time: Sam is now an adult, approaching the same age his father was when he took his life, and the box itself is on the point of succumbing, whether because of the ravages of time or because its contents cannot be held inside any longer.

Sam remarks that, once this box of decaying artefacts is opened, it "could not be resealed" (45). His drive to find out the meaning of the box's contents overpowers him, yet at

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<sup>33</sup> The links between author and protagonist are luminously perspicuous. Johnson's father was a Native Commissioner, and Johnson made a similar discovery to the fictionalised account in the novel.

the same time he experiences a reluctance to do so. Jameson's references to "being able to eavesdrop on my parents" (45) stage a certain restless unease experienced in this act of calling forth a long-silenced history. He feels "something ghoulish and abnormal" about what he is doing, wondering if he ought to "be fiddling with bones in this way" and "whether this fitting together of fragments was recreating real people, or a fiction of [his] own" (45). Yet, though he worries that his efforts may do a disservice to the dead, he is compelled, through the act of writing, to create an alternative and temporary space in which to re-collect his father: he becomes obsessed with "the reconstruction of the story" (45) of his father's life. Here, Johnson evokes Derrida's proposal that "speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's silence" (*Mourning* 72). Sam is taking a risk here, the risk of being consumed in the project before him, of losing what little he has of his father from before the box was opened. This is the risk of knowing too much, of being subsumed in the uncertainty of too much fact.<sup>34</sup> In order to do this, of course, Sam must read beyond the defining act of death with which his father's memory is marked. This action does not carry the promise of completeness, but is nevertheless a necessary act of mourning.

The manner in which Sam Jameson performs this "digging and raking in graves" (46), invokes Maurice Blanchot's reading of the Orpheus myth as an allegory for the writer's task ("Orpheus" 99–104). Acted upon by the impulse to connect with his dead father, Sam *must* follow the story (45–46). He is drawn into a journey where he pursues the "shade", the erased and unknowable image of his father, via the numerous "scrapbooks, yellowed newspaper cuttings ... speeches, stories written in another age" (46). His relatives are "skeptical – even alarmed" (46) at his obsession. His wife worries that the project may cause him to "disappear entirely" (46), and we are made aware that there are continuities between Sam's depressive moods and the severe depression his father suffered, though Sam's episodic bouts of

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<sup>34</sup> Compare here Coetzee's point, which I pick up in the chapter on *Summertime*: "[autobiography] is a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history. But which facts? All the facts? No. All the facts are too many facts. (*Doubling* 18).

depression are “not nearly as catastrophic” as George’s (280). He feels that he knows enough “to complete the journey” (46) and bring light to the family secret that haunts him.

To be sure, the work of the imagination is an important component in completing what is lost and/or absent. Johnson’s novel is a work of *autre-biography* in which the protagonist bears witness to his father’s story. George, it emerges, is a South African of English descent, who grows up in Zululand during the early period of white settlement in the region. The novel begins properly with George in a mental institution, his disordered, obsessive rambling words about his need to get better echoing against his isolation. From here, we are transported to the Zululand of George’s childhood, with its “carpet of hills and plateaus rolled out from the foothills of the great mountain chain of the Drakensberg” (50), is described so that the reader cannot but hear the echo of Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*. This evocation is important, in that it establishes a particular view of the land as being pure and unsullied, and sets the narrative scene for the unsettling of this view that will follow. As the story progresses, the land is described as being “a place that got into the blood and the brain and wouldn’t get out again” (50), with Johnson evoking the problematic ways in which earlier white writers sought to include themselves in the land (see Coetzee *White Writing* 176). In an early passage, the young George looks upon the land with its mythical landscapes – the scenes of “tragic and romantic” battles between English and Zulu – and is drawn to accept the land as his own. This, even while the narratorial voice acknowledges that “[i]mpermanence was in the blood of white settlers; it was the knowledge that the place they loved used to belong to someone else” (51). There is an always-already present sense of disruption at work in *The Native Commissioner*, a lurking phantasmal threat that disrupts complete identification with the land they call home.

Thus it is that Johnson’s evocation of the untouched rural homescapes created by Paton and other liberal Anglophone writers is ringed by threat. George wishes ruefully that

his own people “had never come uninvited to the black people’s land in the first place. Or that someone had warned [him] not to love Africa and told him it could be dangerous to do so” (24). They are in a land where their desire to belong shrinks back before the insubstantiality of that desire. The various areas Jameson presents are never points of settlement: the horizontality of Edenic life is always bisected vertically by the threat of being precariously located in Eden, an illusory home-making always on the verge of being denied by the reality of a proto-Apartheid South Africa that does not conform to the English settler’s desired co-ordination of man and the land. This troubled relationality, hinted at by George’s statement, is a constitutive feature of the South African imaginary vilely exaggerated by the beauty of the landscape as George describes it: the perverse suggestion that hardship is an essential part of true communion with the land of South Africa is constantly brought forward.

The novel traces the arc of George’s career, with the reader following a young George as he applies to the Department of Native Affairs, an administrative branch in the Union of South Africa. He is filled with optimism and equipped with a knowledge of Zulu and a passion for traditional native cultures that he is always adding to. He gets a job as a clerk and embarks on a career path in an era where South Africa is governed by the paternalising jingoistic government of the United Party, and there are job opportunities for bright young (English) white men of the sort that George is. Within a few years, George is promoted to the post of Native Commissioner, and he begins to build a life for himself, becoming noted as a dependable sort with a promising career ahead of him. It comes as some surprise when the United Party is defeated in the 1948 elections and the National Party takes over.

George tries to maintain his optimism even as he is marginalised and sent from his beloved Transkei to a series of ever-more dispiriting locations by the authorities. We read of his being thankful, even amidst the terrible environment of the Tsumeb, that he is allowed to do as he wants, without the destructive intervention of the national authorities. He sees a

certain beauty even in the aesthetic ugliness of the landscape, and a certain honour in doing his job to the best of his abilities. But the threat of estrangement and dislocation is brought ever closer by the Afrikaner government. In one of the novel's scenes, he writes home: "I fear these Nationalists will want to treat the black man as an unperson. This could lead to terrible things. . . I don't know what it is going to mean for my job. Perhaps they will want to chuck all us English out?" To be unhomed in one's own country is a threat that looms ever larger with the National Party in control; the key difference, a difference that George is feeling his way towards, is that the state of being unhomed has an entirely different and less sinister meaning for the white English South African community of which he forms part.

The reader senses that the Commissioner is chasing after something lost, an illusory sense of nostalgia for the world of his childhood, a world that is on the verge of ceasing to exist.<sup>35</sup> Johnson shows in this way that the meaning of nostalgia has changed because the signifier 'home' is being emptied of meaning and repurposed in an alienating way. George longs for a sense of an inner peace that is slowly and steadily interrupted by the encroaching of the political situation in 1950s South Africa.<sup>36</sup> As time passes, he finds himself questioning what previously seemed like unshakeable absolutes. Forced to enact laws that he feels are inordinately harsh and lack empathy, his crisis of conscience is given impetus by a court case involving two Black men. Ntabaka, the more assertive of the two men, stubbornly refuses George's paternalistic presiding counsel and simply asks "What has it to do with you, Sir?" This damning question and the implication behind it, exposes to George that his sense of being-with-others fails before the isolated situation confronting the Black South African:

What right had he to judge anything at all about these people, never mind the effort he was so proud of putting into understanding them and learning their languages? It was a right conferred by conquest alone; that is the only historically accurate thing you could say about it (91).

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<sup>35</sup> Like the titular character in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the sense is that for George, life has been a steady slipping away from the happy times of his childhood.

<sup>36</sup> This irruption of the Apartheid order into George's life draws attention to the ways in which the Jamesons' lives are part of a greater interruption of the existence of the original, autochthonous inhabitants of the geographical space he now inhabits.

He feels “a sense of hopelessness and purposelessness that weighed a ton” (105) and is transferred at his own request away from the Transkei to Duiwelskloof, but life proves no less precarious. He tries to maintain order, both in his job and his life, but things prove too stressful for him to withstand. The ‘shadow’ that stalks him, a debilitating depression, takes hold and he has a breakdown: “he shook his head and his tongue felt thick and swollen, too big for his mouth [. . .] I think I have had a bang in my head, he said at last” (117). That ‘bang’ is the dam wall breaking, letting loose all that has been building behind it. Without the means to properly diagnose or deal with what the reader recognises as clinical depression, George is convinced that his melancholy is physical, and tries to resume his work soon after a short spell of rest (120–140). His family notice an occasional hardening in his demeanour, and the Jameson household is made constantly restless – “not all the time, but sporadically, hovering like the animal in the bush” (119) – by the threat of another breakdown befalling George. The family’s restlessness is not helped by the constant possibility of being unhomed at short notice – George is instructed to move from place to place as he is needed by the government, with the expectation that he will dutifully comply. While this is occurring, he is struggling to come to terms with “his secret weakness” (120).

Before the year is out, the family is once again uprooted from Duiwelskloof. George hopes that their return to the Transkei will bring “permanence and settledness, contentment even” (120). And in this “countryside of breast-shaped green hills and rivers disgorging into lagoons and sea” (121), he tries to rebuild the happy life of his youth. But the tide has been loosed, and the crime taking shape in the legislative halls of the country cannot be held back from encroaching on Libode, the rural idyll where George is settling into his role as patriarch of his own brood. Indeed, it is in Libode that ‘Ntabaka’s Question’, as he has ever after thought of the young man’s injunction, comes back to harass him virulently (124). As the

government takes a more direct role in governing the lives of the country's Black members, George is troubled more and more by the question of his legitimacy (124). He is given more authority, and he runs Pondoland's administrative affairs as an "emperor-in-miniature." He does his job well, earning the praise of the powers-that-be, and his family life seems to be a success of congruent proportions. But George is still unsettled by the growing dehumanisation of Black South Africans he witnesses and is forced to enact. Johnson's narrative gives a sense of the precarious contingent nature of life for the Jamesons, as it swings between the triumphs of George's career, and the inevitable dark lows of the country's political trajectory. George hovers, unsure whether to acquiesce to the heinous He applies for one more transfer, and the government responds quickly, assigning George to Witbank, an environment described by the young Sam as a town "that lurks behind its shield of black coal dumps, malevolently observing our arrival" (148).

George, the reader is aware, has been drawn into and affected by the lives of the people he governs, and this places him in a space of conflict when his official duties conflict with his sense of relational ethics: Ntabaka's question is a centripetal force in the novel, one that will not relinquish its grasp on George's mind. Johnson portentously foregrounds the calamity that waits in the wings, as he shapes the deeply conflicted sense of ethics George feels himself to be in the grip of. As in Botes' novel, then, relationality is here figured as a form of possession by the story of the Other. That much is encapsulated in 'Ntabaka's Question', which infiltrates George's consciousness and sets "itself squarely and sourly in George's gaze" (131). The question is manacled to his conscience from now on, and will not be dislodged. The implications for George's health, in a society where he cannot voice his dissent, become all too clear through Johnson's foreshadowing. He undergoes a dilation he is not in control of, one which prevents him from carrying out the duties of his title with a clear conscience.

The next section of the novel shows the seams of its patchwork construction. The narrative of a young Sam stitches together letters, diary entries and other forms of correspondence, Johnson modulating the voices subtly. Amid the desolate industrial landscape of mid 20th-century Witbank, George tries to carry out his life's work as best he can, striving to maintain the stoicism demanded of him against the frustrating sense that his life is toppling over into the abyss. He suffers two major breakdowns in quick succession, a seismic collapse glossed as "severe exhaustion" in those days, but recognisable by the reader as a nervous breakdown. After the second, George is institutionalised away from his family at a nursing home in Durban, and in an ominous symbolic moment, a freak bolt of lightning strikes the Jameson house the next day (195). Johnson's novel inhabits the experience of George's disordered mind as he tries to stitch the fragments of his consciousness together, with prose that mimics the confusion and uncertainty that George labours under. The seams are rendered disruptively visible, as we are returned to the narrative that occurs near the start of the book (9–25). George's sentences here are stretched taut under the weight of expectation he carries. His optimism is fragile, but it is all he has, and Johnson has him write down a list of fatally cheerful aphoristic sentences that he plans to consult in future, to "ward off the blackness" (24):

A positive personality draws success, a negative one repels it  
 Attitudes are more important than facts  
 Formulate a mental picture of yourself succeeding  
 Should a negative thought come to mind, counter it  
 Inner peace, harmony, without stress is the easiest existence . . .  
 Worry is the most subtle of all modern diseases  
 Anxiety is the great modern plague . . .  
 Do not feel responsible for everything . . .  
 Try to believe in what you are doing (24)

"Attitudes are more important than facts." The phrases are a plangent expression of George's despair, their tremulous cadences gestures of optimism that become fragile when placed on the page on which he writes them. George, I would suggest, does not necessarily believe what

he is saying, but what is important is that he plays along and does what is demanded of him.<sup>37</sup> What speaks beneath these words, and what the reader is required to be attentive to, is the “dark and maimed language, precisely that of someone who is about to die and is alone” (Agamben, *Remnants* 37).

George returns home. Ten days pass before the incident occurs, the moment around which the narrative has been gathering like matter drawn towards a quasar. He methodically enacts a ritual, a return to his old life. Johnson threads the letters and notes from the fateful morning into an imaginative sequence recited by Sam, whose young self is out playing a few blocks away from the house when this unrepresentable moment happens. The passage is notable for the way it acknowledges its limitations. The sparse sentences stitching the archival material into the narrative are marked by the absence the incident leaves behind, of the partial knowledge in which they are written. George shuts himself away, the narrative giving its attention to the slow accumulation of details: the cardboard box, the oilcloth in which a bundle is wrapped, George’s care and attention over the contents (207). The tolling sentences draw us ever closer to the abyss, as the entire appalling process is broken down into its component pieces: “He places the barrel in his mouth. He pulls the trigger. The bullet does what bullets do when fired at point-blank range into a human head” (207). Describing the suicide as a series of autonomous movements, a set of physical events, removes it from the realm of the symbolic, and invests it with a material reality.

This material reality, I argue, allows the event to be viewed without the obscuring filter of symbolism. What we read about George’s final years is bracketed by entries from Sam, which describe his own feelings about the katabatic journey he is undertaking. He goes beyond the contents of the box, searching the National Archives in Pretoria for details and snatches of history that might supplement or add breadth to what he has discovered so far.

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<sup>37</sup> Here, I signpost the first instance of the metaphoric root system that runs through the next three chapters, that being the need to play the South African game proffered by Apartheid.

The papers are “swathes of rich detail interspersed with silences, holes” (142). But Sam realises that in his “amateur detective work”, his endeavours to find historical traces that will fix his father’s story in time and space, that story is slipping away from him. What is required of him, he realises, is attentionality to that which escapes the dredging impulse of the self’s drive for knowledge. He releases his expectations, allows the story to “wash over” him (143).

We are reminded of Blanchot’s formulation:

Attention is waiting: not the effort, the tension, or the mobilization of knowledge around something with which one might concern oneself. Attention waits. It waits without precipitation, leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, our horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it in (*The Infinite Conversation* 121).

Sam ‘allows’ himself to be open to the alterity of a story that a conventional historicising drive would risk erasing. Crucially, for him to do this he must relinquish the ordering impulse of temporality: “I let go of the twenty-first century”, he says, and this letting-go allows him to listen to what would otherwise be suppressed. In this atemporal instant – a moment with all the hallmarks of the *Augenblick* – what emerges is a narrative that is immemorially past. It must be created as if anew. The young Sam’s recollection of the Jameson family’s arrival in Witbank is sculpted from present-tense sentences and interwoven with strands of narrative detail from the adult Sam. These narrative trajectories move at a different time signature to George’s words, and the result is a dense layering of past and present voices. The effect does not always work, but when it does it is powerfully evocative. This variegated register shows how the event continues to act on him, refusing to be consigned to the past. The work is at pains to show that it is irretrievably located in the afterness of the aporetic incident, that it is narrating something it cannot in fact narrate. Like Sam, we read from a position where we know, to take a line from Wislawa Szymborska, “little/less than little/and finally as little as nothing” (“The End and the Beginning” 320).

This point becomes most suggestive when one attempts to consider how the novel attempts to incorporate the radically irreducible tragedy into the afterness of the event. Here,

the novel asks pointed questions about survival, about living on: How does one live on, having borne witness to tragedy? Johnson's writing evokes a nuanced sense of the shattered domestic existence, the ways in which his brothers have to cope with the loss of their father, and their mother the loss of her husband. In *The Native Commissioner*, the tragedy is that which exists outside of time and is thus the always-already-happened. Sam does not seek to simply write about what once existed, but to write into existence that which can no longer exist. The distinction is clear: the box of yellowed papers and diary entries are left to tell their own story, and the language they tell it in is one of decay and ruin. They are dense, refractory to the light of comprehension, and the way in which Johnson foregrounds Sam's reading of the entries as a non-conclusive and precariously constructed working-through allows us to access the realisation that the narrative in which the reader is immersed is only accessible as artefact. It is a depiction of a past that cannot be relived, cannot be made to 'speak again' in order to tell or supplement some prevailing truth. Yet, at the same time, this aporetic device is the starting-point of a narrative that un-writes itself: George's suicide de-scribes his story, bringing to an end his diary entries and marking the point from which his wife gathers up the documents that go into the box. It is a refusal of meaning which instantiates a way to make sense of being.

Here one witnesses the difficulty of survival, in Sam's inability to situate this personal disaster within any sort of time-frame: it always exceeds the date on which it occurs. This is because "memory offers a metaphorical approach to fact; it simultaneously represents fact whilst attempting to understand the fact it represents" (Banner, *Holocaust Literature* 10). It is Sam, along with the other members of his family, who are left to feel the radical shift of relationality caused by George's suicide. If Sam's attempts to remember his father are not faithful to this exposure of relational being, then he risks replacing George as a material being who once existed but exists no longer, with a symbolic non-figure composed of George's

correspondence, his traceable movements and his historically checkable words. The fragmentary nature of George's narrative, bracketed later by his wife's words as well as those of his sons, are all coloured with the mental anxiety that culminates in George's suicide. George's own narration from the nursing home in Durban is too fragmented – the tinnitus of his breakdown rings out plaintively in that passage – to reveal a coherent picture of the man himself. The reader is left to piece together the meaning of this fragmentation, as Sam has done with the letters from that time period. Similarly, Sam's absence from the home when George kills himself becomes a cipher for the work of the book – to talk about that which has been excluded from conversation, the silence that has become an infinite mourning for the Jameson family. In this sense, what Johnson does is to show the power of word-as-event: Sam's traumatised repetition of the interrogative "What?" is the recording of the aporia whose brute facticity is confirmed to Sam in the phrase uttered by Ryan, "dad has gone away" (209). The entire narrative is limned in the material reality of George's absence, and the suddenness with which he is wrenched from their lives leaves them to consider what remains after the event.

To be sure, the author is faced with a difficult task: it may be outside of the imagination's power to "invest, fix and represent" (Parry, "Idioms" 419) the in/visible, or that which has been lost, but Sam's awareness of this loss demands representation. The point from which all narrative embarks in *The Native Commissioner* is at the erased point of a trauma which signals its presence through absence. Or, to phrase the point in philosophical terms, knowledge proceeds from the awareness and experience of limitation. This means that for Sam to recover the narrative from the abyssal space of absence, he must unearth the source of the silencing trauma. He must take on the guise of a reader, bringing to the text the plenitude of his experience. Yet in doing this, he finds that he cannot replace the silence left by George's suicide with the scattered, fragmentary narrative he has gathered. This narrative,

what we are given to read, does little, less than little, in its task of recovery. It does not explain further, does not describe. Accordingly, the reader cannot hope to proceed by way of knowledge alone. If she does, she would have enacted a poor reading, a reading that, due to its supplementary nature, is at once excessive and inadequate.

This narrative, however, succeeds by imputing loss to the words and actions within which it is framed. Loss is constantly inscribed via the ways in which the narrative addresses its departed protagonist via the interrogative second person pronoun. It is visible in the vatic effect of the short phrasal titles that break up the novel: *Just Before Then*, *Long Before Then*, *Before Then*, *Then*, and finally *After Then* – with ‘Then’ being the paramount event. Each section establishes a teleological link to the central tragedy, staging a process of recovery that is of necessity doomed to failure. These hiatuses halt the progression of related events, frustrating the reader’s attempts to seek coherence from the narrative pieces by crafting them into one more or less cohesive whole from which a definitive ‘answer’ to the narrative ‘question’ – what lies behind the tragedy of George’s suicide? – may be gleaned.

To say this is to propose that *The Native Commissioner* offers no suggestions as to how one might go about ‘fixing’ the present. Instead, it delves into issues of how to accept the past as somehow both ruined and intact. The relationship between George’s fragmentary narrative and Sam’s attempt to bear witness to that fragmentation, a work of mourning that is always incomplete, succeeds as result of Sam’s acceptance of his limitations. That Johnson resists a tidy narrative denouement is especially crucial. The novel ceases to be a representation of an already-occurred historical event, and thus does not require a conclusion that is accountable to the grand historical narrative.

George’s quiddity is crucial to the novel’s non-response. He is a figure who does not carry over to the afterness in which the novel’s present occurs. As I have argued above, there is very little – just enough – in the way of his internal consciousness in the makeshift archive

to give the reader an understanding of his thoughts and motives up to a point, but one's sense is that George's increasing awareness of his complicity is the catalyst to the narrative. As George battles with the drive to "overcome too great awareness of self" (206), we are made to supplement these deficiencies in his knowledge from our own limited position in the discursive economy inscribed by the work. We are aware, that is, that his dissolution is occasioned by the systemic violence that he is implicated in, and that in straining to maintain his sense of order and decency, he is working against a world where the ordinary is precisely that which is deranged.

The novel is thus coterminous with the works of Mark Behr and J.M. Coetzee I explore later in this thesis, in the way it complicates questions about legitimacy and belonging. It asks what sort of belonging is possible in a country sullied by the stain of oppression and dispossession. In answering this question, Johnson is not seeking to simply rehearse questions of belonging from an anxiety-laden present. Rather, he proceeds from the premise that the condition of illegitimacy (of not quite belonging) is an unavoidable consequence of being self-conscious of the power that operates in the name of whiteness. How is one to live on in the isolating knowledge of this fact? For the Commissioner, to be 'conscious' is to be simultaneously within and with-out one's caste. He is constantly on guard lest his secret be discovered, constantly seeking to prevent his mind "from going to those dark places where it should not go" (23). But his awareness-of-self<sup>38</sup> is incompatible with the narcotised state of belonging to white society, which results in the "bang" (135) that severs him from this society and confines him to the Durban nursing home where he is removed from sight to recover, or made one of the invisible in a society where such consciousness is a sign of weakness, a liability.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> One thinks of Ginsberg's *Kaddish*, also a work of mourning for a lost parent: "No flower like that flower / which knew itself in the garden / and fought the knife—lost" (*Collected Poems 1947–1985* 46).

<sup>39</sup> I open up this thematic further in Chapters 3 & 4.

Johnson's striking depiction of George's mental illness in the novel is, of course, a commentary on the perversity of the South African society, caught in the maw of racial discrimination and hyper-masculinity: what sort of society is it, the novel asks, in which a man of conscience must repress himself in order to exist, must shut himself off from what he knows to be right? George is placed by the power dynamic of his society, a society which gives him privilege and cripples him at the same time. His 'malady' is one of a consciousness struggling against what is expected of a man in his position. Forced to convalesce in the nursing home, he feels as though he is disappointing his family. Mindful of his wife's struggle to run the household on her own, he resolves to rehabilitate himself. This, of course, does not happen: George's fragile psyche cannot recover. But his suicide, crucially, is not simply a tragedy in which the noble suffering self is crushed under the indifferent facticity of the world. Sam does not mythologise his father: doing so "might equally imply the healing of the trauma or wound, its forgetting or its smoothing over: to straighten trauma into a line and forget the lacuna at its center and its circularity" (Moore, "Speak" 88).

Sam re-emerges from his digging, and is able to reflect on how his father's life has shadowed his own. He concludes that his family's unwillingness to talk about what happened to George constitutes "a very un-African response ... to true trauma" (278). He reflects on the story he has pieced together, and his conclusion is life-affirming:

Of course I wish my father could come back, so we could talk at last and perhaps see if we could find some of the answers together. But I know well that this is the one thing I can never have, no matter how hard I work and run and fight in this life I have lived so ridiculously quickly and unreflectively. I am a father now. So I prefer to remember the Zulu greeting he taught me: *Nyabonana*, We See Each Other. At least we have seen each other at long last; I have that. (242)

These words speak of a healing in the relational bond between self and other; the work of mourning inscribes a proximity which is the foundation for a new ethical engagement that sees things not as they once were (and can never again be), but in their injurable, damaged state. This movement of proximity is occasioned by Sam's surrender to the alterity of the

story he is calling forth. In remembering his father, he remembers himself. In a Jabèsian sense, he authors himself in authoring his father's story. His reading is thus a creative act, an unmaking and remaking of the self into the world. I must stress here that in making this argument I am not arguing that Sam *transforms* the story before him into his own. Were he to do that, he would reduce the work to mere performative allegory, a search for an anterior meaning that takes the form of an intrusive digging and routing through the space in which the work resides. Rather, my argument is that Sam's reading is a movement through space towards a keener sense of self that changes *him*:

whether I have told it just as it happened – whether, in that sense, it is true – I do not know. It is my version, anyway, and if nothing else, I now know more about myself and how I came to be here. (278)

It is an ethics that is precarious, provisional in its succour. Sam muses: “I have ... had a lot more luck in my life, than [George] did in his” (280), but he is aware of the limitations that adhere to the work he has managed. Reprising the thematic contained in the lines of Coetzee's novel *Boyhood* – “And if he does not remember them, who will?” (166) – which Johnson places as this novel's epigraph, Sam is ambivalent about whether the story he has pieced together will do ‘anything’, whether his efforts will assist his children in understanding their own lives and identities, or whether it will “just make things more complicated” (280). The constitutive ambivalence is key, a recognition of the self as the subject of an incessant arbitrage, or an acknowledgement of damaged life as part of the foundational weave of South African society.<sup>40</sup>

*The Native Commissioner* is ultimately a journey towards the self, a journey that can only ever be incomplete. The question “who am I?” can only be answered through engaging with the irreducible otherness latent in the conceptual “who are you?” that Sam directs

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<sup>40</sup> See Ashraf Jamal's illuminating comment: “what this a priori heterogeneity demands is that we recognize ourselves as the persistent subjects of an imperial arbitrage; subjects denied the fullness of the bildungsroman; subjects intrinsically flawed, stained who could never be neatly parsed according to the binary logics of empire or Apartheid” (“Bullet Through the Church” 18).

towards his father. There can be no satisfying answer so long as the self quests after finitude. There *can* be an answer of sorts, an imperfect, fractured, always-incomplete answering, but the self is unsure if that answering is a response, or an echoing back of his own voice, or even whether there ought to be a distinction between the two.<sup>41</sup>

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My argument in this chapter has been that the three novels discussed so far each stage a form of defamiliarisation, an unsettling that disrupts both protagonist and reader. These are works in which both reader and protagonist are placed in relation to, as Jabès glosses it, “the elsewhere of an unimaginable elsewhere” (Stamelman, “Graven Silence” xvii). This phantasmal space, always speculative, is one in which the reader, in reading, is acted upon, made to undergo a form of passivity that frustrates and eludes the closing impulse of completeness, and thus undoes reading as a search for meaning. These works use proximity and readerly sympathy in different ways, but they each have about them a subliminal dimension that prevents their being wholly contained within systems of meaning. In reading them, the reader is brought across to an ethics of “what cannot be finished” (Nancy, *Freedom* 80).

I have left Kgebetli Moele’s 2009 novel *The Book of the Dead* for last because it is a radical step away from the three novels that precede it in this chapter. The novels of Awerbuck, Botes and Johnson are all to some extent expositions on the past, in which the protagonist purports to act from the continuity of real time, but is actually inhabiting the stop-time of writing. The discernible risk such novels hover over, a risk realised in the works of Awerbuck and Botes, is that the author reinscribes the too-stable temporal divisions of ‘past’, ‘present’, and ‘future’ which the work has been working against. These novels instantiate a

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Kearney, writing on Paul Ricoeur, remarks that the self “only finds itself after it has traversed the field of foreignness and returned to itself again, altered and enlarged... othered” (*Paul Ricoeur* 153)

present that, except glancingly, is primarily pretext for discussing or commenting on another historical time period.

In Moele's novel, the stop-time present is present in all its material facticity. It is a novel that plays an intriguing game with its reader. It is not a fraught look at what it means to be an individual in a South African space and time. The first section of the book, titled "Book of the Living", opens with a paragraph of disarming simplicity:

He, Khutso, had been many things in his life. He had been a child, a teenager, a young man, a husband and a father. But the one thing he had never been was happy; he had never enjoyed his life. He knew the odds and he fought them. He had his dreams and he chased them. He has his goals and he worked hard to achieve them. But Khutso had never enjoyed his life; he had only ever endured the struggle that his life had been. There had never been a moment in his life that he felt fulfilled, that he felt true happiness, that he felt joy. There were always things in the way. Things to live up to; wants, needs, wishes (9).

The language is filmic, a procession of words that accumulates like matter being washed up onto the shore. The novel is direct: the protagonist is set before the reader's gaze and his existence distilled into the short sentences with their weighty meter. The story continues in this third-person fashion, as we learn about Khutso's childhood in Masakeng. Khutso comes from a poverty-stricken home, and his desire to succeed in life, we learn, is born of a desire to leave his destitute upbringings behind him. He is grounded in a sense of the future-person he needs to be. After a fashion, he completes his time at school and passes well enough to enrol at the University of the North. The name of the university signposts what the work does not refer to in any overt way, namely the greater political situation occurring in the country while Khutso is growing up. If this narrative does not brim with loud allegorical references to the times as, say, Awerbuck's work does – Moele is nonetheless concerned enough with meeting our horizon of expectations to seed the narrative with details like these. Time is divested of its obsessive pre-eminence, its capacity to mean outside of what it is, but traces of that eminence remain. Temporal signifiers are dropped into the narrative curtly – the author might begin a sentence with an establishing date, usually a year – as a concession to the project of

the telos, but the writing around these dates is oblivious to the consolations of plenitude in its sparse treatment of the events being described. The characters move through life with the turn of each page, the story having the surety of a tale told many times before.

Khutso meets, and becomes infatuated by, Pretty, “a young woman who stirred something deep inside him” (30). From childhood, Pretty has grown accustomed to using her physicality to soften the brunt of the poverty she lives under. She grants men sexual favours, in exchange for which they buy her clothes and give her money: “there were always men who wanted to be part of her life, and when they found that they fell short of her expectations they came with currency, and for a poor girl the currency was what mattered” (33). We are told of Pretty’s encounters with various men via a passage which distances itself from passing judgement on her actions: “girls like her were not for marriage but for show, *so people believed.*” And in the next line, “*They believed* that her kind were made for sharing amongst men, as no one man could ever handle such beauty alone without jealousy rendering him insane” (my emphasis, 32). There is a subtle distancing being encoded in the phrases I have emphasised that impels the reader to sympathise with Pretty. Our response to her is complicated by this undertow, as we are drawn into a proximate relation to Pretty and her actions. Importantly, we are situated by this narrative so as to perceive the limitations inherent in how the various characters in the novel treat Pretty. Overarching binarisms like ‘innocence’ and ‘guilt’, with their juridicial undertones, are checked in our witnessing the contingency of Pretty’s subjectivity, the way she actively makes her place in the world, in relation to others around her without being bound in one place (33).

At a technical level, what we read for the first half of the book is short-legged: it is desultory and favours serviceable metaphor over the lyrical language such that the unsympathetic reader may find its banality obscuring. My argument, however, is that this deliberately restricted prose further implicates its reader, who is made to supplement a

foundational lack in the writing. Its literary gambit is a firmly declarative *This is what happened* rather than the provisional *How do I talk about this?* employed in the other novels under discussion in this chapter. This, conversely, demands that the reader read beyond the text's location in the world and the positions it inscribes. In so doing, we recover the hecceaity of those whose quiddity, in being written into the text, is subject to the processes of elision/reduction that adhere to it.

A series of life's progressions occupies the narrative for several chapters: Pretty and Khutso date, they get married, they become financially prosperous and they have a child who they, in a narrative manipulation by the author, call Thapelo.<sup>42</sup> They believe they are living under grace, but the reader is dogged by the sense that this story is evolving towards its conclusion too quickly. Khutso attains his dream career, his dream woman and a son he loves and dotes on. We sense that there is a revelation or disruption waiting in the wings: "Honey, what do you think counts as a fulfilled life?" Pretty poses this question to Khutso. "Do you think that if I passed away people would say that I had lived a fulfilled life?" (72). Her husband's reply is a dismaying foreshadowing: "Khutso looked at her and smiled. 'Don't think about dying,' he said, moving closer and hugging her. 'Think about living' (72).

His glib admission is the point at which the irruption comes, the end of *The Book of Living*. Pretty tests for HIV, finds that she is HIV-positive, and kills herself. This catastrophe causes both Khutso and the narrative itself to break down. First he cuts Thapelo out of his life, consigning the boy to a boarding school and the care of his sister. "Khutso lived in the valley of suicide for weeks after Pretty's death", we are told (79). Deranged by grief and anger, he is vulnerable to "the strict economy of exchange, of payback, of giving and giving back" (Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 102).

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<sup>42</sup> Thapelo is a Sesotho word meaning 'prayer'.

Here, the narrative's form stages the possession that will afflict Khutso, with a discordant chapter voiced in the first-person pronoun by a character who has no name and no human face and is, as it point out, an entity beyond description and thus beyond containment (77–78). This voice is possessed of an unsettling malevolence, sinister in its impersonal emptiness of motive as it plots the destruction of all it comes into contact with. Its horror is contained in the very formlessness of its constitution as an indecipherable entity.

The closing image of the *Book of the Living* is of a vengeful Khutso who has failed to escape “that hateful form of circulation that involves reprisal, vengeance, returning blow for blow, settling scores” (Derrida *The Gift of Death* 102). As a finite being, he is asked to sympathise beyond all limits, a request that is aporetic in its infinite nature. Khutso has failed to sympathise adequately, to think beyond his own pain to Pretty's position. Once more, the reader is implicated in this moment of self-immolating failure. We are asked, for the briefest of moments, to see beyond the limits of Khutso's position, deranged as he is by grief. The narrative ends with him buying a book, “something leather-covered, like a Bible, with the same quality paper as a Bible” (82). On this book, he requests that they emboss the words “Book of the Dead” (82). Khutso tells the sales manager that he is going to record his paternal family history, “the male lineage from 1840 to the present day” (82). This occasions one last gesture of foreshadowing, when the salesman quips “[a]nd here I was thinking that you are a serial killer, and you wanted to record the names of your victims” (83).

The novel begins properly at this point. The next section of the novel, “Book of the Dead” veers away from the familiar externality we have been treading through. There is now a narrator who uses the first-person, the same entity who slipped into the closing pages of the “Book of Life” section. This entity has, it emerges, taken over Khutso's body and mind in a parasitic manner, using him to achieve its aims. Khutso, the text notes, is the first entry into the Book of Death. He has passed through the answerlessness of the aporia, and been

transformed to the point where he can no longer speak about what has happened to him. He is, I argue, transformed into an absent presence, emptied out of his interiority and made purely a surface from behind which the entity does its work. The text functions as a sort of diary, literally a book of death, in which the entity documents with care and precision how it uses Khutso's attractive body and wealth<sup>43</sup> to ensnare and consume a series of women. The perversity of this figure's desire to "fuck 'em dead", a desire qua desire, signals beyond itself to an elsewhere that is outside the reader's perceptual field.

We read a narrative in which subjectivity is suspended and detail is only ever dynamic, connected to movement or flow. The only 'feeling' the entity possesses is a sense of achievement, bordering on glee, when their (his and Khutso's) quest goes particularly well. Khutso and the entity travel from locale to locale, burrowing their way into the confidence of the women they meet only to infect them and drain them of life. The entrapments escalate as Khutso sleeps with students, employees, married women. For the entity, it takes on the timbre of a game or a sport:

Fly-fishing. Once the able fisherman has cast his line – after feeding his ears with the sound of the flying hook and line, and watching both hook and line break the surface of the still water – he can do nothing but wait. So I waited. (104)

The novel figures HIV as a form of diabolical possession under which the possessed is the carrier of a deathbringing<sup>44</sup> that women are powerless to resist. This is a powerful provocation, more so because the entity is entirely remorseless even when Khutso infects his twelve-year old neighbour Reneilwe (115–121). All are corrupted, the novel says, and none escape – not even the novel itself. However, the reader is moved to respond to this provocation with skepticism: the work bears the stain of a gendered antipathy that is an

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<sup>43</sup> In a knowing nod to the pervasive presence of life-insurance in the South African optic, Khutso is able to act because Pretty's *two* life insurance policies have paid out (73).

<sup>44</sup> The term is Paul Celan's (*Selected Poems and Prose* 395).

authorial proclivity.<sup>45</sup> Why are the fourteen women, a very wide range of characters, so thinned out and static, so woefully unsuspecting?<sup>46</sup>

To this argument, the answer can be put forward that people are hardly ever the tidy, fully presented types that manifest in novels. The women in this story are susceptible, the novel suggests, merely because they are human, with all the limitations and fallibilities that adhere to that variegated state. This novel, then, works against the totalising impulses of its genre by presenting to us characters in exactly the attenuated light a mediating (and ethically unrelating) consciousness would perceive them in. However, there is nothing in the novel, no authorially inflected irony, to exculpate the writer from the crude externality (and its attendant moral implications) of what he has written. As the novel extends, the narrative's ambivalence becomes increasingly unpersuasive, because the reader suspects that its writer is complicit in the corrupted story he is so lavishly laying before us. We are drawn towards a form of hermeneutic literalism that the novel neither endorses nor rejects at its end.

It is clear from the argument I have made so far that this novel works in an affective capacity on its reader. The novel utilises none of the ormolu that we encounter in *The Native Commissioner* or *Gardening at Night*. Confronted with the plainness of the text, we read the work with an untrusting eye, caught in the encircling movement of a traumatic occurrence that continually loops, transfixed by a 'protagonist' who is (as Tom McCarthy would put it) a 'rear-facing repetition engine,'<sup>47</sup> continually living out the original irruption in a series of re-enactments. As Benjamin declares in a similar context, "where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 261).

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<sup>45</sup> Moele's debut novel, *Room 207* is similarly afflicted.

<sup>46</sup> Albeit a movement that is an encircling, an advancing over old ground in new and unsettling ways.

<sup>47</sup> McCarthy uses this phrase in his treatise 'Declaration on the Notion of 'The Future,' which appeared in *Frieze* Issue 141, September 2011.

The novel shreds narrative convention, dispensing the illusory time of the conventionally fictive in favour of an atemporal stop-time in which the narrator wreaks havoc. What we read is more innovative in its form than the other narratives I have considered here, but this innovation also exposes its limitations. We see at times that the author is precariously balanced on the boundaries of form, and that balance occasionally tips in a direction he does not desire. The narrative desires to keep the entity as inscrutable as it possibly can, but the conceptual grid is rendered vulnerable by the dictates of the novel form. The looping trajectory of the narrative project is bisected crudely by the ineluctable movement of closure that adheres to the form: Moele finds no way of moving the plot forwards other than by way of interchapters in which the entity excogitates on its actions in the world (110–11). Where a work of greater literary intensity might use the lyrical uncanniness of language to gloss this closure, Moele's work is rooted in the facticity of language and cannot do this. It is suspended in the double-bind between form and what escapes that form.

Ultimately, this doubleness defines *The Book of the Dead*. The work leaves off as Khutso, the host of the parasitic entity, is deserted by this entity. "Death is hovering like a hungry vulture" and the entity has work to do elsewhere (165). Khutso, in seeking his perverse memorialisation of "the breach, the sudden epiphanic emergence of the genuinely unplanned, the departure from the script" (McCarthy, "Declaration" n.p.), finds only that he is riveted to the material state of his own body. The entity leaves him, leaves the novel as well, to the ineluctable closure of death. In this ethically empty novel, there is no redemption, no salvation, to the last. We recall the Adornian exhortation to fashion perspectives "that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light" (*Minima Moralia* 274): Moele's work differs from the others in this chapter which project a "saving closure" (Jamal "Terror"

124) in step with Adorno's messianic light. As I argue above in the case of Botes' work, this projection potentially occludes as it illuminates. In *The Book of the Dead*, there is no swinging between the binaries of good and bad. Like Johnson's novel, it embraces a radical ambivalence about its own project; however, unlike *The Native Commissioner*, this novel's task is the pursuit of lessness, a project of reducing and stripping-down to almost perfunctory extremes. Moele's novel achieves Aletheia, 'the unconcealedness of being'<sup>48</sup> showing us the world not as redemption would have it, but as it is in its inescapable presentness.

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In his intellectually agile lecture, "What Does and Doesn't Happen", Javier Marías makes the following claim:

We all have at bottom the same tendency ... to go on seeing the different stages of our life as the result and compendium of what has happened to us and what we have achieved and what we've realised, as if it were only this that made up our existence. And we almost always forget that ... every path also consists of our losses and farewells, of our omissions and unachieved desires, of what we one day set aside or didn't choose or didn't finish, of numerous possibilities most of which – all but one in the end – weren't realised, of our vacillations and our daydreams, of our frustrated projects and false or lukewarm longings, of the fears that paralysed us, of what we left behind or what we were left behind by. We perhaps consist, in sum, as much of what we have not been as of what we are, as much of the uncertain, indecisive or diffuse as of the shareable and quantifiable and memorable; perhaps we are made in equal measure of what could have been and what is.<sup>49</sup>

In this chapter I have attempted to trace an idea latent in the four novels under examination that finds its expression in the passage I have quoted above. The works I have analysed here are all fictive disquisitions on the uncertain, the indecisive, or the diffuse. The aporetic encounter hoves into view as an optic through which these discussions of relational alterity may be perceived. Therein, we see the need, articulated in various ways and with varying degrees of success, for a subjectivity founded in the pre-reflective response to the unknowable alterity of the Other. Each text, I argue, illuminates the workings and the

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<sup>48</sup> Heidegger relates the concept of Aletheia to his notion of disclosure, over several of his works, including *Being and Time*, and *Poetry, Language and Thought*. My reading of Heidegger draws on his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art", which appears in *Poetry, Language and Thought*.

<sup>49</sup> As translated by Benjamin Kunkel in his review of Marías' *Your Face Tomorrow 3: Poison, Shadow and Farewell*, published in *The London Review of Books*, 31:23, 3 December 2009, 18-21. There exists no English version of Marías' essay.

limitations of a radical human heterogeneity, a striving to give account of the senseless in the time of the aporetic, where the work itself risks being insensible, and where what is unsaid or unsayable is as important to the reader as what is said or can be said.

I must note here that each of these texts is also marked by a failure of action: the recuperation or restoration or meeting with the Other is always incomplete, cannot be anything *but* incomplete. The self may desire the escape of its limited relationality, but it cannot complete the gestures this escape requires. The crucial point to note here is that they do not seek to do this, do not quest after completeness or the illusory goal of an ultimate truth. They recognise, in accordance with Simon Critchley's formulation, the importance of "sense-making that doubtless fails, but where what matters is the attempt" (*Very Little* xvi). In the following three chapters, I trace this thematic of necessary failure at some length, examining how three writers have expanded this concern with rendering that which refuses to be conceptualised.

In these chapters, I pay particular attention to a facet I have only gestured to briefly here, which is how these works of literature affect their readers. As Michael Marais argues, "[i]f the literary text is to affect relations in history, it must affect the reader who is in history and who therefore approaches the text from within a horizon of expectations" (*Secretary of the Invisible* 36). As readers, we are affected by our experience of the uncanny in these novels, an experience that may be fleeting or discontinuous, but nevertheless affects us.

## Chapter 2

### In the Dark Back of Time: Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water*

*Is there something essentially, constitutionally wrong with us? Is there something lacking in our make-up as Afrikaners? How far back does it go in history? – this insecurity, this unresolved anger, this wretched need to prove ourselves? (Brink 279)*

The work of mourning in South Africa is contoured and shaped by many distinctions. Beyond the simple dialectics (who has gone? Who has remained behind?) are another set of more complex considerations. Who may mourn? Who may be mourned? What may be grieved for, and by whom? Where can mourning take place, and under what conditions is it acceptable or unacceptable? Is all mourning collective? If not, which forms of individual mourning are permissible? These conditions contour the surface of the work of mourning and transform it into an artefact beyond itself, a social document. That is to say, the story of mourning is always a story of society, and the place of particular kinds of mourning in society at a particular moment in a given time and space. It is the story of how the act of mourning occurs as an ethical engagement with (or within, or indeed against) a set of norms. The work of mourning may be collective, or it may be deeply individual: the subjective experience of grieving for, and living on after, the death of a loved one, places mourning at the site of a divergence between the universal and the particular.

This is because the matter of death is also a matter of living. It can be theorised in the following way: my relation to that which is mourned for is at once universal (I am among the living, s/he/it is not) and singular (in the post-death experience, I recall *my* unique relation to the deceased). Put another way, loss shows up the ways in which the relationship with the Other is a part of self-composition. In the act of mourning, therefore, “something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us” (Butler, “Violence” 22). When those others are the subject of edicts (voiced or unvoiced) that proscribe the ways in

which they may be mourned, or prohibit their being mourned altogether, that revelation becomes all the more significant.

What foreclosures occur in South African society that may limit or prevent the grieving of certain losses? It is a question that carries a great deal of weight in South African society. In the aftermath of the first democratic elections of 1994, the oppressed and the forgotten came under scrutiny, as the country sought ways to deal with its unresolved past. In particular, the unexamined nature of white life in South Africa was problematised increasingly, as people came to realise that it was, in fact, circumscribed by codes and values that permitted only certain identities, while restricting or de-legitimising others.

Of particular concern was the way in which white South African nationalism was arranged around a central narrative that defined how men behaved, how they defined themselves, and how they acted in society. The ideal male figure in this society was a willing proponent in the masculinist hegemony. Propped up by the pillars of sports, religion, and military participation, South Africa's white patriarchal order was openly hostile to those who went against its dictates. The mythmaking which sustained the Apartheid order was at the expense of those minorities which did not fall within the heteronormative scheme. It instilled a model of hyper-aggressive masculinity steeped in history and culture and implicated in various forms of interpersonal and institutional violence. This model, importantly, was the scaffolding underpinning the daily routines and rituals of white South African males: at school, where sporting prowess and obedience to rigid authority were promoted; in the home, where obedience to the father and not showing weakness were of paramount importance; and finally in the military, where the collective state-sanctioned violence were regarded as a de rigeur assertion of masculinity.

The image of masculinity put out, with its appeal to nationalism and domination, had to be protected at all times against the subversive. This "subversive" was anything

“abnormal”, any alternative masculinity that threatened the myth of the disciplined, hard-bodied white male. The abnormal was to be expunged or scourged from one’s midst. The norm of masculinity, based as it was upon a deeply abnormal society, fought to suppress homosexuality among those who identified as Afrikaner. The ironic juxtaposition of a society that embraced certain forms of homosociality (rugby is a clear example) while condemning homosexuality as aberrant points to the foundational schism in the society of the day.

It can be theorised that the violence conducted by the hegemonic order against those who fell afoul of its dictates was aimed at correcting the behaviour in question. The prodigal son paradigm resonates clearly: the son is to be cherished as long as he conforms to the father’s ideals. Should the son stray beyond the boundaries inscribed by the system he is being inducted into, then he will forfeit his status as a man and as an Afrikaner.

To say this is to say that these traumatic occlusions and erasures were instigations for reflection and interventions after the transition to democracy. As South Africa moved further away chronologically from the time of Apartheid, its writers sought to find ways of representing the neglected spaces of ‘ordinary life’. In various works published over the ensuing decade and a half, writers have tried to find ways of speaking about the occlusions occasioned by a discriminatory past.

As Slavoj Žižek points out, “narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism” (*Plague*11). Amongst the authors who came to prominence during this period, Mark Behr has been lauded for his evocative, often controversial attention to Afrikaner patriarchy and the complicities and occlusions that were fostered by the overtly militant society of the day. Behr’s first novel was a searching indictment of the supposedly idyllic purity of South Africa’s white society. Over the course of three novels, Behr’s writing has testified to the occlusions engendered by

Apartheid society's focus on ideal masculine identities. It has also focused attention on the complexities of giving account for one's actions.

### **Telling Secrets**

Mark Behr's work in the field of South African fiction has constantly articulated itself as an intensely introspective response to the task of recovering from the experience of Apartheid. In three works published between 1993 and 2009, Behr has sought to depict the fraught experience of belonging to, and being marginalised in, an Afrikaner society which retains a strong sense of collective identity.

At the heart of Behr's writing, I would argue, is an agitated awareness of speaking from marginality as a troubled, accusatory position that breaks through the sealed off parameters which define belonging and loyalty in the Afrikaner cultural domain. This author has sought to write a way through the maze of subjectivities, complicities and positionalities that make up Afrikaner identity. His writing, particularly in his first novel, *The Smell of Apples* (published in Afrikaans in 1993 and translated into English a year later), and in the novel that forms the subject of this chapter – 2009's *Kings of the Water* – is shaped by a distinct sense of the issues of shame, guilt and blame that speak themselves through Afrikaner society.

Behr's work, then, sifts through the sedimentary layers that make up identities, attempting to fathom the manoeuvrings of society which conspire to ensure that only certain identities can be seen. The work of such writing lies not in attempting a factual recovery of lost existences, but in paying close attention to those ceaselessly overlapping points of friction where loss has been covered over. Importantly, Behr's work seeks not to reinforce standard metatropes: there is a resistance in his works to overdetermining: the agents of occlusion and those are affected by their manipulations are drawn without conscious resort to

cliché or stereotype. That is to say, Behr's work resists bounded ideas of knowledge at all points. The author seeks to show the agents of power as not simply unfathomable monsters, but people negotiating their own spaces in their culture, though this may involve being deformed by the systems in which they participate.

There are risks with this form of representation. The writer is at risk of playing to spectacle: the more brutal the violations, the more deplorable the agents of these violations, the greater the danger of transmuting their actions into spectacle. Similarly, in displaying the damaged or excluded lives, the author is at risk of making these lives into spectacle, objects available for consumption within an economy of lament and nostalgia. This point certainly adheres to Behr's first work, *The Smell of Apples*, which sifts through the past in order to examine its effects on the present. In demonstrating the repugnance of the dominating/oppressive system in the novel, Behr is at risk of rendering a journalistic depiction whose power to do anything other than report or explain is limited.

One way of accessing this problem is through Graham Duggan's idea of the "anthropological exotic", wherein the author's work is created in such a way as to give "the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the 'foreign culture' itself" (*The Post-Colonial Exotic* 37). Behr's work is at particular risk here, since he is depicting the intrinsic character of Afrikaner life. *The Smell of Apples* is widely taught in South African literature courses, and with this exposure comes the risk that the novel (as a subjective attempt to give account) is extrapolated, its specificity reduced and its depictions normalised.

Such a text arises for particular reasons, of course. The author takes it upon himself or herself to reconstruct, to record faithfully, to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth", as the popular aphorism avers. They feel called upon to account for their actions, and they do so in particular ways: by repeating the gestures performed, the steps taken, the actions they took which may have caused another to cease to be. Such a story cannot be told

impassively, but it registers only as reportage because it cannot summon up the time gone by or lost, nor can they revive the dead who are lost within that time and gone. The idea that one can give a faithful “as it happened” transcript of what took place, what crimes were committed and what exploits undertaken (and in whose name), emerges as a chimerical fantasy.

It is precisely because Behr’s works are fictive accounts given, and *not* explanations per se, that they wield such power. The novels are not self-assured representations of facts known but kept secret until their revelation on the page. Behr’s characters find themselves in situations that exceed their (and indeed the novel’s) capacity for representation. The work itself speaks of an impulse to give account for oneself that does not itself stem from an original interrogative. Put another way, the impulse to speak in these novels comes from within, though it is (of course) moderated by external factors. In this regard, Judith Butler makes a pertinent point when she outlines Nietzsche’s account of self-reflexivity:

He remarks that we become conscious of ourselves only after certain injuries have been inflicted. Someone suffers as a consequence, and the suffering person, or, rather, someone acting as his or her advocate in a system of justice seeks to find the cause of that suffering and asks us whether we might be that cause. (*Giving an Account* 10)

Behr’s work is interpolated, certainly. But might there be something other than, something more or less complex than, a Nietzschean wish to avoid censure/punishment from an external force, that informs this drive to give an account? As Butler puts it, for Nietzsche, “accountability follows only upon an accusation or, minimally, an allegation, one made by someone in a position to deal out punishment if causality can be established. And we become reflective upon ourselves, accordingly, through fear and terror” (*Giving an Account* 11). But it is not, it seems, fear or terror that compels the author of these works to speak when he might otherwise have remained silent. What might it be then? No law compels the author to speak out, and no outward obligation rests upon him. The compulsion must therefore be internal. There is certainly an element of the self-accusatory in Behr’s work. *The Smell of Apples* is a

struggle with the unchosen conditions of life: in its author's words, it is "at heart, concerned with how an ordinary boy is loved into bigotry and hypocrisy; and how he becomes a privileged supporter of an exploitative and oppressive system—not unlike many of us were in youth or continue to be in adulthood" ("Living in the Faultlines" 2).

Behr's novels contain autobiographical resonances, but they differ in crucial aspects: they are not singularly about their subjects, but a form of bearing witness to trauma which testifies to the causal agency of the self under question. That is to say, the novels dispense with the authority given to those who author their own stories. In the place of this authority is a voice which attempts to speak a truth that answers certain questions: which secrets were kept, and why? Who was expelled from whose midst, and why? What suffering and/or injury did one bear witness to? For the protagonists of these novels, complicity in the sufferings of others comes unconsciously, through love and family intimacy. Trauma, for Behr, constitutes the irreparable breaching of innocence.

Here, a brief exposition of the novels will illustrate the point. In *The Smell of Apples*, Marnus' trust in his father (a South African Defence Force general who represents the masculine national ethos) is shattered when he witnesses this same father raping his best friend Frikkie. In this rending moment, the prelapsarian innocence evoked by the apples in the novel's title is irrevocably lost; the next morning, Frikkie observes that, "These apples are rotten or something" (*Apples* 179). In this novel, Behr takes on the idea that a trauma witnessed becomes a corrupting secret whose possession expels one (literally or figuratively) from the community of which one is part.

This motif is developed further in his second novel, *Embrace*, published in 2000. This novel evolves the 'coming-of-age' thematic utilised in *The Smell of Apples*. Published some years after Behr's dramatic revelation that he had spent time working as a spy for the Apartheid government, *Embrace* sees a thirteen-year old protagonist, Karl De Man,

attempting to negotiate the complexities of identity when that identity involves hiding one's sexuality. This secret-keeping casts a light on a world where the public over-dominates and subsumes the private, such that the private cannot exist in untrammelled form. The clandestine forms a refuge from the overdetermination of the normative, but this refuge cannot last because an intrinsic form of the subterfuge is collusion with the normative.

Finally, in *Kings of the Water*, the idea of the corrupting secret is developed further, in a novel whose title evokes the innocence of childhood games. Michiel Steyn's surname is a homonymic evocation of the unjustness at the heart of White relations to the farm. His sexuality and how it changes and determines his relation to, and participation in, the community in which he grows up, is explored within registers of concealment and revelation. The protagonist returns to his family farm, a space associated with the innocence of his childhood. The Rousseauian impulse<sup>50</sup> cannot be fulfilled: the protagonist cannot imagine a way back to the innocence of his youth.

Behr's register, to be sure, is that of the displaced autobiographical voice: his protagonists draw elements of their identity from their author's life story, and use them to give account of earlier realities. If they are fictional selves called into being by various literary devices, then they are no less truthful for that, because they invite a reflection on how the accident of one's birth confers certain responsibilities. The autobiographical resonances also lend support to the notion that any relation to the regime of truth is also a relation to the self. They are called to give account, or to answer for those who have been expelled from time, and they do so by reverting to their earlier lives, or earlier times in which they lived. The selves Behr constructs are unhomed figures, boys/men who become unsettled in the spaces they were once familiar with. Their sense of displacement calls to mind Theodor Adorno's words in *Minima Moralia*:

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<sup>50</sup> An impulse to see the pastoral scene as a haven from the corruptions of the world.

Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible. The traditional residences we grew up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with a betrayal of knowledge, each vestige of shelter with the musty pact of family interests" (38).

The characters in Behr's novels are no longer at home in their previous identities, their language and culture, and the homes in which they were brought up. Their struggles to confront the unverbalisable parts of themselves or their histories grant the reader access to the complexities of loyalty and betrayal: If they are loyal to what they have been taught is the norm, then they are being disloyal to themselves. These are figures whose existence is denied or refuted or subject to erasure, who give account to interrogate South Africa from its points of discomfort. They demonstrate how life, as it is lived in the interstitial spaces of Apartheid South Africa, consists of never being one thing or the other, but is instead a matter of having to choose or deny in order to blend in.

Behr's novels are also distinguished by their settings, obdurate worlds where the abnormal is granted no quarter. For Marnus in *The Smell of Apples*, the very ordinariness of the world in which he grows up shows up the casual nature of the cruelty, which has been integrated into the realm of the everyday so successfully. In *Kings of the Water*, the abnormal registers only through the protagonist's awareness of his displacement from the idyllic home space. These are deliberate gestures on Behr's part to point to the resistance these innocuous surfaces present to penetration, hinting at the intricate and byzantine nature of the cruelties which bulge below the presentable surface of life in white South Africa.

As a way of delineating the changing relation to the idyllic conferred by his characters' loss of innocence, Behr introduces various temporalities which guide the narratives onwards. *The Smell of Apples* is an account from the perspective of eleven-year-old Marnus Erasmus, interwoven with narration from the adult Marnus who is fighting for the Apartheid state in Angola. In *Kings of the Water*, the narrative uses 36 hours to frame an account that moves between the past and the almost-present. In *Kings of the Water*,

particularly, the various chronologies work multi-directionally, proliferating to form a matrix of meanings about a society too complex to be spoken of in a single voice.

In this giving account, the characters face an essential question: What is “normal” in a deformed society? Behr’s work suggests that a disinclination to fix upon bounded notions of behaviour is the first step towards a discerning of this question.

### **Unworking Memory**

Behr’s intensely private novel *Kings of the Water* is a multi-layered work: it is an elegy, a reflection on the nature of belonging, and a study on the conflicted nature of identity. The novel plays on the boundaries of genre by melding the traditional plaasroman with transnational elements, with the elegiac novel form, and with the *bildungsroman*. The events in the novel take place over a weekend in 2001, as its protagonist Michiel Steyn returns for his mother’s funeral. Michiel is a homosexual Afrikaans man who lives in San Francisco with his lover Kamil. His return to South Africa from a decade and a half of exile – to a resentful father and a family that does not know what to make of him – is the reader’s point of entry to the novel.

Michiel is a useful focaliser: he has an MA in English Literature from Berkeley; he thinks about the politics of exile, and he is at ease with the works of Nadine Gordimer, Philip Roth, Michael Cunningham, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee. As a result, the novel is able to engage in a literary conversation with the works of these authors without the conceit wearing thin too quickly. While the novel has a nominal telos, it has the form and atmosphere of a work written as an unbroken stream: though people speak and converse with one another, the scenes are not marked by any conspicuous shifts of time, and Michiel’s voice is formally indistinguishable from the narrator’s voice. What moves the prose forward is not event or dialogue, but the steady inquiring impulse, a pressurelessness that induces a breathless,

water-immersed quality to the work. That is to say, what moves Behr's prose forward is the voice of the protagonist giving account — his desire to respond, to defeat the j'accuse by speaking. Behr's narrator has an acute eye and an attentive ear: he is a watcher of people, of their behaviour and reactions, of their inclinations and characters, of their malleability and their submissiveness, of their inconstancies, their limits, their innocence, and of the silences, lacks and gaps that proliferate around them.

Why such a readerly narrator-focaliser should be needed is the novel's initial intrigue, but the beginnings of an answer are formed during the act of reading. It enables a form of supplementation, a gesturing beyond the novel's boundaries. If the novel exhibits a form of anxiety in both its form and content, this is because it utilises a long-troubled literary form as its starting point, the *plaasroman*. Critiques of this form by now amount to a long tradition in and of themselves, and Coetzee's *Disgrace* forms a sort of countertext that the novel invokes at critical moments. Behr signals his engagement with the *plaasroman* genre by quite literally name-dropping texts which problematise the credos upon which the traditional *plaasroman* is built: novels like *Disgrace* and *The Conservationist* lie on the desks of characters, or are given away as gifts at critical moments. In this way, the novel points to its own implication in a particular set of discourses, demonstrating its status as both “an autonomous entity and a social fact” (Adorno *Aesthetic Theory* 8).

In other words, the novel declares its membership of a community beyond itself. It signs to further places of escape from the limiting and limited positions of the discursive economy within which it is situated. By making the reader aware of the novel's cultural embedded nature, the work seeks to negotiate these limitations: it signals to that which remains, that experience of community which forms around this text and the works with which it converses.

To speak of such a community is, of course, to invoke a paradox. The solitary event that constitutes the reading of the novel works against the idea of community. The work invites us away from the sphere of the common, towards the realm of the singular. But while it does this, the work gestures to other moments of reading, moments which call to mind the event of reading that occurs with *Kings of the Water*. The gesture is illusory – it disappears before the incommensurable singularity of reading as soon as one attempts to perceive it<sup>51</sup>. One perceives this experience as a haunting, an other-worldly perception of other singular moments that nevertheless are similar to the present moment of reading. The work, *Kings of the Water*, is inhabited by other texts which repeat or infinitely resonate themselves. *Kings of the Water* thus becomes the connecting pathway to an Unavowable community of reading.

Javier Marías, appropriating Shakespeare, terms this phantasmal space “the dark back of time” as a means to

give a name to the kind of time that has not existed, the time that awaits us and also the time that does not await us and therefore does not happen, or happens only in a sphere that isn't precisely temporal, a sphere in which writing, or perhaps only fiction, may – who knows – be found.<sup>52</sup>

As a description of that which is beyond the realm of thought and knowledge, it is a fitting apparatus for approaching *Kings of the Water*, whose narrative is concerned with how our stories are inhabited by other stories, our lives by other lives, across generations without end.

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The first pages of the novel begin at a noticeably languid pace. Michiel stops his rented car to open the gate that separates the Steyn family farm, Paradys, from the rest of the world, under clouds that “pass overhead like a fleet with sails billowing against the blue, their shadows rallying across the veld under the noon sun” (1). This motif of transit is the point of

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<sup>51</sup> In speaking of the singularity of the reading experience, I draw on Derek Attridge's notion of singularity in the reading event, as he describes it in his work *The Singularity of Literature*. Attridge's concern with what sets literature apart from other arts is echoed in my discussion of the unique moment of reading.

<sup>52</sup> Marías, Javier. *Dark Back of Time*, (New Directions: 2001), 44.

immersion from where the novel proceeds. In a revelatory backtracking, we are given the scaffolding on which critical parts of the story will balance: his is an Afrikaans family, we are meant to infer from the farm's name and his brother's greeting over the phone (2); there is a rift between Michiel and his father, the ailing patriarch of the Steyn family. These are the facts the novel admits at face value. Behr seeds the opening pages with enough subtle references for one to gain a sense of where the narrative will progress to, but the revelations that make the story are withheld over many pages, only gradually being sifted into the work. There are descriptions of scenery, images "he remembers like lines on his own hand, like a story known without quite imagining all that could be found in its reading" (1). Already, the stock trope – the land's incantatory power to reveal itself without revealing itself, is deployed. Michiel himself is a prime example of this image, the self-knowing subject who comes to discover that he does not know all there is to know about himself. His arrival at the airport, an airport that was Jan Smuts International when he last passed through it (the reader will note that the airport was renamed in 1994) is a passage into a world where old familiarities are rendered unfamiliar. Michiel is alive to the passage of time, but the temptation to slip into the safety of memory is strong, since memory overwrites the environment through which he is passing to such a degree.

Michiel's return, to be sure, is heavily invested with symbolism: his homecoming shadows the parable of the prodigal son. Here, however, the trope is developed into a structural metaphor through which the relationship between the Steyn patriarch and Michiel is explored at length. Michiel is returning to a past he had fled from, and in so doing his motive is to finally reckon with the past. In this regard, the author's depiction of the farm as a place of the dead cannot be anything but significant. The association with the dead can be seen in the opening section of the novel, where Michiel notes the slip of the farm into a state of decay from, which is also a slip from the farm of his memories into the farm as it exists in

the novel present. Michiel's journey home is thus a katabatic descent into the underworld. Through a gradually accumulating assemblage of images and fragments of memory, the farm is built up for the reader as a world of dead images, a world cluttered and overpopulated by memories.

Notably, Michiel's arrival invites being read in terms of an ethics of hospitality. The farmhouse is not the hospitable space that greets the prodigal son upon his return. Michiel finds that the stoep "now has a shell of white metal bars" (15), a security gate that bars his entry:

The gate is locked but the front door beyond the enclosure is open [. . .] He searches for a bell. There is none. "Fuck" He curses under his breath, looking across the yard. 'You knew I was coming.' The dogs sit, looking up at him. He could go to the kitchen or the side entrance. Resentment rises in him, a literal release of something in his stomach. (15)

His father's failure to run to meet him, a crucial element of the prodigal son parable stages the failure of hospitality: the "face-to-face" encounter that Levinas conceives of as being at the centre of the self's encounter with the otherness of the Other (*Totality and Infinity* 295) is deferred. Of course, the encounter between father and son in the parable is not the truly ethical Levinasian encounter: the father is moved to rush from his house and embrace his son. The forgiveness he offers creates a reciprocal relationship between them, he as forgiver and host, and the son as forgiven and guest. It is an economy that places certain preconditions upon the son: that he be assimilated into the fold and resume his place as the dutiful son. The son is thus predisposed to accept the offer of forgiveness.

To say this is to make the point that the biblical parable enacts a rather problematic affirmation of the father's divine authority. The symbolic economy of forgiveness is riven with aporia: who forgives and who is forgiven occurs under particular conditions in which the son's obscene suffering comes as a result of him attempting to function outside the boundaries of the father's order. The unconditional forgiveness suggested by the parable – unconditional because the son's prepared speech is cast aside by the father's embrace –

cannot be accommodated within the sort of homecoming Michiel enacts. In the parable, the father represents a greater law – a law that governs morality – which must be submitted to. In a Lacanian sense, the son's return is a renouncing of that which is outside of the law in favour of that which is inside the law.

Michiel's is not a return to the law of the father. His father represents the old order, the delegate or representative of a social and political order whose reasoning has been deemed faulty. His father's position in history as an Afrikaner patriarch casts him with the perpetrators of Apartheid, troubling the legitimacy of his right to forgive his son's vices. The deformation of the father in the son's eyes changes the terrain upon which the meeting occurs. Michiel arrives with the knowledge that his father has Parkinson's disease (6). He knows that something is demanded of him, some response to account for his fifteen years of absence. As he draws nearer, the spectre of his father's creeping decrepitude lingers in mind: "Have age and the shakes indeed mellowed the old goat?" (5).

It can be seen that the return of the prodigal son is subject to a paradoxical logic: it is an extension of the father's hospitality, certainly, but that hospitality is premised on recognising the son *as a son*. An absolute hospitality is both "inconceivable and incomprehensible" (Derrida, *Acts of Religion* 362). Nevertheless, the reunion between father and son that occurs in the parable succeeds because it is a reunion *despite* its limitations. It is an overcoming of the inscribed subject positions by the truly ethical act of the father's running to embrace the son.

What we find in *Kings of the Water* is that the farm carries no guarantee of refuge that would provide the impetus for return. Michiel's angered assertion that he has not arrived unexpectedly carries with it the expectation that the door would be open to him. Finding the kitchen gate will not admit him, he returns to the front door, where he finds that the dog has soiled his suitcase. He is almost irretrievably the outsider, his arrival an answerless entry into

a foreign space. This is not the situation he has envisioned: the locked doors prevent him from being absorbed into the comfort of the home. In this way, the ethical relationship engendered in the act of homecoming is troubled. When his father finally appears to interrupt the moment of anxiety, Michiel is completely unprepared for the sight of the old man. The father he remembers from his past “exists only in voice and cobalt-blue eyes . . . neither the photographs Ounooi brought nor what she said or wrote has prepared Michiel for this” (17). Crucially, it is the gaze of the father that remains rooted: the eyes that have looked on in condemnation and the voice that had pronounced his banishment have not altered. In the phantasmal moment of the first encounter between father and son, with nothing to disturb the moment, the potential for an ecstatic reconciliation is briefly present and almost immediately extinguished, made imperfect.

Oubaas is unable, to say nothing of being unwilling, to perform the act of hospitality, the unconditional embrace. His words – “the American arrives with an Afrikaans curse on his lips” – with their anapaestic resonances call to mind both biblical verse and the Lord Byron poem “The Destruction of Sennacherib” (*Selected Poems* 231). Importantly, the words fix Michiel as the expected guest, the intrusive presence whose use of Afrikaans is an anomaly. The symbolism of the gate that separates Michiel, on the outside, from Oubaas, on the inside, suggests that Oubaas’s ethical generosity will be found wanting, or indeed that it fails at the moment where it is most needed.

When Michiel crosses the threshold, he finds himself unable to close the distance between himself and his father. Alida, the family’s domestic servant, solves the problem (as she has solved Michiel’s exclusion by unlocking the door) of whether Michiel “will shake his father’s hand. Or hug him. A kiss would have been unthinkable” (20). As Michiel surveys the decor of his parents’ bedroom, his eye alights on a large painting, an Nguni cow that stares out at him. Oubaas’s eyes are “an accusation on Michiel” as he answers the unvoiced

question on Michiel's lips: "Karien's . . . She became a child in this house after you left" (22). The potential of forgiveness is deferred here in Oubaas's words, which demand something from Michiel that he is not prepared to give. "Let it go, Michiel thinks. You will exhaust yourself responding to each recrimination" (22). Michiel fails to vacate what Judith Butler calls "the self-sufficient 'I'" (*Giving an Account* 136). The novel seems to suggest that Oubaas's is a singular failure of sympathetic imagination in keeping with Michiel's image of him as the stony patriarch. And indeed, this failure is stressed in Michiel's reminiscences, which draw on his father's suspicion of him as too soft and unmanly.

But this notion of sympathetic failure is briefly turned on its head when Oubaas insists that Michiel bath him in preparation for Ounooi's funeral. Michiel is required to act generously, to care for his father. Michiel is suspicious of his father's motives, believing that the "ritual" is his father's attempt to humiliate him:

what Michiel reads in the blue eyes is contempt. Clearly the insistence that his son – *this* son – be the one to bathe him is not some grand gesture of reconciliation. No, this is born from a disdain still simmering all these years later. This is not a mother's funeral; it is to be a father's final showdown with a son. For this, he has been lured to the farm. (28)

As he removes his father's clothes, he is struck by the proximity of his father. The old man's dilapidation, his "helpless obscenity" (*Žižek Cogito and the Unconscious* 100) invests the ritual with more pathos than Michiel is prepared for. He is increasingly aware of his own proximity to the aged patriarch, noting his father's inescapable "stale smell" and wondering if it is possible that his own odour (the result of not having washed while in transit) is co-mingling with his father's (28). The authority shifts subtly to Michiel without his noticing, as he averts his eyes from his father's nakedness<sup>53</sup>. His "will-not-to-know" falters before the ethical task demanded of him. The unconscious nature of this shift is emphasised in the way Oubaas is presented as the body in lived flesh. The text lingers over the details of his body:

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<sup>53</sup> The Biblical resonances with the story of Ham and Noah are perspicuous.

Oubaas's sunken chest is blue-white and veined. Like Roquefort. His breasts sag. The nipples are pronounced, like those of a pubescent girl. Even as he tries not to look closely, Michiel does not fail to register the pallid folds of skin beneath the thinning gray hairs of the belly. What muscle is left in the arms can no longer be discerned. In the precise pattern of a farmer's tan, in a V from neck midway to hairy chest, sunspots and moles discolour the skin as they do on both arms from above the elbows to the hands. In the folds where the chest meets the soft upper arms, the skin is beige, veined blue, with the bruised yellow wrinkling of old apple. (28)

The father's crumbling corporeality subverts his authority, that authority being located in his status as masculine patriarch<sup>54</sup>. Oubaas's 'helpless obscenity' inspires a form of gentleness in Michiel, who wonders what "time and disease have left undone to the behemoth before which they quivered until deep in their teens" (29). Michiel resolves anew to complete the ritual not as a punishment, but as an act of generosity on his part. Despite Oubaas's prickly commentary, the old man is unprepared for this show of kindness, and his manner begins to soften. As he washes his father's body, Michiel's 'will-not-to-know'<sup>55</sup> disappears, and he begins to wonder if the intimacy of "this fugitive moment" might "contain something of what the religious call grace?" (31).

Michiel's sympathy, then, is co-opted without his consent. When Oubaas asks him why he is so quiet, he searches for something to say, "something to acknowledge whatever might be happening here; grant his father and this moment the benefit of the doubt" (32). The comment that comes – "I'm thinking, Pa, how life brings us to unexpected places" (32), emphasises the truly ethical nature of this slipping of integuments – it is a non-phenomenal experience of being inhabited by alterity. The central necessity around which the ethical dimension of this moment turns is proximity. That is to say, Michiel's proximity to his father's body is what allows him to respond affectively to his father. Behr intimates the possibility of Michiel responding to Oubaas if he shifts from the distanced stance of the son disgraced by his history, to the son who accepts his father as requiring care. As long as

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<sup>54</sup> .This scene resonates with Sarah Nuttall's idea of the *bodiography*, as a narrative "of self centred on the lived body in which the body is figured less as an object inscribed with the social and the political than as a subject actively contributing to the production of meaning ("Bodiographies" 3).

<sup>55</sup> The term is Lacan's (Rabate *Jacques Lacan* 242).

Michiel is attentive to the distance between himself and Oubaas, the ethical moment, where the possibility of a different set of relations lies, is deferred. It can only inhabit the space

The improbable nature of this passage can be read in the context of Emmanuel Levinas's description of the approach of the other, with the 'fugitive moment' connoting the opening up of the self to the otherness of the other person, its infiltration of the self's consciousness. Importantly, though, *Kings of The Water* does not argue that this moment of ethical response completely obviates the loss that has occurred. The movement of closure signified in this "fugitive moment" fails, clearly underscored by Oubaas's emotional collapse in the bathtub (32–33). Oubaas's choking grief mirrors the asphyxiating totality of the unspoken grief that threatens constantly. For Michiel, the spectacle before him, the spectacle of his father's pain, transfixes him. The encounter with the reality of his father's grief, its ontological presence, roots him to the spot, unable to act, because it places an impossible demand on Michiel to extend beyond himself, transcend himself, and go further than he has gone until now.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that this demand is impossible is precisely the point. In not being able to be met or satisfied, the demand ceaselessly exhorts one to do more. Ethical action, in this logic, is grounded not in the exculpatory consolations and satisfactions of limited sympathy, but in the restless dissatisfaction of knowing that one has not sympathised adequately, that there is yet more to be done, and that what needs to be done can never be done. The father's despair, the baseness arrives without being called upon, and Michiel finds that he is unable to take his sympathy to its logical conclusion by embracing his father. Instead he cannot bear to watch, shrinks back until his father grows quiet again. (33).

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<sup>56</sup> There is a homology here between Oubaas's silent scream and a moment in Coetzee's *Foe* where the unnamed reader-figure descends to a watery underworld, a place without words where s/he finds the mute Friday. This reader-figure's attempt to draw speech from him evinces "a slow stream, without breath, without interruption . . . Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face" (157).

When the old man finally speaks again, his question comes as if the terrible, terrifying outburst of emotion has not happened. Michiel resumes his task. But while he is shaving the old man, Oubaas suddenly challenges him to prove himself faithful to his father one last time:

‘This could be your last chance, Peet . . . The razor won’t do the job. People will know you tried and failed. The law will be involved again. More serious than AWOL.’ Michiel sees the glint in the blue eyes. ‘But you could push me under. I assure you there is not much fight left in this body.’ He is smiling. ‘You can say you left the bathroom to fetch something. When you came back I had blacked out and drowned. The last will and testament is in town, at Malherbe and partners. (34)

Michiel is taken aback by “the haste with which the old man has gone from despair back to here” (34). They have retreated from the moment of a possible redemption to this point where the old man’s obscene demand, and his pleasure in making it, inspires anger in Michiel. Oubaas’s delight evidently comes from his thinking that he will use this moment of closeness to extract what he has always desired from Michiel, the hardness of character that will validate the father’s status. His misrecognition of Michiel as Peet suggests the true perturbed nature of Oubaas’s relation to his oldest son’s death. In Michiel there reverberates what Oubaas saw in Peet, a softness that unsettles him sharply. But there is surely a secondary resonance in Oubaas’s soliloquy: does the old man regard his drowned eldest son’s death as a form of revenge against himself? To the moribund old man, the accusation behind Peet’s death must be deflected: the dead son is the spectral presence at the bathtub. Indeed, Michiel recognises this in the ‘glint’ that has returned to the old man’s eyes (34). The scene shows up a dissonance that interrupts the new proximity of father and son, re-establishing the old dynamic of authoritative father and disobeying son, united even as they fail to recognise that unity. This dissonance is the spectre of the dishonourable honourable action, a leitmotiv that I will return to later in this chapter.

For Michiel, Oubaas’s challenge allows his vigilance to drop, resigned to the old boundaries being where they always were (34). He realises that he is being drawn into the old relationship, and chooses to stand up for himself:

There were times, Pa, I wished you a taste of your own medicine . . . some kind of revenge. But that desire went, with time, Pa . . . In reality you have grown too old for me to get back . . . at you, Pa. Old, and weak and pitiful. Revenge may be a dish best served cold, but delayed too long the festivities no longer seem worthwhile. *Die kool is die sous nie werd nie*. The cabbage is not worth the sauce, he hears himself saying, but he says nothing. He empties the bowl's dregs in the sink and gets clean hot water, catching sight of his warped reflection in the chrome faucet. He looks into the mirror and notices his red eyes before again sitting down on the bathtub's rim. And at heart, old man, I always loved you. Is there a way to force these words out? (35)

Michiel's refusal to play the game adds another dimension to the novel's treatment of guilt and complicity. By refusing to be contaminated by his father's bitterness, Michiel is also refusing to give authority to the economy of violence. Of course, to refuse to engage is still a form of engagement, and Michiel is still in some way tainted by the discursive position of the offender. This position sanctions Oubaas's reproach: "a man halfway through his thirties who still cannot explain himself. Stand up for yourself! Is it possible that you are even more pathetic than I remember? The scene demonstrates that he lacks the capacity to understand Michiel in the latter's capacity as the Other. The injurious words entrap Michiel in the economy of damaged relations, where it is impossible for him to respond adequately. In this way, Michiel is "bereft of his symbolic identity" and reduced to a subaltern respondent confronted with the obscene object" (Žižek, *Gaze and Voice* 107). The "fugitive moment" disappears, and the old game reasserts itself.

What is one to make of this scene? What ethical conclusions can be drawn? The reader's position in relation to the narrative renders explicit the idea that what is required is a reading beyond the limitations inscribed by the deformed relationship between father and son. We are aware that the repulsiveness of Oubaas's behaviour compels us to sympathise with Michiel against him. That is, the reader is compelled to take up an oppositional position and thus becomes a part of the novel's economy of contestatory positions. The reader is "directed" by the text to sympathise with Michiel, through the novel's use of an ironic layer that permeates its narrative. That is, because Michiel's position elicits the reader's sympathy, what the novel presents on its surface as the normal becomes exactly the opposite. We are

also aware that the society Michiel has positioned himself in opposition to is actually where the abnormal resides. In the scene I have elaborated above, the body of Oubaas is not, or not merely, a phenomenological presence, but an ontological proof of difference. Behr's description seeks to repel the reader, to prevent us from sympathising with the old man. We sympathise with Michiel not simply because we have inhabited his interior life up until now, and not because we are fully aware of how the story will turn, but because the story compels us to dislike the father against whom Michiel is defined.<sup>57</sup>

This is what happens if the reader is 'taken in' by the work, that is, if the reader begins to play the game the novel sets up. Our sympathising with Michiel obscures how the "mechanism of injury" (Žižek, *Gaze and Voice* 106) functions, by positioning us with him as innocent parties who are witness to the father's coldness. The reader is dissociated from the conditions that enable what occurs in the narrative: our sympathy in effect gives us the false assurance that we have little or nothing to do with the systemic and symbolic conditions (Marais, "Violence" 7) that accrue to Behr's invented world.<sup>58</sup>

Is it possible to move beyond this limiting and limited ethics of sympathy? Such a move would require an impossible surmounting of language's limitations. Perhaps, following Paul Celan, what is required is a close attentiveness to the "true" speech of all, not just the ones the novel invites us to sympathise with. Such a reading carries with it the awareness that the oppressive father also carries the stain of his oppression. Put another way, the reader must be attentive to her/his own position, as well as the miscellany of positions that proliferate in this text, and be wary of creating a villain of Oubaas without acknowledging the historical

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<sup>57</sup> My argument here was evolved greatly by Mike Marais' discussion of the nexus of violence, sympathy and proximity in his "Violence, Postcolonial Fiction, and the Limits of Sympathy" (*Studies in the Novel* 43. 1, 2011, 94–114) and I am indebted to the author for providing me with an advance copy.

<sup>58</sup> Mike Marais follows Lisa G Propst's comments that "responding to the emotional impact of one person's story can make it easy to overlook the stories of others and the social structures which led to that person's suffering", and that "novelists and readers who empathize with persecuted victims may envision themselves as virtuous and innocent, alleviating their sense of responsibility for conditions that cause suffering" (330–331).

and symbolic contexts that create and enable abuses of the sort he has inflicted on his sons. But such attentiveness as this would be impossible to complete, given the inescapable foreclosures of the reading subject's positioning in language.

A way out of the bind posed by this situation can be found in the possibility, latent in this novel and theorised by Mike Marais, of complicating the emotional gesture of sympathy "and thereby extending the sphere of its concern" ("Violence" 8). Only through a sympathetic attentiveness to both the proximate and the distant characters in *Kings of the Water* can a truly ethical reading emerge. This possibility is subject, however, to what Mike Marais terms "a profoundly aporetic logic" ("Violence" 11). This logic emerges when considering how it is possible to undertake a truly attentive (which is to say, unlimited) reading when one's finitude and location in society's discourses conspire to limit one's attentiveness. The fundamental impossibility of a supra-discursive attentiveness (that is, an attentiveness outside of language and culture) is both an impossibility and a necessity if the complicity of limited sympathy is to be overcome.

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In the lapse of time that has transpired since he left the farm, events have occurred that could not be anticipated. The spectacle of his father's decrepitude suspends (however briefly) any expectations Michiel has carried with him into the encounter. It is an exposure to Otherness brought about by the decay of the physical body, and it interrupts the temporality of experience (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 148, 149). The self (Michiel) does not experience alterity as a subject in control. His father slips nearer while he is caught in a moment of inattention. This is a telling demonstration of how the Other slips through what Levinas terms the "outstretched nets" of consciousness (*Otherwise than Being* 150). The clues that Michiel appears to misrecognise are laid constantly before the reader: the old world has changed, something has shifted, and the old markers have lost their referents.

The reader is aware that Michiel's arrival constitutes not a return so much as a new arrival. Everything about the farmhouse, with its new decor amidst the old furnishings he recalls, suggests what Michiel himself comes to realise: "that his home – whatever a home is – is no longer here (50). He knows from memory the precise habits of the house from which he was suddenly rendered absent years before, and to which he returns now as a visitor who must supply prior warning of his arrival. The time has changed, yet Michiel remains caught in the web of settings and rhythms established over years in the home which sheltered him.

As long as Michiel tries to predetermine what the world will contain, it continues to evade his cognitive grasp. The ethical demand that is placed upon him is that he relinquish his prior knowledge. The fragmentary moment that constitutes the novel's present-time is shown up in the way Michiel's preconceived or old ideas collapse in (or near) the instant of his attempt to apprehend it.

If Michiel's meeting with Oubaas proves unsettling, his subsequent meetings with the other people from his past prove equally un-homing. One pivotal moment here is a scene early in the novel where he meets Alida (18). Michiel's immediate reaction is that the woman who has raised Oubaas and he and his brothers in turn has not aged in the slightest: "the tiny woman . . . seems miraculously close to the way he remembers her" (18). Looking at her closer, he notices "dark markings of sun on her cheeks, fine lines around her narrowed lips and eyes. Her skin is a lighter brown than he remembers. Yes, she has aged. She is indeed an old woman" (18). The moment of comprehension makes thinkable the idea that time *has* passed, and that the farm is not immune to the shift of time.

The perturbing of Michiel's perceptions is important. Knowledge, with its *a priori* points of reference, can only go so far, can only allow in what fits with the subject's already-present conceptual system. Michiel's inability to read his former world lends itself to being read as an unsettling of epistemologies. The novel-present's landscape has altered and must

be learned anew if he is to accomplish the task of grieving for his mother and reconciling with his family. But this new world resists easy assimilation. The implication is that the unworking of memory cannot proceed until Michiel, the subject, has freed himself from the limited position of his past experience. To do this, he must find a new voice with which to give an account of himself: the old voice and the old knowledge will not do.

### **Degrees of Dishonour**

For Michiel to recuperate the past, he must confront the state of dishonour he has lived under for the past fifteen years. The violation Michiel has committed takes the form of a silence that is gradually dismantled as the text proceeds. There is much to be unpacked, and the novel proceeds via a combination of confession and reticence as Michiel's inner voice and memory reveal more and more moments from his past. The acts attributed to Michiel, the cause of his dishonour, call him to account for himself. That is, he must account for why he left the country and his family behind him, and more pertinently, why he abandoned the girlfriend Karien, who was pregnant with his child at the time.

In coming to terms with his shameful past, Michiel must work towards acknowledging his responsibility, reconstructing his deeds and traversing the aporetic distance between his past and present selves and the others he has shared his life with. His location on the farm, the site of the identity from which he has fled, is significant: the farm is a place of passage between the past and the present. His recuperation from a state of dishonour must emphatically occur in the "here" space of the novel-present: it can only be thought through from this space.

But what does it mean to be dishonoured while living in dishonourable times? To have shame descend upon one while living in shameful times? The South Africa Michiel grows up in is one in which security attends only to those who operate within the dictates of

the state and its functionaries. For those who do not, life is dangerous, precarious, or fragile. The system has “a certain psychological terrorization” (Butler *Precarious Life* xix) as its metier. Those who do not fit with the ambit of the symbolic and systematic order are expelled from its midst.

We read that Michiel goes AWOL from his national service, after being caught in a homosexual encounter (his first) with an Indian naval officer, Lieutenant Govender, on a whites-only beach. Here, the layers of transgression are multiple and varied. The taboos Michiel has broken mark him as operating outside the society that claims him as its own. Yet because we are aware, reading this novel from the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that the society in question was flawed in its relations with the world, we are also aware that the disgrace this transgression confers upon Michiel is a false disgrace. The true disgrace, the novel implies, lies with the regime and the system that underpins it. This system brings itself into disrepute when, acting under no constraint, it deliberately commits its deeds without consideration for the Other. In *Kings of the Water*, the South African Apartheid state and its functions come under scrutiny: it becomes dishonourable by denying its responsibility for the Other. Indeed, the novel enacts for the reader the paradox of living under a system which is dishonourable, which further asserts that it cannot be dishonourable because it determines what is and is not dishonourable.

For Michiel, his transgression is an acting out against “the delusions of raw white South African male power” (31). This system’s exclusionary processes, its machismo-reinforcing routines of violent rugby and army service, contrive to produce what Judith Butler terms “unlivable lives” (*Precarious Life* xv), where those who attempt to live outside the restrictive paradigms of the state encounter face the edict of exile. The paradox-effect at work here is artfully wielded by the author as a means of revealing the obscene and the violent facets of society. But again, the reader must be attentive to how this paradox functions. That

is, in reading the work, she must be aware of how it undermines both its first and second orders: it deploys the first order (Apartheid society and its agents), and then enacts the second order (unmasking the true obscenity of Apartheid society). The work illuminates its motives for the reader, in that it exposes the nature of Apartheid-era white South African society in such a way as to evoke the idea that there must be two sides to the issue: the facts of Michiel's misconduct, and a greater societal truth to which the reader's eyes must be opened. Showing off this latter truth to the reader entails a criticism of the society which insists upon shame as a punitive measure and as a means of legitimising itself. The reader of *Kings of the Water* must be wary of Michiel's account, which belongs to the second order and lends itself so much more readily to sympathy than the first order. She must read it knowing that it is tainted by its dialectical relation to the first order.<sup>59</sup> Such a reading allows no complacency: it constantly unsettles, taking up a third position in the dialectic around the first order and the second order.

If this sounds like an absurd impossibility (how is a third position to be accommodated in a dialectic?), then it is nevertheless a necessary position in order for the reading subject to supplement the lack inherent in the first and second orders. This supplementing recognises that the first and second order are both necessary and yet incomplete in their representations. Here, the work gestures once more to the impossible task of enabling the reader to abandon her position or location in culture and, in so doing, construct for herself a position that is precisely not a position, a negated position that therefore allows the self to be within the world while viewing it from nowhere within it.

Michiel is able to assemble a picture of his family that illuminates the workings of the South African white male patriarchy. Peet, the eldest, lives an inner life that is shielded from them all. There is something uncanny about the eldest Steyn son, something that escapes

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<sup>59</sup> Compare, here, Mike Marais' perceptive argument for how the reader of J.M. Coetzee's fictions must read them "with a cold eye" ("Violence" 14).

representation and something that his family struggles to apprehend (40). He is “the tennis player who never allowed himself to be bullied or scorned into playing rugby,” is seldom caned at school, and refuses the idea of marking those instances of corporal punishment as a badge of pride (39). What happens to Peet as a result of his refusal to play at the system’s games’ occurs entirely in the narrative’s shade. His willed departure from the world seems to be a completion of this gesture of refusal, one that struggles to be read by his family.

Michiel’s proximity to Peet is undoubtedly significant: it has taken him considerably longer than it took Peet to learn that he can subvert the authority of the system by not adhering to its rules, by not playing its games. While Peet is ultimately unable to live out the psychic schism between the systems the world imposes and his own inner life, he projects a sense of being in control to the last. The young Michiel also adopts the rituals, tries to pass ‘for one of the boys.’ He assumes that Peet has a quieter, savvier way of living his life, but he is, of course, uncertain.

His brother Benjamin, the brusque, masculine middle child, is most like their father – “his character radiated everything Oubaas wished for” (76). He is “the ready repository of their father’s every ambition” (76), and it is to him that the task of bringing the family together falls once it becomes apparent that he excels at sports and agriculture out of a genuine desire and not a will to please the father. He is ever-vigilant, a state brought about by his father’s constant temper and scorn, ever ready to do as his father instructs (77). But at his heart, he is, as Oubaas recognises, his mother’s child (76).

In an illuminating passage, Michiel recalls a standoff between Oubaas and “The Chosen One”, where the family are on their way home from a holiday. Words are exchanged, or actions are committed that result in a threatening altercation between Oubaas and Benjamin. The two males come to blows like bulls sparring (77), while the rest of the family remains in the car. Ounooi shuts the door behind Oubaas who has leapt from his driver’s seat

to “knock the shit out of” his son. The shutting of the door is a recurrence of the will-not-to-see that characterises much of her engagement with the world. Michiel himself at first follows his mother’s averted gaze, before they both turn to look as the sound of blows falling reaches them (77). In a scene that scripts the overturning of the father’s symbolic authority, Benjamin succeeds in evading his father’s fist, and turns the tables on the patriarch, pinning his arm behind him. Yet when Benjamin sees that his mother is witnessing him subvert his father’s authority, he guiltily averts his gaze (77). He whispers something in Oubaas’s ear, and the altercation ends as quickly as it has flared up. Michiel watches the two reconcile, and from his brother’s lips he reads “*I love you Oubaas*, a phrase that would be inconceivable coming from his own” (Behr’s emphasis, 78). Michiel’s distance is inscribed explicitly in this scene, as is his brother’s proximity to their father. And if Benjamin has succeeded in defeating the patriarch at his game (he has, for the old man never again lifts a hand to any of his sons), he refuses to divulge what he whispered to Oubaas. When Michiel asks him, later, Benjamin’s response upholds the ‘game’ of patriarchy: “the day you pin him like that is the day I tell you” (78). The symbolic mandate of the father’s authority is protected by Benjamin’s silence.

Ounooi’s ‘will-not-to-know’ determines her entire articulation of self, as Michiel comes to realise. Her immersion in European literature and culture, and her travels to “Western Europe, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Taiwan and Uruguay with members of the congregation” are a refusal of knowledge and experience, in Lacanian terms. The passion she puts into her daily life is, accordingly, a passion of willed quietism, an inner migration. Michiel is, in his early years, unsympathetic to her ‘innocence’ and unable to reconcile it with what has happened to her sons. His ire grows considerably when he recalls how Ounooi feigned indifference<sup>60</sup> to his ‘crime’, and then took him to see the young dominee who will

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<sup>60</sup> Michiel wonders in his later years if this indifference is “from a state of grace or delusion” (72).

later marry Karien. Her reasoning is that the young dominee, who has “a contemporary angle on things”, “preaches in the township”, and is “broad-minded and educated” (72) will provide sanguine advice to help Michiel through his predicament. But Dirk provides no succour:

*“the church is clear on these issues. The word tells us it is an abomination. But I do not believe it is for us to judge . . . I suggest you return to the army and ask them to refer you to someone; in the army with me were men who were cured of such urges by psychologists (Behr’s emphasis, 73).<sup>61</sup>*

Dirk’s equivocating words simply reinforce the idea that Michiel is being cast out of paradise.

Thus, Michiel becomes disengaged from his mother. Only in his later years is he able to see her more clearly, accepting both her limitations and her moments of grace. Behr’s depiction of her character is one of the novel’s pivotal points. Michiel is constantly taken by surprise at what he does not know about his mother. His proximity to her, a proximity he has spent fifteen years trying to obliterate, has blinded him to the possibility that there may be different facets to her character. Over the course of the narrative, Michiel’s developing sense of attentiveness allows him to perceive other things about his mother: that she too might be able to reach out beyond herself, as seen in her membership of the AIDS Activism Committee and her embracing of Karien as one of her own children. “Truth, he thinks, she had her own brand of, like all of us” (94).

And what of Oubaas? The father requires an adversarial intimacy with his sons, for the simple reason that without this contestation, his power is untested and becomes unfulfilled. Oubaas’s fear of Michiel comes down to a desire to test the limits of his patriarchal strength. Benjamin is willing to pit himself against Oubaas. In this equation, power without opposition is equal to no power at all. Michiel fails in this regard, and is held in contempt by his father, who can perhaps see in the young boy the possibility of something other than the dominant heteronormative masculinity. The father rules his children as he rules

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<sup>61</sup> The Dutch Reformed Church supported and encouraged the Apartheid state, and was in turn propped up and consolidated by the state. In the words of Ponti Venter, who spoke during the TRC hearings, the church “acted as no more than limbs... of the volk and the state.”

the farm, with the threat of a terrible power to be unleashed on those beneath him. The reader notes how the different stages of Michiel's life are the result and compendium of what has happened to him, colouring what he has achieved and what he has realised in his life.

But it is not only this that makes up the existence of Behr's protagonist. The path he follows from childhood to the novel-present, a path consisting of losses and recoveries, of repressions and frustrated desires, of numerous thoughts of revenge and reconciliation which are or are not realised, of longings not expressed, of the fears that paralyze and overwhelm action or cause flight, of what he left behind and what excluded him as a result. He, the reader must conclude, consists as much of the uncertain, indecisive or diffuse elements of his past – the unspoken betrayals and treacheries and repressions – as of the shareable and quantifiable and memorable losses recorded by history.

Through Behr's slow-release method, we are able to piece together that Michiel's older brother Peet, "solid, reliable loving, fair-minded and brilliant Peet" (75) was secretly homosexual, and that his drowning just after his graduation was a self-inflicted wish to avoid a drawn-out death from AIDS. Leon, Peet's bosom friend and the last person to see Michiel's brother alive before his death, calls the event "a simple drowning" (88). Michiel's suspicion that something is being concealed is aroused – but he does not act until his own security is brought under threat. Having returned to the farm to face his parents, the account he gives before "the scornful Oubaas, the voiceless Ounooi" works within the same registers of concealment: "They set us up. We weren't doing anything. He was a friend from the officers' mess and I shouldn't have taken him to a whites-only beach. I made a simple mistake" (88).

The slippage between the two events is something Michiel catches a glimmer of: "when *simple drowning* overlays *simple mistake*, two phrases rub against each other like primitive sticks, raising a suspicion that till then has been unimaginable" (88). Under the guise of returning to the military base in Durban to face the disgrace that awaits him there,

goes instead to Cape Town. In Stellenbosch, he finds Leon, Peet's bosom friend and the last person to see him before his death (87). He reveals to Leon that he is "effectively AWOL and decommissioned", and this prompts Leon, the witness to Peet's shame, to open up with revelations of his own. From this meeting, Michiel buys his ticket and bears this secret away with him to London.

Peet's suicide brings Michiel's own moment of shame into sharp focus. The two acts are seemingly unknowable in motive (more on this later), but they both confront the limits of the sayable. That is, they are both willed protests against the silencing of those who enact them, and they demonstrate that the only available alternative against the edict of silence is a blind acting-out, a bodied protest. Such a protest is how the novel figures the sexual encounter between Michiel and Karien in their mingled grief at Peet's death. The act occurs spontaneously, with no thought for their modesty.

The manner of the incident which prompts Michiel's flight, the encounter with Govender, is unveiled in similarly cumulative fashion, over many pages of allusions and hints, such that when the incident is revealed in full to his family and friends, the accompanying confessor's relief, a clearing of mind where before he was exhausted, is palpable (167). Despite it being a story Michiel has "repeated in a thousand and one versions, snippets and asides" to the people who have come to be his family in America, he is uncertain of how to proceed. What emerges when he begins to speak is an assemblage of facts, a truth-telling rather than a confession.

This truth-telling, to be sure, requires a degree of risk-taking. As a relational process, Michiel's account carries no guarantee that those who hear it will be forgiving. Instead, he must rely on different valences: that those to whom he gives his account will recognise the truth-directedness of his gesture; and by so doing that he will be discharged of the burden of guilt he has carried with him for fifteen years. If the scene of his address is to be faithful, it

will *not* require remorse: that is, it will not act in a theological or juridical fashion (Moore, “Speak, You Also” 88). It is, then, a scene that requires a receptive ‘we’ to hear the account of the ‘I’ who speaks. This contrasts sharply with the reception inflicted on Michiel at the first instance of his attempt to give account, fifteen years before. Now, of course, there is more to be said, more to potentially be forgiven for.

Behr’s depiction of the initial point of Michiel’s dishonour shades in the initial point of rupture in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, as Michiel brings his story, namely the transgressive sexual moment between the white protagonist and a subaltern partner. Behr’s plot weaves in the superficialities of *Disgrace*’s conceit: Michiel’s thoughtlessness about the fate of the officer and the deleterious consequences of his actions for his family are an instance of the I-self’s “not-wanting-to-be” (Moore, “Speak, You Also” 88). His actions are, via a strange inversion, a flight from the ethical relation of mortal being (Moore, “Speak, You Also” 88). To illustrate my point, here is Michiel’s description of his return to the farm:

I came back to the farm. I didn’t know there had been some article in the papers with our names. I thought the navy would keep it under wraps. I told Oubaas and Ounooi that it had been a set-up, because of the race thing on the whites-only beach. That Govender was a friend and I had made a mistake by going where the law said we couldn’t. Oubaas was as angry about my lack of contrition and the subterfuge as he was about what I’d done. What I’d become . . . I was no longer the kid he’d known. I was the one he’d always feared. *Show me you can be at least some excuse for a man by doing the honourable thing and go and finish your two years. Humble yourself in the face of your disgrace. After that, we can talk.* (171–172)

Oubaas’s anger is intensified by Michiel’s lack of remorse, the prodigal son’s remorse being an essential condition of the father’s forgiveness. Michiel does not, at the time, provide the required display of submission that would affirm the father’s authority. The patriarch turns his back on Michiel, sending him away to face his disgrace. In a passage that takes place at the farm’s dam, the day before he is to return, Oubaas invokes the motif of game playing that occurs in Coetzee’s *Summertime*: “that’s life, Michiel. You play by the rules or else you don’t play at all” (58).

Michiel’s realisation that he “is the rule the game depends upon”, and his arrival at the farm is an act of survival that demonstrates that he has surpassed ‘the game’. To be sure, his

account before the assembled community of family and friends on the day of Ounooi's funeral relies on the different valences I refer to above. Benjamin's question – "what happened?" – is addressed to Michiel, who "hears no demand, no entitlement or the usual confidence brimming" in Benjamin's voice (167). In Butler's terms, the question arises out of "a desire to know and understand that is not fuelled by the desire to punish", and Michiel's response in turn expresses "a desire to explain and narrate that is not prompted by a terror of punishment (*Giving an Account* 11). Michiel is thus in a position, finally, to give an account of himself.

Because the past is such a disruptive phenomenon, even this position is beset by difficulties. The betrayals that encircle the trauma that has led them to this moment are manifold. If Michiel betrayed his parents and Karien by taking flight, then it is because, we are aware, he was himself so deeply betrayed. There are three struggles, points of difficulty which conspire to alter Michiel's retelling of what happened. The first is the presence of Karien at the scene of address. Michiel remembers acutely the last words between them, and her wish never to see or hear from him again. Michiel is aware that he has subjected her to "countless smaller treacheries" (172), that the close bond between them has suffered injury. The botched abortion<sup>62</sup> that comes in the aftermath of their night together, and her harsh words to him on the last occasion of their meeting before he flees the country, cannot easily be washed away. He finds himself in the present having reservations, the reader notices, about once more implicating Karien in his shame. Perhaps more notably, he does not wish to commit another betrayal: why bring her more grief? Why afflict her with his feelings when what has passed cannot be revoked? Nevertheless, he finds that it is to her that he addresses himself.

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<sup>62</sup> The foetus clings on, refusing to be abolished. The trauma it suffers causes it to be stillborn. The reader might wonder if Behr is consciously deploying the symbolism of Gordimer's idea of the interregnum.

Part of this must surely come down to the presence of Karien's husband Dirk, whose words fifteen years before condemned where they could have saved, is a source of consternation for Michiel. His attraction to the man is mixed with anger at the church's morbid complicity with the system. His relationship with Karien, which begins in the aftermath of the botched abortion and draws him into the Steyn family, effectively usurps Michiel's position in the family order. Now, Michiel finds himself unable to respond charitably to Dirk. Part of his inability stems, the reader is told, from his knowledge that he and Govender were betrayed by a padre who, he learns later, became a spy for the South African National Intelligence Service.<sup>63</sup> Listening to Dirk's awkward concession of misjudgement, Michiel feels as though the pastor is accusing and absolving himself in the same breath, without being asked to do either. When Dirk talks about the work he now does in the township, the reader cannot but draw the link to the padre who did "hearts and minds" work with Black and Indian children (169).

Dirk's words are, we must understand, part of the same bad faith as this "hearts and minds" work. They are not received warmly by Michiel because the pastor's admission of having condemned on the basis of motives revealed by time and history to be abstract makes him blameworthy. Dirk's words – "things are different now" – do nothing for Michiel, though they may ameliorate the conscience of the man who utters them.

Finally, the presence of his brother, "the Chosen, the one in three who did not betray a single expectation" (59) *must* influence the conditions under which Michiel gives account of himself. Benjamin's personhood is for Michiel a rebuke of his own deviance, and has been since they were children. It is Benjamin who has called Michiel back to the farmhouse, and it is he who takes their father's place as the primary authority-figure who will (Michiel

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<sup>63</sup> The *autre-biographical* voice speaks clearly here, since the reader would no doubt be aware of Behr's confession of his having spied for the NIS after completing his national service.

believes) inherit the farm. The uncertainty Michiel feels in exposing himself as vulnerable before the chosen son is tangible.

This point is underscored by the hesitancy with which Michiel begins to speak. There are many contingencies to be accounted for but, ultimately, the narrative surfaces. Giving account brings the unbearable events into the speaker's present, but only as something that has already taken place. Michiel speaks not as a victim – though the sympathetic reader might expect his tone to be one of justifiable reproach and complaint – but as one attempting to understand the actions of those who caused him to undergo suffering.

So Michiel begins to speak. My argument is that this account is necessarily altered by who hears it. From this, it must follow that the account is not truly faithful. It cannot ever be truly faithful because of what it has to accommodate: the utterance is always provisional. Nevertheless, this conclusion of mine is immediately qualified, rendered incomplete, by the fact that Michiel's self-scrutiny in the moment of address *is* a truth-directed attempt. What emerges is irretrievably affected by the subject's location in history. For Michiel to speak truly, he would need to access a different, other self.

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Michiel's reticence where the shameful moment is concerned is notable. He is able to admit that he was not thinking, and that "something more basic was at work" (112), but he avoids true self-revelation even in the moment of confession. Kamil insightfully terms it "an act of shame-based, racist desire, not of simple pleasure" (112). The humiliating consequences of his actions prompt Michiel to enact a willed gesture of self-disappearance, when his initial flight to the farm does not provide the refuge he seeks. He slinks away, seen off on his departure only by his mother who is unaware that he is carrying his passport and does not plan on returning to the military base.

If Michiel hopes that this escape will expand his world into something less claustrophobic, then the reality is that his memories cannot be shed as easily as his South African identity. His life outside South Africa still carries the trace of the world he has tried to leave behind him. Living overseas requires other forms of concealment: concealing his identity as a white South African, or passing himself off as a conscientious objector to the South African system. The ruse does not work:

In the early years – in England and Australia, when his thoughts still came mostly in Afrikaans, before San Francisco and Kamil's domestication of him – his mind played with encountering anyone from here. He had pictured the other's face and his own feigned indifference, when, offhandedly, he would say *oh, that was a long time ago. I scarcely remember those days*. The one time he bumped into someone he knew – the woman on the jetty in the Solomons – he'd tried, only to see the deception register at once" (5).

He learns to keep a watchful vigilance for other South Africans, avoiding them when he can. He feels no solidarity with his fellow émigrés, who have too easily cast off the shame they innately carry with them as white South Africans. His flight from South Africa is a survival strategy, a form of intervention against oppression staged as a resistance to the system's incursions on his identity and his freedom. His is an exodus along established pathways: the motif of leaving and taking up occupation as an émigré is a route available to him as a result of his whiteness. If whiteness is "a passport to belonging" (Nuttall, *Subjectivities* 123) Michiel reinforces this last point when he narrates that "he left here with a white skin, a thousand and one choices, change to spare and only personal scores he wasn't sure he wanted settled" (94).

The years pass. Michiel has sexual encounters with various colonial Others, attends anti-Apartheid talks and has Sol Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* presented to him by a Black South African woman in London (71). Throughout, he has to operate in modes of visibility and invisibility: his white South African identity places him at risk of censure and must be concealed or disguised at times. What Michiel learns during his peregrinations is that other people must be watched for their proclivities, and that belonging must be treated with

suspicion. One scene in particular scripts the cause of his apprehension. He attends a lecture on the Freedom Charter, hoping to return the Sol Plaatje book to its owner. He listens to the speakers, applauds the Charter, and is generally drawn to its goals and its promise of freedom for all. His enthusiasm, and his faith in the possibility of an ultimate collective harmony, is sharply burst, however, when an Australian asks how the liberation movement views the question of gay and lesbian rights. The answer is disconcerting:

Gay men and lesbians are jumping on the back of the democratic movement and exploiting the struggle for their own ends. I don't see them homeless or hungry or suffering. Where does this business come from? It's very fashionable over here in the West. It will disappear along with colonialism and racism. We haven't heard of this problem in Africa until recently. In a liberated South Africa people will be normal. Tell me, are lesbians and gays normal? If everyone was like that the human race would die out (132).

Michiel comes away from the meeting with a discomfiting awareness of the many treacheries and inconstancies of the country he has left behind, resolving to “let them stew in their hateful white and black fat, together. The liberation movement, as Michiel is exposed to it, is incapable of providing a hospitable space for all.

His time overseas is presented in the novel through his recollections and through conversations with Glassman and Kamil, who attempt to get at the root cause of Michiel's problems with attachment. Like the prodigal son, Michiel devotes himself to wild living, becoming the unknowing subject of an increasingly strong desire to liberate his desires from the repressions and sublimations of his historical moment. He is driven to annihilate the loving side of himself because he feels in this part of himself the presence of Ounooi and Peet. Put another way, he is fleeing from himself. The reader observes how Michiel sabotages or destroys every relationship he enters, in ways that repeat his initial transgression.<sup>64</sup> This self-destructive trait is recognised by Kamil after a year of living with Michiel. It is Kamil

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<sup>64</sup> So for instance, he enters into a relationship with a lawyer who fast-tracks his application for citizenship: “even before he got his papers the lawyer found him in bed with a Samoan fisherman” (133).

who prompts Michiel to begin the sessions with Glassman that will fill a void in Michiel's life.

Michiel's relationship with Kamil occupies the fringes of the novel in some respects. It too is subject to the silencing of the established order, but Kamil is the ever-present ethical counter-voice to Michiel. With him, "no word was unheard and nothing was made easy", and his presence reminds Michiel that he is not (or not always) the victimised other. Michiel is not initially attracted to Kamil. Michiel behaves like an unsympathetic reader, surveying Kamil's body and finding him "*too effeminate, too gay, not straight-acting enough, dick too small, not muscular enough, too obvious and oblivious of it*" (Behr's emphasis, 137). Kamil is everything Michiel's early conception of masculinity and concern with concealment is against: he is camp, self-assured, and a member of outspoken activist groups. He has none of Michiel's anxieties, and he moves through the novel being and saying the things that Michiel is reluctant to be and say.

It thus follows that Michiel must reach beyond himself in order to love Kamil. "Allow yourself to feel what your doing does to me", Kamil tells Michiel, forcing him to abandon the casual manner in which he has been treating their relationship (81)<sup>65</sup>. The implication is clear: Michiel has to open himself up to the possibility of being affected by another in ways other than the violent paradigm he has grown up in. The additional point that emerges here is that Michiel must recognise his role as a causative force, one capable of causing injury to those he cares for.

Struggling to shake off the history that has informed his relations with the world, Michiel is initially unable to respond to Kamil's alterity. He grudgingly accepts the commitment to not abandon Kamil. Despite the wariness of Kamil's proximity to him, and almost without his knowing, Michiel is affected by Kamil's presence in his life. In time, his

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<sup>65</sup> Kamil's statement evokes Levinas' "*Me Voici*" (*Otherwise than Being* 145) as the moment where the other calls attention to itself as an Other, placed for the self's consideration.

agitations abate, and the urge to flee from Kamil leaves him. In the process of being affected by Kamil, Michiel loses the separation and distance inscribed by the position he has adopted in response to history, and this enables a new ethical engagement to take over.

The latter lends himself to being read as a figure for what Judith Butler terms “the precarious life of the Other” (*Precarious Life* xvii). That is, he draws the reader’s attention to the status of the body as that which is ontic and injurable. The relationship between them is conducted under the shadow of Kamil’s HIV-positive status, and when he takes a turn for the worse, in the days before “the miracle drugs”, Michiel must tend to him. Michiel is “baffled, enraged and fearful” of the commitment required of him (82). He nurses Kamil through the touch-and-go times, not knowing if his partner will make it, but committed nonetheless to take care of him. The spectral presence of death brings to the fore Michiel’s fear of abandonment, and the risk of losing Kamil to the same disease that claimed Peet. As the drugs bring Kamil back from the brink of death, so Michiel learns truths about himself that reverberate with other events in his life. Because he is connected, he is responsible, and it is this responsibility that reforms Michiel.<sup>66</sup>

This relationship is figured in the novel as something proairetic – we wonder why Behr evanescently links Michiel’s self-immolating escapade with Lieutenant Govender and his later relationship with Kamil. The reader must surely be tempted to draw a link between Michiel’s shame and his relationship with Kamil,<sup>67</sup> especially since it seems disingenuous that the normally perceptive Michiel is so blind to his own motives, even when Glassman points them out to him. But the narrative refuses to divulge itself on this point, and this refusal marks itself upon the text as a moment of blindness that exceeds Michiel’s capacity for awareness.

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<sup>66</sup> See Tom McCarthy’s “Between Pain and Nothing” in *The Milgram Re-enactment: Rod Dickinson’s Re-enactment of Stanley Milgram’s ‘Obedience to Authority’ Experiment*, Jan van Eyck Press, Holland, 2004.

<sup>67</sup> As in Michiel’s off-handed noticing, which he pardons almost immediately, that there are no photos of himself and Kamil at Paradys.

The reader notes a lesser phenomenon at work here: what is important is not Kamil's illness, but what Kamil's illness tells us about Michiel. One notes that Michiel's failure to sympathise adequately has become a source of discomfort to him: he resumes his sessions with Glassman while Kamil is ill, stuck in a perpetual loop where the moment of abandonment is relived infinitely. What happens to Michiel evinces Tom McCarthy's description of a Levinasian ethical engagement, where "it is always to an 'Other' that I am responsible – one whose utter otherness interrupts my self-possession, dashes it, makes it impossible" ("Between Pain and Nothing" n.p.). Michiel is 'emptied'<sup>68</sup> of his former being, forced to recognise that his status as an 'I' makes him answerable.

That last word is highly significant for the reader. In this novel, the relation to alterity is figured as a need to see beyond what is seen, what Levinas would term as 'responsiveness' to the face of the Other for whom I am responsible.<sup>69</sup> Such responsiveness is present in *Kings of the Water*, but in the paradoxical way of being present as absence and inadequacy. This Levinasian conceptualisation has its expression in the connection between Michiel and Kamil, a relationship which provides a space for other relations to generate, effectively culminating in Michiel's decision to renew contact with his mother. This connection also, of course, provides a model for the reader to follow.

### **Memory Repeated in the Superlative: Mourning and Living On**

In *Kings of the Water*, the literal and metaphorical places and placements of shame and working through shame are constantly at issue. Questions of victimhood, silence, and the un/working of memory balance in an unstable fashion, as the narrative gradually reveals its

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<sup>68</sup> See Levinas' *Otherwise than Being* 92.

<sup>69</sup> See Bernhard Waldenfels' essay "Levinas and the Face of the Other" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63.

secrets: how Peet's death was in fact a suicide, and how the farm itself harbours secrets that threaten to displace the Steyn family's place as rulers of the land.

These questions encircle the notion of the unforgivable action, where said action creates a form of aporia that invites questions about the nature of memory and forgetting. The most important of these questions is whether repressing memory can ever suppress the shame that accompanies the knowledge of one's complicity in unforgivable acts. Michiel, arriving in the novel's near-present time is consciously aware of the fragility of memory, which depends so much on knowledge. Looking at the Steyn family photographs on Ounooi's desk, he takes notice of one in particular:

Peet. In color. His head, in profile, is inclined as the Chancellor touches his shoulder. Who would not recognize the then South African President's skewed grin? Beneath Peet's cap and the wing of dark hair over his ear the features are more pronounced than they have ever been in Michiel's memory. A deep groove extends from beside his nose to the corner of the black moustache. A few days before fishermen will find his body. Michiel's eyes go to his brother's tie and white shirt collar, where the black gown and the two hoods come together. The photographer's flash has cast a shadow where the shirt collar stands away from the throat at the Adam's apple. How much weight had he lost? Oubaas and Ounooi must have noticed. Ounooi, your genius for seeing only what you wished. (39)

The picture is silent, but it has a mute enormity to it, an endless sense of loss which resonates with Michiel, who views the picture like the attentive reader, with a new eye. The scene delicately emphasises how Michiel has been taken over by a new way of relating to the world. To be sure, Peet's loss is a part of Michiel's innermost being, and the distance inscribed by death allows other forms of being in the world to be perceived.

This observation can be read against a moment that Michiel's memory grants us access to, an event that occurs during Ounooi's visit to see him in America before her death. They have just been to see a performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Ounooi is commenting on the behaviour of Blanche DuBois (86). Standing on "the winter-wet streets of San Francisco", Michiel tells his mother "what he, in his own disgrace, went to find out from Leon" (89):

*You read all these books, you stand here prattling about a literary character in denial, you rattle off phrases from Shakespeare and quote Brecht in German. But they have never made you see anything of*

*your own life. Words, words, words that entertain you but do not affect you one jot! Well, let me relieve you for once and all of your denial, your own delusions about your sons. Listen, you elitist snob. Let me inform you about Peet.*

*Michiel, please. Stop.*

*Peet did not drown.*

With her back to him Ounooi raises her arm with the program and the plastic bag. *Don't do this*, she says.

*Drowning as we use it in English implies an accident. Selfmoord, Ounooi, if you want the Afrikaans.*

She swings around with her forearm covering half her face. She stares at him, her eyes bewildered.

*To drown oneself is suicide.*

Her gaze is disoriented, her look unfocused. She shakes her head, turns, seems to half-stumble, her cheek squashed and distorted against the window.

*You will never forgive yourself for this*, she whispers.

*He walked into the sea because he was dying*, he smirks, choosing words for their spite, *and there ain't any denying that!*

She throws her head back, covers her face with one hand and raises her other arm as if holding him off . . . *No, your eldest was not a haemophiliac or a mainliner. Let me present it in terms Benjamin would use: you and Oubaas had a sixty-six and two-thirds percent success rate – two homos out of three. Now he snorts: when it comes to real Afrikaner farm boys that ain't half bad, Ounooi. You raised two of us. That statistic in my world is a mark of pride.*

'Then why . . .' she whispered, turning wet eyes on him, shaking her head, pleading, 'why use it against your mother like a blade?' (86–90)

This episode, replayed in Michiel's mind, is the novel's best portrait of the way the silence has distorted and disfigured the Steyn family. Silence contains within itself the possibility of being an inadvertently ethical action, by not revealing where revelation (speech) would betray. But Ounooi's silence has the effect of condemning Michiel. Michiel attempts here to obliterate Ounooi's silence, calling forth (or providing a voice for) his dead brother Peet.

Tellingly, Michiel's harsh words, his railing against the falseness or bad faith of Ounooi's quasi-European existence on the farm, invert the power relations between them. But his violent appropriation of Peet's death, the unsayable secret, fractures Ounooi's reserve. She staggers before the violence of Michiel's speech, as if her son had rained down physical blows upon her. She cannot bear to hear what Michiel is saying, because, *pace* Javier Marías, "Listening is the most dangerous thing of all. . . . Listening means knowing, finding out, knowing everything there is to know" (*Heart So White* 4).

Michiel's words call on Ounooi to see herself as a causative force. Judith Butler describes this as the moment where we are called on by some authority "not only to avow our causal link between our own actions and the suffering that follows but also to take

responsibility for those actions and their effects” (*Giving an Account* 10). To be associated with the heinous silencing of her son’s life is deeply distressing to her, but the reader is aware that the accusation in Michiel’s voice is unfaithful to Peet’s memory and the willed disappearance he enacts. Moreover, he is unfaithful to the ethics of responsibility in the demands he places on Ounooi to respond. The revelation thus loses its power as an act of yes-saying, becoming a tawdry denouncement and a damaging spectacle (90). What is emphasised here is that the silencing act cannot be revoked, and the silence around Peet’s death cannot meaningfully be broken. That is, it fails to end the silence of Peet’s absence from their lives. Michiel’s response evokes the problematic of responding to what Theodor Adorno terms “damaged life” (*Minima Moralia*). Ounooi’s voice is throttled before the brutality of Michiel’s words: she fails to respond as he would want her too. Indeed, her words call to mind the Levinasian ‘*Me Voici*’, interrupting Michiel’s call to account. Michiel himself experiences, not the relief or resolution of his dissatisfaction in this moment of revelation, but only a dry grief. He has failed because in the violence of his outburst, he is reiterating the very masculine power he despises, and more significantly because it is an appropriation of Peet’s story in the name of a collectivity which, in Butler’s words, turns out not to be collective (*Giving an Account* 8).

Ounooi, for her part, is silent as they walk. Her answerlessness attests to the ways in which her position has been contaminated by the distortions of the system in which she has lived. When she breaks her silence, it is as though Michiel’s outburst has not transpired. It is little wonder that he shrinks back from pursuing the matter further, apologising to his mother (91). Michiel is able to see, in retrospect, how the society’s system of relations has conditioned and located Ounooi’s attitudes to life in general. For the attentive reader, Ounooi’s words must resonate with Kamil’s, calling on Michiel to see *himself* as an agent

capable of causing pain<sup>70</sup>. Michiel's limited sympathy, that is, his inability to extend his sympathy to his mother, is found wanting.

It is also clear that the scene of address inculcates the reader. What do I mean by this? If the reader during the scene exults in Ounooi's exposure to the truth, if the reader's sympathy lies only with Michiel as the wronged son, then her sympathy will have been found wanting.<sup>71</sup> How is the attentive reader to proceed, then? Simply put, if she is to read this moment in the novel with an attentive eye, then she must sympathise with both mother and son. The novel asks the reader to involve herself, to become answerable by recognising the flaws in both positions: to see how Michiel's position is informed by a desire for retribution, and indeed how both positions occur within the reconstituted space of Michiel's memory. The reader, upon witnessing Ounooi's *Me Voici*, must regard her careless actions as occurring within a wider uncaring system, as Michiel comes to realise. In seeking to read beyond the limitations of both characters, the reader would be confronted with her own limitations, made aware of her own complicity in the reductions of language, and thus be implicated in that of which she reads.

When mother and son part (unknowingly for the last time), it is on new terms, on an unconditional forgiveness of one another. Ounooi is, Michiel believes, uneducable on the truth: but if he is unable to exact an account from her, they have succeeded in bringing something new into the world, a kind of acceptance of themselves as living "damaged lives", which prompts them to each consider the other from the standpoint of redemption (Adorno *Minima Moralia* 247). Michiel is surprised, when he returns to South Africa, to discover that Ounooi has been in the vanguard of the community's fight against the stigma surrounding AIDS, an ethical response of her own. In holding his mother responsible for his suffering, he

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<sup>70</sup> Tom McCarthy expands Levinas' *Me Voici* as "Please stop hurting me" – effectively, '*Me voici*. Here I am. I'm human. Have compassion' ("Between Pain and Nothing" n.p.).

<sup>71</sup> See Mike Marais' "Violence", p 14.

has missed out on “the daily. The ordinary. His mother’s humble contribution to reconciliation” (93).

The end-moment between mother and son is a patch, a stitching-over of the aporetic trauma, which evinces Meg Samuelson’s idea “of the provisionality and fragility of social reconstruction: stitches and patches can mend and thereby make fabric re-usable and life liveable, without promising the original wholeness” of the pre-torn state (*Remembering* 240). “Denial”, is what Michiel calls his mother’s unwillingness to go to the past. “Forgiveness”, Kamil responds, “is accepting the distance between how we would have wanted things to be and the way they are” (9). The reader who arrives at the narrating scene, in the aftermath of Ounooi’s death, is able to see the truth as something between (or above, or outside) these two positions. The image evoked is of the grave, freshly filled: the aporetic space is covered over anew, but it is not (or not quite) apiece with the land around it.

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The foregoing argument has drawn out the ways in which dishonour deforms and cripples those upon whom it descends. My intention is to show that the novel view of dishonour has been perspectival: in this work, dishonour proceeds by degrees and shades. Behr’s work enumerates the various ways in which dishonour exerts its pull on those who fall under its aegis. But what is the self-obligation of the subject to whom dishonour clings?

In answering this question, I wish to advance the notion that guilt brings the subject thereof into being: The functioning of guilt in this novel takes shape on through two operations of guilt: the first is what Jean-Pierre Vernant would describe as “the ancient religious conception of the misdeed as a defilement attached to an entire race and inexorably transmitted from one generation to the next” (Vernant, *Myth and Tragedy* 81). The second operation is shame, which isolates the subject from the first order: in confessing and feeling shame, the subject becomes intensely aware of himself as different, as ‘apart’ from the

community which scourges him. For the reader who encounters *Kings of the Water*, the sense that accrues is of a shame that is intertwined with knowledge.<sup>72</sup> The movement from innocence to a state of knowledge is staged as co-terminous with the arrival of guilt.

Like John in Coetzee's *Summertime*, the younger Michiel is unaware of how unjust the society he lives in is. In one passage, Behr sums up the young Michiel's naiveté:

The ANC, as far as you know from newspapers and nominally from your own training, is one of the new communist/terrorist groups becoming more popular and dangerous than AZAPO and the Black Consciousness types. Over time, you have understood that an important leader is Nelson Mandela, imprisoned on Robben Island for a Moscow-backed conspiracy to overthrow the state. The Black-Consciousness types have a hero called Biko-something-or-other. (111)

A brief turn to the rhetorical devices through which this extract is articulated suffices for my purposes. Unlike the rest of the narrative, Michiel's place in the tangled web of dialogues from which this extract is drawn is rendered in the second-person. As a form of address, the vocative "you" distances the present-Michiel from the past he is being called to account for. On a wider level, the accusative address implicates the reader in the history being described, appropriating the reader's judgement and pre-empting it in the critique that follows from Kamil's father: "More streets on earth are named for Mandela than for any human being living or dead and you want to tell me you heard of him only when you were eighteen?" The reader is invited to occupy the vacant space of the "you", to share Michiel's position and discern his sense of guilt and shame at the history he has neglected. The 'he' who feels shame shares some sort of ground with the reader; the subject who is giving account, meanwhile, becomes 'other' to himself. The slippage between the terms of address highlights the proximity and the in(ter)determinacy that adhere to the novel's sense of relationality. This slippage also renders the reader's position in relation to the moment of giving account

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<sup>72</sup> The biblical resonance again manifests.

unstable, by refusing the distanced relation presupposed by the position of the inquiring reader<sup>73</sup>.

What is the implication of this? It is, simply, that the ethical relation imposed by the “you” is the mark of an always-tenuous blurring of subject positions from which a new generous ethics of response is called on to emerge. The work gesturally enacts the model of alterity it advocates, compelling the reader to use her imagination to respond to the subject in a non-conceptual way. My reading of *Kings of the Water* is one in which the novel’s textuality overflows the boundaries of its positioning in language, and the resulting implication of the reader allows the possibility, however slight, of a defamiliarizing reading.

While Michiel’s sense of dishonour is deeply individual, the sense of shame that accompanies this dishonour transcends the individual. His reasons for leaving trace back to the idea that he has transgressed the sanctified codes of society. The inculcation of the brutal testosterone – which Glassman is quick to remind him is not exclusive to South Africa – and militarised machismo of the South Africa in are in themselves not enough to strip the subject of innocence. What activates Michiel’s knowledge of himself is shame – shame wherein he learns truths about himself that would otherwise have been obscured by his upbringing. The price of this knowledge is, symbolically, expulsion from Paradys.

If my argument here is valid, then the question that arises is how the subject who is subjected to shame must behave. Shame is not easily dispelled once dishonour descends, as the reader witnesses in Michiel’s conflicted feelings where Karien is concerned. His awareness that the abortion has rendered Karien infertile induces in him a deep sense of guilt that makes him shrink before the prospect of seeing her again. But conversely, he is compelled to seek her out: he desires to know her story, a desire which calls her into a proximity they once shared. This proximity is palpable for the reader: the person who

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<sup>73</sup> See Judith Butler’s insightful remarks in this regard in the introduction to *Giving an Account* (12).

requests that one share one's feelings with him exposes himself, defenceless at the mercy of the one's giving or refusing to give account.

Karien's survival is a contrary impulse inspired by the death-bringing acts of betrayal. It disrupts the symbolic importance the novel accords dis/honour. She refutes the sense of dishonour as a guilt that goes to the inmost depths of the dishonoured, not through extravagant gestures of grief and accusation and regret or the laying bare of the confessional act, but by surviving doggedly and acting courageously. Though Michiel gains access to a distance that allows for different forms of negotiating and engaging with his shame, he is unable to make use of this distance through the proximity of the unspoken *j'accuse*. For most of the novel, Michiel is accused by others of loving inadequately. He comes to regard it as something in his makeup, but it is precisely this submission to shame that Karien rejects. She reconfigures herself as a speaking subject distanced from dishonour. What is infringed upon in the moment of dishonour, Karien seems to attest, is not her essence but a fiction to which she has subscribed. The sense/feeling of dishonour is real, but what is dishonoured is a construct which proves dispensable: other constructs may take their place. The construct Karien chooses to replace the one which has been besmirched is a new one in which Dirk takes the place of Michiel, and her adopted children take the place of the stillborn baby.

If the reader asks herself at this point how it happens that Karien is not also contaminated by the society in which she lives, then the response must be that she of course *is* contaminated. But if the entire society is contaminated, so the logic must follow, then what is contamination if not the norm? The normal, this novel seems to suggest, is precisely that which is *not* normal in society. Karien's state, following on from the example of Ounooi, is one in which implication and complicity are reworked into positive impulses.

Is this ethically vacuous? It is, if one accepts that complicity involves a giving-up of power that is irreversible. Accepting this would mean accepting that it is not truly open to

Karien to decide that the authority of the system, codified as *mythos*, is not what she wants. However, it is not, if one accepts that the turn away from the *mythos* to the *ethos* that it envisages is a turn towards making life inhabitable in the presence of uncertainty.<sup>74</sup> Displacing the status of dishonour (*mythos*) allows a form of life not totally assimilated by the historical. Of course, the reader is aware that the historical can never be completely overcome: Karien's damaged body is a physical reminder of the dishonour that clings to her, a legacy that has its metaphorical counterpart in the novel's depiction of the new South Africa, which I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.

Dishonour, then, appears to gesture to itself as a psychic space where fragments of thought are inseparable from the wellsprings of action, but expressible only as a kind of regretful retrospective glance. To access this intangible moment is the ultimate goal of the confession — an action unavailable to the individual, because the intangible recedes rapidly as it is glimpsed. It is an experience that has no authority, no signature. But while the sense of dishonour may no longer adhere, is shame so readily discarded? My argument here is that forgiving the self is potentially more difficult than being forgiven. The novel seems to suggest that Michiel's sense of shame is generated within himself — as an ethical response — rather than in the implicit accusation of an external party, it is less easily done away with. If Michiel is able to grant forgiveness to himself, particularly after his testimony, then the work will have resolved itself, will move steadily towards closure. But, of course, it is not that easy to bring about closure where the rupture has been so traumatic, so damaging in its effects.

The novel scripts the difficulty of forgiving the self in the exchanges between Michiel and Karien. Karien's ready forgiveness, the seeming ease with which she has absorbed what happened to her and restored her life is a source of anxiety for Michiel, who has for so long

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<sup>74</sup> Clifford Geertz defines the *mythos* as “the collections of notions a people has of how reality is at base put together”, and the *ethos* as people's “general style of life, the way they do things and like to see things done” (*Islam Observed* 96–97).

defined himself in relation to the event. When they turned their backs firmly on each other – he by fleeing, she with her letter expressing her wish never to see him again – Michiel’s sense of the event became subject to a time that does not end. This interminable period freezes him at the moment of the offense, while those left behind continue counting, and progress onwards through time. The nature of shame, Michiel is aware, is to estrange those it affects and to outlive its causes. Michiel knows nothing of the events that took place in his absence, the conversations he has not been present to hear, and the movements of those he used to be close to. In the absence of their presence, he has criticised, punished and condemned himself. It is, as Glassman offers, a way of feeling *something* when one’s ability to feel has been deadened by the lack of compassion that the system that shaped Michiel confers. A need for abjection, “some base need to beat up on yourself” in the words of his therapist, is the compulsion that animates Michiel.

It is no surprise then, to witness Michiel’s lack of conviction, his need to identify some remainder denoting the trauma. Karien’s willingness to give her good grace asserts the primacy of the individual ahead of the culture. She demonstrates, in her power to startle, and in the way she does not conform to Michiel’s expectations, an unassimilable alterity that undermines the very basis of the novel narrative. At this level, the novel intervenes in its own project, using Karien to give shape and habitation to the model of ethics it advocates as necessary for exiting the state of dishonour. Dishonour need not cling to one, need not inhabit one’s being without end. She translates Michiel’s shame from the overbearing and inconsolable sense of dishonour into something smaller and more manageable, something to be negotiated with the passing of time. The reader readily understands Michiel’s disbelief, which emerges from his sense that the system has occupied his inmost being. Karien’s lack of

regret or anger “undermines what he has presumed for so long: that in her life his place was taken by a wound” (151).<sup>75</sup>

There are difficulties that appear for the reader who takes it upon herself to be adjudicator between the two positions, even with the understanding I have advanced above. Karien’s approach seems not quite adequate, and calls attention to itself as such in the same way that the grave calls attention to itself as distinct from the land by the presence of disturbed earth. Of course, a captious reader might question why the narrative seems to didactically force a sense of propinquity with Michiel upon the reader’s position. That is, we are encouraged to read his accepting the claim made upon him by dishonour as properly his, his inconsolable mourning as something affirming. Here, the paradox-effect I spoke of earlier manifests again: one thing is offered (Michiel’s dishonour) while another thing accompanies it, masked but drawing attention to itself (his moral rectitude, finding grace despite his failings). The reader must occupy the third position, both within and without the dialogue and supplementing the novel by resolving this standoff. Such a position looks beyond these two extremes, emphasising the polyphony of positions within a dialogical system.

With this in mind, how then does Michiel alleviate his infatuation with the traumatic memory? He has seen, during his time overseas, how people have readjusted their guilty pasts:

No one, ever, black or white, had supported, been complicit in or privileged by Apartheid or any other kind of exploitation. By its own magnificent volition, a system existed without human agency. South Africans he bumped into overseas seemed to believe that they had, one and all, slipped from their mothers’ wombs with cries of *Amandla!* And their mothers had answered *Ngawethu!* (134).

The myth behind this idea – that people are free to make themselves anew, that they can willingly wash off the pain they have inflicted, that what they have left behind was not

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<sup>75</sup> It is useful to think of the contrast between Michiel and Karien in terms of Sam Durant’s distinction between “the assimilation or integration of loss into consciousness,” and a pathological, inconsolable mourning “marked by the failure to integrate loss into consciousness” (*Postcolonial Narrative* 30). As Mike Marais attests (quoting Durrant) “such a failure of integration goes together with an ‘encryptment’ of the dead within the living: ‘the dead remain secretly entombed within – internal to but sealed off from – the consciousness of the living, and they also remain enigmatic, coded, untranslated’ (31) [*Secretary of the Invisible* 56].

carried out with their complicity or cooperation, is exposed by the knowing stare of the Other who calls on one to give account: as Michiel himself puts it, the deception registers at once, in the instant of its being. What the narrative asks is whether there might be other ways to transcend “the tyrannies of nostalgia, loss and guilt” (149): through a truth-directed acknowledgement of shame, an acknowledgement of the self’s ability to be desubjectified rather than a steadfast self-preserving clinging to one’s individuality<sup>76</sup>. The questions it asks seem to have no direct answers: instead, they disrupt the *mythos*’ claim of a universalisable community.

### **The Infinite Demand of the Aporetic**

For the reader coming to the end of *Kings of the Water*, the work projects a difficulty where the thinking-through of trauma is concerned. My argument here is not that the novel struggles to resolve itself – its ending, though temporal and mediated by several unknowables – is a quite decisive return to the tyranny of time. It is rather that the novel presents a struggle to resolve dishonour that can never see completion. Its culmination in a space and time (2001) quite distant from the present-day (2011) or even the time of the novel’s publication (2009) calls forth the Blanchotian argument expounded in *The Writing of the Disaster*: “We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always-already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it” (1).

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<sup>76</sup> See Andreas Huyssen’s treatise on the work of memory: “while the hypertrophy of memory can lead to self-indulgence, melancholy fixations, and a problematic privileging of the traumatic dimension of life with no exit in sight, memory discourses are absolutely essential to imagine the future and to regain a strong temporal and spatial grounding of life and the imagination in a . . . society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space” (*Present Pasts* 6)

It is at this impossible point that the narrative begins its end. As Michiel is leaving the farm, he learns of the attacks on the World Trade Centre, the real world intruding to start the clock again. Faced with the unknowable future – which is of course a future the reader relates to as the past – Michiel chooses to stop at the roadside and slips into the landscape to find a cell phone signal that will connect him with the outside world. His failure to find this connecting signal isolates him from America, whose status as ‘the fabled damned of nations’<sup>77</sup> is horrifyingly realised at the very moment that Michiel is making his way back to it. Unsure of when he will be able to return, our last view of Michiel is watching him offer an apple to a decrepit horse that approaches him without fear. It is a scene that will, if the reader chooses, stand to comparison with a similar moment in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, and it is here that the sought-after complete encounter occurs with the other, an encounter premised on the gift of hospitality. It is an unplanned moment, an encounter with Otherness that avoids monumentalising the Other in an intractable inside-self/outside-Other dichotomy.

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This is undoubtedly a novel concerned with the failure of alterity, a failure it stages in its characters’ inability to respond with true generosity when before the face of the Other. The reader notes Michiel’s fascination with how the farm as a temporarily arrested space is struggling to fully integrate with the new South Africa, through his thoughts on the Black characters in the novel. Of the cast of workers who maintain Paradys, there is often allusion, but little in the way of presence. In an illuminating conversation, the family discusses the future of the farm, with the threat of land appropriation being voiced by Giselle, Benjamin’s wife, whose sneering resentment of the new order as likely to bring ruin to them all represents the unresolved white consciousness that Michiel distances himself from (161–162).

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<sup>77</sup> Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg both speak through Michiel. The term comes from Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*.

Giselle's racial antipathy contrasts with her husband's cautious optimism for the future: Benjamin's belief in the neoliberal future envisioned by Thabo Mbeki is bolstered by the possibility that Paradys can be transformed into a tourism hotspot generating never-before seen profits. Both views cast the White South African as natural custodian of the land. In each case, the human dimension is lacking, as evidenced in Karien and Michiel's concern for the workers and the claim they have to the land. In this respect, the novel's title – which references a children's game where the titular king holds that title briefly and precariously – is significant. The revelation that Michiel has not been disowned, but is in fact joint heir to the farm is troubling for Michiel, who realises that any claims that might be made to the farm will come from those who work the land. They, the Steyn children and their wives, are “English-speaking Afrikaners all of them: boere, coming to the farms in their free time. Hobby farmers with the real business of making money and life elsewhere” (165). The novel acknowledges that time cannot be halted forever, even on the farm, however discomfoting the notion may be.

In this respect, the status of the Black characters is a key example characterised by Behr with somewhat uneven results. The long-suffering maid Alida is a curiously inscrutable figure: Michiel speculates on the problematic idea that she still sleeps in the servant's quarters while her financially successful daughter has been “promoted” to the guest rondavel<sup>78</sup> – but Alida seems to take the obscene contradiction in her stride. The injustice is noticed, but not *felt* by Michiel, who lets himself off the hook through the distance he interposes between himself and the farm. He is, as far as he is concerned, a spectator incapable of acting. Again, the voice of conscience is provided by Karien and Dirk's adopted son Kagiso: “O se ke wa nyeka marao makgowa jwalo ka ntja” (140).<sup>79</sup> His words show that

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<sup>78</sup> Tellingly, neither of them occupies the farmhouse.

<sup>79</sup> Awkwardly translated Sesotho statement on Behr's part. Correctly, *O se ke wa nyaka marao a makgowa jwalo ka ntja*, which translates as “You go after white ass like a dog.”

the narrative of reconciliation symbolised in Karien's family too readily obscures some uncomfortable incongruities, but the provocative moment seems to be deployed only for its polemic effect, doing little beyond gesturing to the discordant notes the inner lives of the Black characters in this novel.

It is perhaps here that Behr's narrative can be faulted: he seems undecided about what to do with the cast of Black characters who maintain the maze. We are aware, because Behr makes us aware, that Alida's is a position whose meaning is inextricably linked to the racialised political and economic inequalities of the past, but the limited narration does not task itself with developing the reverberations of this position amidst the socio-political upheaval that even Paradys is not immune to. Lerato and her family are placed within the narrative seemingly to signpost the social pertinence of the burgeoning Black middle class. They are another literary seduction that teases but is never completely within the grasp of the novel's machinery. These characters are aware of their occlusion, but since we only see them from the authorial perspective – in a vaguely white liberal sense of right and wrong – the position of the darker attendants to the novel slips away. The same might be said of the carnivalesque presence of Mamparra, the “astrante blerrie meid” whose ancestors predate the Steyn's occupation of Paradys. Her presence is a potential source of disruption to the Steyn's entitlement. But because the work toils so earnestly to illuminate the ‘big picture’ that the reader is supposed to ‘get’, that the ‘small picture’ is obscured when they could have been accommodated in the same ‘shot’. The ‘small picture’ is glimpsed only as a remainder, a blurred abstraction that mars the clarity of what is being observed.

This blurring of presence resonates in other areas of the novel. The fate of Paradys' neighbours, the Oberholzer family who are brutally murdered on their farm might be something they have brought upon themselves through the brutal treatment of their farm-workers, were it not for the fact, casually deployed by the author, that the workers who were

brutalised were murdered when they sought to defend their employers. The author's imposition of blurring on the emotive topic<sup>80</sup> emphasises the effect of mediation, turning it into what it is: an endlessly reproduced trope against which the conservative Afrikaner is tempted to forsee their ruin.

The novel displays an intuitive awareness of the anxieties felt by sectors of the population about towards the changing times and the impact of this change on the way lives are now being lived. Michiel is implicated in this anxiety, despite his attempt to distance himself through his position of exile: he finds that the distance of his exile collapses before the sense of belonging that knows that the sense of belonging he feels must be guarded against, cannot be allowed to flourish without an awareness of his complicity in the processes of subjugation that accrue to ownership of the farm. His awareness that living out a utopian fantasy in the midst of the changing country is irresponsible. As he tells Benjamin, "to us, Paradys is an abstraction. It's a name with fence posts that can be moved, even overseas, in the blink of an eye. But for these people this is their lives, not just a word. I cannot live with myself even partly responsible for their living like this. I don't want that responsibility, cop out or not" (217).

Benjamin is curiously observant to Michiel's attempt to inscribe the inconsolable as a facet of their relation to Paradys:

'Does their proximity make it intolerable, Michiel?' Benjamin calls to him from the graveside. 'Seeing their lives so close? Because I know enough about California's economy to know who does the work there. You can hold this pose only because you don't see the hands picking the strawberries and lettuce you eat. I have business partners there, Michiel, I know the shape of the eyes of the people who do the unskilled labour in San Francisco. Don't come and whine to me, to us in this country about exploitation, please' (217).

His response affirms what the reader already knows: there is no elsewhere from which to locate one's criticism of the system. Though he may protest otherwise, Michiel's alternative

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<sup>80</sup> Part of the modern Afrikaner's engagement with the farm is the nightmarish spectre of farm murders, brutal criminal invasions of the farm space in which the farmer, or the farmer and his family, are often tortured and killed.

is as much an abstraction as what he perceives Paradys to be. Benjamin undermines Michiel's nostalgic<sup>81</sup> but ultimately ethically non-substantive view, affirming instead an ethically committed and enabling engagement from which progress might emerge. Benjamin's view, then, short-circuits the ambivalent answerlessness inherent in Michiel's approach: it is a rejection of a fraught mortality which wheels about "as if with one foot nailed to the floor" (Critchley, *Very Little* 225).

If the reader is tempted to agree with Benjamin, it is because his words provide succour from the unrelenting veil of uncertainty Michiel's consciousness (and thus the reader, for we are positioned in close proximity to him) stumbles under as we work through the abyssal space of memory. The pathway opened up by Benjamin's perceptive words is towards something new – not the old, non-substantive nostalgic relation of childhood which is lost and refutes one's efforts to find it again, but a radically different substantive engagement, one that is open to change and speaks in a speculative vocabulary about the future. The older Steyn son's idea of engaging differently does not advocate a concomitant elision of the farm's historical status as space of division; neither does it deny whatever kind of complicity one may have shared in that process of division. On the contrary, it necessitates an active and attentive remembering. There can be no escape from complicity, but that should not preclude white subjects from being able to express their proximity to the land, or attempting to find or create in it the intimacy of home through reflective engagement with the space and those who constitute it.

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The work is not without fault: Behr is inordinately fond of longeurs: following Michiel's train of unvoiced thought is a bewildering and wearying experience for the reader, a labyrinthine descent into memory. Each thought and each memory opens up various turnings

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<sup>81</sup> In the sense that it longs for a purity of engagement that, never having existed, is confined to the same past-life as the dead.

down which one tumbles. It is a novel whose animating impulse is digression; it proceeds by digression; digression as a way of escaping the self. But all the digressions lead back to the central character's consciousness. What Behr's novel demonstrates is that self-absorption is ultimately a trap of consciousness into which it is easy to slip.

I want to adduce here that the novel is working with the creative constraints of a field of contestations and counter-narratives. The novel proceeds by engaging with the plaasroman genre: the image of the farm novel is re-edited to create new forms. *Paradys* is nothing if not a set assembled from past and present forms, a layered assemblage composed of fragments manipulated and recombined to bring about new meanings. Thus, the work has actors in various roles, re-enacting words and facts from an archive. The work proceeds at a Baudrillardian remove from this archive, which is itself composed of scripted representations, in an infinite move of representing. The reader grasps this: she cannot but grasp the presence of the archive and the conceptual machinery that raids it. Behr's novel, to be sure, co-opts the original plaasroman genre into a new instance, an event rather than an object.

To say this is to argue that a great degree of the plaasroman's intertextuality is inevitable: the archive comes to be an entirely transpersonal order. The reader of *Kings of the Water*, attentive to this, cannot help but notice a palpable anxiety, as if the author is trying to neutralise the possibility of reinscribing the problematics of the genre by deploying defences against them already. It is, in the words of Zadie Smith, "a novel that wants you to know that it knows you know it knows." The work does the job of interpretation even before the reader arrives at the scene of reading. . Behr's work exudes a strong sense of constructedness, of artificial landscaping in which events can be placed, repeated or replayed a decade and a half later. But perhaps the reader's suspiciousness is misplaced. The author is introspectively mapping out his storytelling process producing an immersive text that invites comparisons

with Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish* in its encouraging the reader to hover over the in-bent world of its protagonist.

By this, I mean that the novel stages a move from interiority which is always disrupted – the self cannot ever escape itself, but it exhibits a desire to defeat solipsism by reading itself against its legacy. The reader who participates in the event of reading this novel is aware that there can be no new *plaasroman* – that the time the *plaasroman* belongs to is fractured, divided off from the present. It follows then that this novel's attempt to engage with that genre can only ever be an incomplete attempt. In Derrida's words, if "the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it" (*Specters*). How to proceed, then? I would argue that this novel calls the logic of procession itself into question. Part of that questioning is an acknowledgement of a dread before the unknowable future.<sup>82</sup> By blurring the despair of the disaster unfolding in Michiel's adopted home with the foregrounded redemptive hope of the immediate solitary present in which Michiel finds himself, the work gestures to the existence of an 'eternally invariant'<sup>83</sup> position from which to perceive its subject.

I am of course aware, as I stressed in the introduction to this chapter, that Behr is going over the ground he has covered in his previous works: *Kings of the Water* repeats most of the concerns that occur and linger in *The Smell of Apples* and in *Embrace*. The engagement with history that occurs here is a refinement of several gradations from the notion that tragic guilt can be voided of itself and used in the service of a truth-directed account of the self. The reader of this work is conducted towards the limits of ethical engagement, towards the failure to engage with history. If the reader is then led to quizzically ask, 'where to from here?' Then the reader has proved unequal to the task set by the work. If, on the other hand, the reader is

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<sup>82</sup> A dread that may be theorized as a fear of the future's inability to be consigned to any perspectival grid from which its meaning may be drawn.

<sup>83</sup> Cf Adorno, *Notes on Literature*, Vol 2. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. University of Minnesota Press: 1989, 6.

left asking 'where here is', then the reader will have exercised the ethical engagement the novel itself cannot.

## Chapter 3

### Learning to Live Finally: J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*.

*Understanding it can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning* (Adorno *Minima Moralia* 283).

### The Dredging Machine

If J.M. Coetzee's work has always orbited in the more remote spaces of South African fiction, it is because there is in his work a level of complex reflectivity, a complexity held within the restrained and sparse prose with which the author constructs his narratives. Of course, Coetzee is not, and has never been, the only South African writer to practise a level of reflexivity in his writing, and the sheer amount of critical writing on nearly every aspect of his work might suggest that as an author, J.M. Coetzee is in danger of being oversubscribed. What sets Coetzee's writing apart is the manner in which the author strives to negotiate the limits of alterity. The reader of Coetzee's formal experiments is acted upon by the reading: if we do not, or cannot, sympathise with Coetzee's protagonists, we are nevertheless implicated by this very response. This is especially true of the *autre*-biographical novels that Coetzee has written: *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), which relates a period of his childhood from the age of ten until he turns thirteen, and *Youth* (2002), which relates a period in the author's young adulthood. The confessions expressed within, shown up in sharp relief by Coetzee's writing, evince in the reader a sense of unease. If we find the texts' excession of the autobiographical pact<sup>84</sup> too jolting, and the protagonist of the *Boyhood* and *Youth* novels too emotionally disengaged, then what does that say about our own implication in the work of reading? A reading of these texts must recast itself to take into account the implication of the reader in what is being read. The embedded state of the reader is critical: for, if Coetzee's

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<sup>84</sup> Phillippe Lejuene's set of rules which a text must fulfil in order to be considered as autobiography. Lejuene's claim that "[a]utobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing" certainly clashes with Coetzee's more open-minded conception: on being asked by his publisher whether *Boyhood* was memoir or fiction, Coetzee is said to have responded, "Do I have to choose?" (Collingwood-Whittick, "Autobiography" 14).

characters are embedded in the language and culture of their society, and limited by this positioning, this limitation opens up the possibility of the reader seeing what the characters do not.

It is this ironising effect that one notices when thinking through Coetzee's work: a nuanced attention to the limits of language and what those limits might signal to (beyond themselves) where ethics are concerned. The critical argument in terms of which this facet of Coetzee's work has been discussed might proceed in terms of a Derridaen discussion of the "visible in-visible, an invisible of the order of the visible that I can keep in secret by keeping it out of sight" (*The Gift of Death* 90). In these terms, what lies outside of the registers of language nevertheless remains perceivable, as that which lies beyond the limit. Such an argument might advance, as Derek Attridge does, the need for a "responsible reading" ("J.M. Coetzee" 243) of the work. Such a mode of reading, and the interpretations of Coetzee's work offered in its name, stresses the need to attend to the invisible excess, that which remains unsaid. To read in such a manner is to be aware that one is reading without assurances, without guarantees and without certainties. It is also to be aware that an extra awareness is required on the part of the reader. Reading becomes a matter of sifting through, of trawling over, and of shining the interrogative beam into the lacunae of the narrative.

But there is a problem with this. Such an interpretive praxis incurs the risk of performing an act of violence upon the text through its very actions. One thinks here of Derrida's metaphor for the interpretative practice as

a sort of dredging machine. From the dissimulated, small, closed, glassed-in cabin of a crane, I manipulate some levers and, from afar, I saw that done at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer at Eastertime, I plunge a mouth of steel in the water. And I scrape the bottom, hook onto stones and algae there that I lift up in order to set them down on the ground while the water quickly falls back from the mouth. (*Glas* 204)

I would like to compare Derrida's metaphor, with its focus on the remainder that always remains, with Coetzee's revealing description in *Doubling the Point* of being true to the fact:

“what is truth to fact? You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out” (17). The importance of this concept for the author can be seen in how he later remarks that he is “tempted to try out the following definition of autobiography: that it is a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history. But which facts? All the facts? No. All the facts are too many facts. You choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose” (*Doubling* 18). What then, is the way forward? That the narrative’s ‘purpose’ is always-already corrupted by the mediation of its author is a given: the ‘purpose’, such as it can be defined, shifts with the time of its author. The very idea of autobiography thus presupposes an impossibility, the idea that the ‘facts’ can be a stable trellis on which to suspend one’s narrative. For Coetzee, ‘the facts’ are less something to be represented, some record of what has gone before, than they are a record of the author’s self-positioning at the time of writing.

Of course, this state of being poses a number of problems for the reader. However the reader attends to the page, the effort always lags behind, always leaves a little more to be said. This is particularly evident in the case of an author like Coetzee, in whose writings there seems an elusiveness or resistance to the imposition of an interpretative method. One risks overshooting, risks saying too much and too little at once, when attempting to elevate the work into hermeneutic meaning. Coetzee’s *autre-biographical* works, slight texts by most standards, frustrate attempts at interpretation that do not self-consciously work against the mastering impulse of thematisation. However they are read, and whichever thematic filters are applied, there is something that slips through, eluding the interrogative gaze. Assumptions that what is on the page can be transcribed into another order of interpreted meaning do not capture the intangible, inexpressible elements that remain behind. This does not mean that the

excess does not need to be communicated: on the contrary, it demands communication, even as it escapes revelation.

That the writer must commit to acting despite the irrelevance of action is a crucial facet of my argument, here. The writer writes because s/he cannot say what s/he means to say. There is always more that lingers, unsaid. This leaves the writer with a paradox: how to express the unsaid, if the medium available to the writer is one which strips from the unsaid its essential darkness? Just as “Eurydice is Orpheus’ Work, and his work – the production of beauty – will be achieved when she escapes from Hades and comes to stand in the daylight” (Critchley, *Very Little* 48–49), so the novel is the author’s work, a work achieved when the novel has been brought into the light of speech. And just as Orpheus’s desire overcomes him and causes him to transgress the law, so the author longs not to rehabilitate the unsaid into the order of the said, but to present it in its unsayable state.

There are more strings to add to the loom. In Simon Critchley’s words, “the paradox of Orpheus’ situation is that if he did not turn his gaze on Eurydice he would be betraying his desire and thus would cease to be an artist. Thus, the desire which destroys his art is also its source” (*Very Little* 49). The writer’s inspiration can be figured as precisely this sort of impatient, transgressive desire, grabbing the work before it is complete, continually frustrating the possibility of completion.

What is the task of interpretation here? The reader perceives that the writer is under the influence of something over which s/he has no power, the excess which s/he can “neither grasp fully nor relinquish” (Critchley, *Very Little* 50). The writer cannot prefigure excess: it occurs in a darkness no light can penetrate. The only way the writer can engage in any non-negating way to the excess is by opening the writing self up “to chance, to accidents, to sudden modifications of the given” (Badiou, *On Beckett* 55). For the reader, then, who takes up the work of the novel in the event of reading, the path onwards is a stumbling about, as in

a dark room where one is aware of an unseen presence, but where turning on the light switch would cause that presence to vanish. The reader must read in non-expectation, not seeking out the unseen presence in the dark room, but letting it manifest itself *as unseen*. In this way, then, can the reader approach excess: it is, to paraphrase Borges, to be found in its own darkness and not in the world of light.<sup>85</sup> The authorial voice, such as it is, is of little help where the illumination of this darkness is concerned: at most, all it gives off is a faint penumbra.

How then is one to proceed? My argument in this chapter will be for a reading that does *not* proceed in its mission to cast light upon the territory of the dark. To put this point forward is to argue that what one looks for when one seeks to make the work ‘mean’ is not what one finds. Indeed, in Coetzee’s *autre-biographical* novels, one finds oneself in a realm where, *pace* Adorno, “meaning nothing becomes the only meaning” (quoted in Critchley, *Very Little* 204). If the point sounds dramatic, then a reading of the texts in question soon bears this out. *Boyhood* and *Youth* do not readily accommodate autobiographical conventions: the narrative plays out in the present tense; the narrative is the story of a life in only the most chronological of senses. The reader bears witness to a series of episodes in the life of John Coetzee, a character who shares most of his biographical details with the author.<sup>86</sup> These episodes are not reflections on matters past, but selected recollections in which moments of discomfort and shame are recounted in searing detail. There are no authorial speculations on what John’s reactions to events reveal about him, and what they mean for his process of ‘becoming’. Crucially, what we read is presented to us without authorial comment: the reader’s judgements stand in for those of the author, thereby further implicating the reader in the work of the text.

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<sup>85</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis, “A Yellow Rose.” *Dreamtigers* 38.

<sup>86</sup> Derek Attridge says of *Youth* that, “the third person and present tense ... caused even reviewers in prestigious periodicals to treat the work as a novel” (“Confessing” 156-157).

What makes the lack of authorial justification all the more noticeable is that, across the two works, what we read may not necessarily gel with the image we carry of the internationally admired author: there are areas of slippage, to be sure, between Coetzee proper and his fictional doubles, but there also clearly visible points of divergence. Indeed, the protagonist of these works is almost excessively hapless and blundering, such is the extent of the incidents. The recollections seem to capture the very worst of their subject's experiences: not just moments where he is the victim of the world's cruelty, but moments where the protagonist himself is the enactor of shameful and cruel acts. We read on in search of some commentary that will moderate the attitudes and acts so described, but no such commentary is forthcoming. Differently put, nothing is uttered by the authorial voice to justify the protagonist's acts. Had some form of justification been present, one might have had cause to question the author's motives in revealing such excoriating details. As it stands, the details are presented to us with no attempt to excuse or account for the actions of this earlier, other, self.

The protagonal John Coetzee is an object of displacement, represented in the third person present tense throughout. This method of address is deliberate, the 'he' standing in for the 'I' to demonstrate the displacement/transfiguration of the all-knowing subject<sup>87</sup>. The third-person address is also a surface upon which the author inscribes the characteristics we read upon John Coetzee: distanced, cold, aloof. He is stripped down to his abstract characteristics: thoughts, actions. John Coetzee as he appears in *Boyhood* is a half-formed, fledgling individual: only in shadow – the *scuro* – do we perceive the evolving purpose of the writer-to-be. In *Youth*, he is poised on the cusp of something greater, waiting to be “transformed” into The Artist, “to be rid of his own self and revealed in his new, true, passionate self” (111). In the act of reading, the reader is brought into a realm where she must

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<sup>87</sup> Note Coetzee's comment in *Doubling the Point* that [a]ll versions of the *I* are fictions of the *I*. The primal *I* is not recoverable” (75).

bear witness to a speaking that does not begin and does not end. The story does not ‘finish’ in the conventional sense: *Boyhood* and *Youth* are both sections ‘in the life’ that leave off before the sought-after teleological completion. In a sense, we are made aware that the past is not a finite process from which the author emerges cleansed, but rather a continuous process of working through.

The use of the present tense must also be emphasised here, removing as it does the distance of retrospect that traditionally accompanies autobiography. Underpinning all of this is the notion that this ‘John Coetzee’ is not the John Coetzee we know to be the author of the text. The incongruities between protagonist, narrator and author permit us to delineate some sense of Coetzee’s concern with self-knowledge and self-mastery, and how these relate to the relationship of the self and the Other. To be sure, the presence of these incongruities permits neither the restoration of the fantasy of self-identity (that place being always-already a matter of sociocultural context), nor the apprehension of the Other into the order of the familiar.

What is the point of these gestures? The elimination of the “I” casts the text into a realm “to which applies neither the form of consciousness, since the ‘I’ is there stripped of its prerogative to assume, its power, nor the form of unconsciousness, since the whole situation and all its articulations are, in a dark light, *present*” (Levinas’s emphasis, Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 4). This dark light, to use Levinas’ term, makes the familiar strange, unknown: “The illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated one encounters it as if it came from us. It does not have a fundamental strangeness” (Levinas, *Time and Other* 64). The third person is a way of setting things free from the light in which they exist for the author, circumventing (or attempting to circumvent) the issues of subjective choice around which truths are revealed when the author stands before his “reservoir of memories” (Coetzee, *Doubling* 17). That is, the ‘he’ stages the writer’s loss of control, when giving the self over to the “other dark.” The results of such a

loss of control, as we will determine, may be deeply ambiguous. I argue this with the proviso that “he” is still a pronoun, carrying with it all the assumptions of a spectating outsider able to watch and comment on the activities of this “he.” What Coetzee draws our attention to is that the view of the relations between subjects we observe from outside is only a partial view, precisely because we are not, in fact, outside, but always a part and agent of the world we are observing.

Coetzee’s works, then, take a challenging view of the author’s ability to address the story of the self. The author is certainly attentive to the occlusions and exclusions that occur during the act of confession. We can certainly read a restrained pedagogy into Coetzee’s reluctance to participate in the charade of “reality” that autobiographical works construct. The works deconstruct the ontological privilege one might wish to grant autobiography – or the writers of autobiography – as ciphers of truth. If truth emerges, it does so despite the author. The author cannot produce truth voluntarily: it is not a willed action. This is a standard metaphoric I am applying to Coetzee’s writing: several of the author’s texts detail characters who are taken over, despite themselves, by the invisible, or are required to extend themselves beyond the limitations of their placing in society (Durrant, “Bearing Witness” 430–463). And Derek Attridge, in discussing *Boyhood* and *Youth*, argues that what Coetzee is after is not truth as “a series of facts hitherto unrevealed”, but truth as something that “can be experienced only in the reading, or in a certain kind of truth” (“J.M. Coetzee” 145).

My argument, in this regard, is that when reading Coetzee’s autre-biographical texts, one is presented with works that preserve their apart-ness, avoiding even as they admit a little light into their surfaces. Through these gestures of disassociation, the text also declines the authority to speak on behalf of its author/creator. Indeed, the text inscribes distance from its author, interrupting the completion of the author’s work. The reader participates in the experience of language unworking itself, constantly doing and undoing itself. The work

places the reader as a finite being in relation to the infinitely unknowable, because the representation involved is not a total, complete representation. That is, because the excess is always more than the author's attempt to speak it (and thus our attempt to read it), the author of the work must always say more after he has spoken. There is always more that still needs to be said. The absence which the author's words can never fill, nevertheless requires filling, demands to be filled. There is always a remainder after speaking ceases, a remainder which requires that more be said. And after that still more: the text is thus a work of interminable mourning.<sup>88</sup> At every turn, one is confronted with, not just an unreliable narration, but an unreliably limited narration, in which we are required to read beyond what lies on the page, beyond the position of John himself. In these works, we are required to suspend our drive to identify the narrating voice with a controlling authorial consciousness. Coetzee is no Prospero's father: he does not play puppeteer, casting retrospective regrets for the actions of his younger (other) self, or deploying justifications from the vantage point of the narrative near-present. But what is the net effect of this? We cannot hope to understand the experience of the young coloured boy John plays with in *Boyhood*; we have no way of making sense of what John's subsequent feelings (remorse? regret?) might have been, when he recollects how he trapped his brother's hand in the grinder (119).<sup>89</sup> A possible answer to this is demonstrated in the young John's attempts to break free of his mother's smothering love (*Boyhood* 47), a deliberate depiction by the author that overtly foregrounds that we have no access to her story, or that of any of the other characters. We are 'locked in' to the focalising position of the narrator, limited to his perspective. But if the reader can speculate on what lies beyond the

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<sup>88</sup> Here, one thinks of Penelope's ruse in *The Odyssey*: "By day she wove a great fabric / And by night, she analysed (undid, untied, unwove) it" (251). Penelope's is a work of mourning that can never be completed.

<sup>89</sup> This scene, one of the more troubling scenes in the text, occurs when John and his younger brother come across a mealie-grinding machine: He persuaded his brother to put his hand down the funnel where the mealie-pits were thrown in; then he turned the handle. For an instant, before he stopped, he could feel the fine bones of the fingers being crushed. His brother stood with his hand trapped in the machine, ashen with pain, a puzzled, inquiring look on his face" (119). This moment comes back as a memory while he and his brother are playing with a book press they come across. But as for what effect that memory has on John, the reader has no way of knowing.

young John's perspective, it is only because John has not yet learned to treat others with the sympathy their alterity demands. The reader takes on that role on his behalf. Thus, to read Coetzee's work here is to enter into a contract with the work, in which the reader is required "to supplement an originary lack in the writing" (Marais, *Violence* 13).

This task, it must be pointed out here, occurs *despite* the reader. That is, the impositions the text demands are ineluctable and unavoidable. It is not an active choice that the reader makes to participate in the work. Rather, the reader is acted upon in the act of reading, without her knowledge. To be sure, the reader's participation is an involuntary response to the workings of the text. The reader cannot suspend this working, cannot *choose*, more importantly, to suspend it. The reading of Coetzee's works is an act in which a loss of control occurs. It is an act in which the reader is dispossessed, rather than affirmed. We read without guarantee, in a realm where the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the word are amplified. In reading, the reader is drawn down into the aporia between silence and the need to speak, an Orphic descent into darkness, where the interpreting subject (the reader) and language itself can find no purchase. Coetzee's group of confessional texts seems to suggest that the reader must proceed, in spite of this failure. Like Derrida's dredging machine, we continue to feel along in the dark, accepting that something unknown always escapes our grasp, as it does his.

This then, is the reader's task as it has been laid out in the first two *autre-biographical* novels. However, this task raises the question of form within these texts. If we know after the experience of reading that *Boyhood* is not a narrative of growing up in a historically messy time, and if we are aware after the act of reading that *Youth* is not the story of how the young John Coetzee came to be J.M. Coetzee, author, we might then ask why this author persists in the use of this form, which purports to do that which it cannot do? Perhaps the answer is that the form invites play, being an excitingly unstable medium where meaning is always

mercurial. To read Coetzee's works of confession is to be in a realm where the act of confessing occludes and obscures even as it purports to reveal. Crucially, it *is* an act, a staging or event that draws the reader into a paradoxical, oxymoronic space: the intimacy of the reading, undercut by the alienation that occurs when the reader discovers nothing

Such a text calls for a reading strategy that pays attention to the disintegration of the traditional narrative structure and the ways in which the known is rendered unfamiliar, a reading without assurances. In the absence of certitude, the reader must respond by embracing this absence as an intrinsic condition of the text. Indeed, the reader must accept it as the work of the text, to expose the constructed nature of the ontological 'truths' to which we anchor meaning. By playing out the inadequacy of language as a medium, the reader is tasked with doing what the work cannot do. That is, she must respond to the lack of certainty by reaching out to the text, engaging it on its own terms.

Whether this is possible or not is the argument Coetzee's novels engage with. The reader is a subject grounded within a particular history: she reads according to the terms and codes with which she is familiar. In the familiar mode of reading, the reader's relationship to the text takes on the contours of a Hegelian struggle between the mastering reader and the servile text. What we see with Coetzee's *autre-biographical* novels is an emphatic concern with whether it is possible to ever occupy a position outside the boundaries of the reader's horizon of expectations. My argument is that this task is insurmountable, impossible even; but this impossibility matters little. What is important is the unceasing attempt and what this ethical labour may allow. As this chapter will lay out, futility in the act of reading outside oneself is crucial to this act: if the engagement with the work has no results at all, or results quite different from the reader's expectations, then this is the risk entered into.

To understand the negations that occur within the text is thus to understand what Adorno calls “organized meaninglessness”:<sup>90</sup> although meaning is negated, that negation takes place within a recognisable form, in this case the form of the novel (*Notes to Literature* 243). The fact that the form of the autobiography is employed and played with emphasises what is missing in such narrative acts, but also that the silence we perceive cannot be perceived without language. Blanchot proposes that “without language nothing can be shown. And to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible.” Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, silence and language form an integral relationship within *Summertime*, one where the silence plays “the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and against which alone language can emerge” (Derrida, *Writing* 54).

To be sure, when attempting to understand the work of the text, the reader must be aware that while this silence may be accommodated within the boundaries of the text, it has a status as “a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence” (Blanchot, “Literature” 301). This overruns the medium with which it is paired, rendering it unfamiliar and strange. The narrative itself that carries this representation of that which cannot be represented becomes a failed narrative, one which cannot do what it purports to do. In the moment of being read, the text becomes a performative enactment of the aporetic encounter. As Simon Critchley puts it, with Beckett in mind: “the path to be followed is a pathless path, which means that we do not proceed, but stay on the same spot, even if we are not quite at a standstill ... we wheel about as if with one foot nailed to the floor” (195–196).

This movement, though, should not distract us from the task at hand. The reader may initially shrink from this task, daunted by a narrating voice that intones in an impersonal, indifferent way. Stripped of the comfort leant by the traditional structures of the autobiography, the reader must submit to the stuttering, looped logic of the encounter. Pegged

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<sup>90</sup> Simon Critchley translates this from Adorno’s original “*organisierte Sinnlosigkeit*” (*Notes on Literature* 283).

to the spot, the reader must accept a degree of impotence that attends her relation with the work. What is required is a dilating of her senses, to truly allow the experience of the work to occur.

### **To Live**<sup>91</sup>

How to begin, then, with the subject of this chapter, Coetzee's latest *autre-biographical* work, *Summertime*? Perhaps, briefly, with the phenomenological experience of the work, what we encounter as we begin to read. We note, firstly, that the title rehearses the chronological theme of the texts that have preceded it, although modified in this case to refer to the seasons rather than stages of development. In this regard (and this is a point to be returned to later) the shift signals a change in the nature of the experiences underwent by the subject. We might contrast this shift with the return of the subtitle, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, which maintains the relation to *Boyhood*. If we are thus tempted to engage with the work as a following-on from Coetzee's earlier *autre-biographical* works, then perhaps that is forgivable. In the encounter with the new work, we seek out those signs of filiation that aid the reading process. Indeed, these texts may seem to function as rungs on the ladder to some ultimate meaning.

The first pages of the book encourage this associative reading, continuing the tone and rhythms of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. We are told that what we are reading is from a set of Notebooks dated 1972–75. Therein, we are given an account of an Apartheid-era atrocity committed in Botswana, in which a family of South African refugees is massacred by masked gunmen. We read the journalised account of an atrocity visited upon South African refugees to Botswana. John records several contiguous feelings, as he reads the details in a newspaper article: his own revulsion before the atrocity, his outrage before the 'bland denials' of the

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<sup>91</sup> From the 1952 Kurosawa film that John describes in one of his extracts.

regime, which leave him feeling soiled (4). “So this is what he has come back to!”<sup>92</sup> John’s declaration alerts the reader to his return from the foreign settings of *Youth*. Perhaps most critically, he records the frustration he feels at his inability to bring his father over to these feelings of outrage (4). He talks to his father about the atrocities, but we are told that “his father is too wary to rise to the bait” (4). He wills his father to share his outrage, but is frustrated by the older man’s head-in-the-sand attitude, and the gulf it creates between the two of them. Once more, the reader is required to provide the perspective from which this gulf is observed.

The reader is led to speculate that his father’s response – not indifference, but resignation – is a more successful way of coping with this world in which they find themselves, a world in which the total power of the state is, or appears to be, an accomplished fact. John feels outrage, shame, and ultimately despair, at the crimes committed in his name by the South African government: outrage, at the flimsiness of the excuses proffered by the government; shame at how he has naively believed for so long that

the men who dreamed up the South African version of public order, who brought into being the vast system of labor reserves and internal passports and satellite townships, had based their vision on a tragic misreading of history. They had misread history because, born on farms or in small towns in the hinterland, and isolated within a language spoken nowhere else in the world, they had no appreciation of the scale of the forces that had since 1945 been sweeping away the old colonial world. (5)

His despair comes at realising that he has been mistaken: the rules of the game are not just different. Rather, the “men under whose dirty thumb he lives” are playing at a completely different game altogether. Indeed, the game being played is a cynical one by players well aware that they cannot hold out indefinitely:

Their talk of saving civilization, he now tends to think, has never been anything but a bluff. Behind a smokescreen of patriotism they are at this very moment sitting and calculating how long they can keep the show running (the mines, the factories) before they will need to pack their bags, shred any incriminating documents, and fly off to Zurich or Monaco or San Diego, where under the cover of holding companies with names like Algro Trading or Handfast Securities they years ago bought

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<sup>92</sup> In “Remembering Texas”, an essay reprinted in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee mentions something similar: “Complicity was not the problem – complicity was far too advanced a notion for the time being. The problem was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge” (51).

themselves villas and apartments as insurance against the day of reckoning (*dies irae, dies illa*). According to his new, revised way of thinking, the men who ordered the killer squad into Francistown have no mistaken vision of history, much less a tragic one. Indeed, they most likely laugh up their sleeves at folk so silly as to have visions of any kind. (5–6)

In a recurrent theme from *Boyhood*, he realises that he is out of step, out of kilter. For John in *Summertime*, the question of importance now is how to live under such conditions. If running away is not an option, how is he to live as a man of conscience under people who have none? The reader is left with this question, as the entry is ended at this point. We then receive a short post-script detailing the author's intention to 'expand on his father's response to the times as compared to his own; their differences, their (overriding) similarities' (6).

We are tempted to suppose many things about John's relationship with his father from this extract. We may wonder if John is courting his father's approval, seeking a validation of his opinions from the father who refuses the authority placed with him by his son. John attempts to bring his father over to his way of thinking and being in the world, in order to relate to him better. But his attempts are bound to fail because they are the products of self-interest: the reader senses that John will feel himself a better being if he could reach out to his father.

Mirroring his father's retreat from the political into the personal, the next fragment we read concerns the ramshackle house he shares with his father. Having embarked on an ambitious project to shore up the house's walls, John soon realises that he has committed a mistake of a calamitous order. Having misjudged the amount of work required, he finds himself trapped in a project that will take considerably more time and effort than he had envisioned. Yet, in the work he takes on to keep the house from succumbing to the rising damp, he is able to retreat from the problems of conscience: it is repetitive, laborious, a work that possesses him as he enacts it. But if John's decision to do "what people like him should have been doing ever since 1652" (7) reads like an act of conscience, it is not merely that.

That is, while it *is* an attempt, however small and insignificant in the greater scheme of things, to even out the injustices of the social order, it is also an act of self-interest.

Shadowing Coetzee's point in the interview that closes *Doubling the Point*, the gesture of taking on his own labour provides John with "a capsule in which he can live, a capsule in which he need not breathe the air of the world" (393). And if it is not in his material interests to give up his weekends to the backbreaking task of reinforcing the house's defences, he feels himself involved in the construction of something that will cast him for eternity alongside the hardy nameless souls who build the infrastructure his people take for granted. The note that bookends this set-piece is a short-hand reciting of the author's 'evolving purpose'.

For the next scene, we leave the singular experience and read an entry more easily checkable by history. In the same *Sunday Times* newspapers which lay out the State's tawdry violence, John reads the news that the writer Breyten Breytenbach, exiled to France some years ago, has been granted a visa allowing him to re-enter the country in order to visit his ailing parents (8). Having married a French-Vietnamese woman, Breytenbach would of course have fallen foul of the Immorality Act, which criminalised sexual relations between white and non-white. Despite this, we are told, "the Minister in his compassion will permit the couple a thirty-day visit during which the so-called Mrs Breytenbach will be treated as a white person, a temporary white, an honorary white" (8). Here, the author tantalisingly commits himself to an act of signature: we know that Breyten Breytenbach exists, and indeed can vouchsafe the general truths of the events being described without too much bother.<sup>93</sup> It is an amusing vignette which captures the absurdities of the Apartheid state vividly, and the reader certainly senses John's distaste. Moreover, the composition of the section, in which the story is grouped with "exposes of torrid love affairs between teachers and schoolgirls in

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<sup>93</sup> Readers of South African fiction would no doubt be aware of these intriguing events surrounding Breyten Breytenbach.

country towns” and “pictures of pouting starlets in exiguous bikinis” (8) lends some sense of what it would have been like to live in a society so over-determined by phenotypical difference. The author faithfully conveys the spectative nature of such a society and how the members of such a society become predisposed to responding to one another in particular ways. Here, the postscript mentions John’s desire to explore “the envy felt by white South Africans (men) for Breytenbach, for his freedom to roam the world and for his unlimited access to a beautiful, exotic sex-companion” (9).

The reader is tempted not to accept this recollection at face value. We may speculate various things about what we have read: Is this a confession of envy on the part of John? Is it a tacit exposing of his resentment at his own position, trapped at the southernmost tip of the continent? We may recall that John, in *Youth*, displays questionable attitudes towards sex and the role of sex: he sees womyn as mere instruments for the creative artist, and sex itself as instrumental to unlocking the artist’s artistry. If we read this insight back into the specific historical moment this piece represents, we might then wonder if the ‘truth’ of this piece is not in fact the inadequacy felt by John, who at this point has not yet achieved the status of artist he was so desperate to realise in *Youth*. Indeed, Breytenbach here reads like the picture of the artist John desires to be in *Youth*. So it would appear, then, that the author is using the universal as a backdrop against which to sketch the evolving purpose he sees for himself.

So explicit a set of references to external events and parties requires caution, however. The historically literate reader, the reader poring for autobiographical morsels from the notoriously guarded author, or even the reader who has shared in the experience of being white and South African in South Africa on 16 April 1973 is in danger of being ‘taken in’ by this red herring of Coetzee’s. In this regard, Philippe Lejuene’s autobiographical pact returns to mind: we are conditioned by our reading into trusting that there is, ultimately, a real author behind the artifice that constitutes the text. For the autobiographical project to be sustained,

for the reader to believe that what s/he is reading is credible, the writer must establish a certain level of trust. This is done via the placing of markers<sup>94</sup> that make the reader feel that s/he has been let into the confidence of the writer/narrator figure. These markers allow the reader to ascend from the individual stratum to the level of the higher (more general) truth.

What truth is this piece telling about its subject? Indeed, who is the subject of the piece? What does it say about living in South Africa during the period in question? Such questions are rapiers the reader may wield on behalf of the inherently violent nature of interrogative reading. In this passage, the protagonist is looking out at a familiar world, a world of Sunday papers and sex scandals and their effect on a buttoned-down, Calvinist society. But as for what he sees, and what he takes from what he sees, the reader is left to speculate. The clues laid out for us by this passage lead us in increasingly narrower circles, until we are left circling on the spot. What we find is what we want to find, and this is obviously dependent on the reader's conception of the whole.<sup>95</sup> That conception is invariably run through with the values of the dominant culture: using history as a backdrop, as this piece *seems* to encourage us to do,<sup>96</sup> privileges history as the anvil on which the singular is formed. We return to the dates and the places signposted, drawn in by the promise that these features will give meaning to the landscape in which the reader wanders.

In truth, each of these episodes lead from nowhere to nowhere. In doing so, they are liberated from chronicity, and the "and-then" telos that attends to historical narratives. This last point also inheres to the next fragment, in which we read of the Empire Cinema's

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<sup>94</sup> These markers may be historical people, places, or dates. Coetzee uses all three, here.

<sup>95</sup> Coetzee makes a similar point at the end of his essay on Achterberg's "Ballade van de gasfitter", in *Doubling The Point* (69-90).

<sup>96</sup> And we are undoubtedly drawn to read *Summertime* as a piece of South African literature, a genre submerged in historical meaning. The documentary-style nature of these fragments only aggravates this tendency.

screening of a Kurosawa film, *Ikiru (To Live)*.<sup>97</sup> The plot of the film is relayed to the reader: a passionless bureaucrat, learning that he has only months to live, undergoes an existential crisis. He realises that he has led a meaningless life – indeed, that he has not lived at all. He wants to learn how to live, if this is possible, from his youthful secretary. When she attempts to leave, he grabs her, beseeches her to teach him how to live. But the latter “is repelled by the nakedness of his appeal” (9). The note appended to this fragment is a question: “How would he react if his father were to grip his arm like that?” The briefness of the piece nevertheless raises questions that return us to the opening extract. From the question, what returns is the concern over the relationship between father and son. John’s father, as we have seen (and will see later) has an inner life which is closed to his son’s inquisitive gaze. As for his outer life, that does not yield much promise of passion, cause or action. The older man, disbarred from practising law, works as bookkeeper at a firm that imports and sells components for Japanese cars (255). The distance John feels from his father, as we have seen, is an entirely myopic one: John is separated because he is not of his father’s order, and because he has not acquiesced to a life not lived. But we are aware that by invoking *Ikuru*, the author is also posing the problem of responsibility: in John’s attempting to make sense of his father, he is also trying to identify what is demanded or required of him in his role as the son. That sense-making does not succeed, as we shall see, but the will to do so is certainly present, even if it is undercut by uncertainty. John does not know what he would do if he were placed in that position by his father, and the mixture of longing and dread in the question can be sensed by the reader.

As if to emphasise that there is little to be revealed here, we drift from this short fragment into an amusing piece in which John falls into a catastrophe not of his own design.

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<sup>97</sup> Is it coincidence that the central question in the first piece in *Summertime* resembles the existential problem posed in one of Kurosawa’s earlier films, *Rashomon*: how one ought to live in, and derive meaning from, a world where death is a certainty, individuals are self-interested, and God does not exist. Of course, there are also shades of Beckett to be drawn out.

Hired as a language expert by a widow wishing to contest the terms of her husband's will, he finds himself mired in a simple-minded (yet all the more infuriating for that) argument over the widow's misreading of the word "notwithstanding" (10–11). His efforts to disembarass himself from the foolish situation are comical, an unusual touch which marks the work as belonging to the same Coetzeean late style as *Youth* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. The humour of the piece undermines the philosophical seriousness of the fragments on either side of it. But if that is the reader's experience of the "13 September 1973" fragment, John himself is rather more concerned with (the post-script again assists) what features of his character are revealed by the account (12).

There is an unexplained gap of some 20 months in the archive we are accessing, before we rejoin with the next piece, which is dated to 31 May 1975. This fragment is nominally a meditation on the turbulent nature of the South African state on the precipice of destruction, but also a speculation on what it would mean to live one's life outside politics. John is aware of the impossibility of living outside politics, which is to say living outside power: "if Jesus had stooped to play politics he might have been a key man in Roman Judaea, a big operator. It was because he was indifferent to politics, and made his indifference clear, that he was liquidated" (12). If politics is a game, the players at this point in history are devising new ways to continue playing, even as the game becomes ever more unsustainable. To not play, as Jesus did not play and John (in his own way) does not play, is to exclude one's self from the community of players and thus open one's self up to the possibility of liquidation. If John finds himself contemplating Jesus as a guide, he is still sceptical enough to avoid the lures of allegory (13).

In the next fragment, the reader is once again inveigled by the spectre of history. We read a scene in which an old schoolmate of John's moves into the house across the street. We read that John and his new neighbour were in Standard six together at St Joseph's school in

1952. The historical facts are laid before the reader so neatly as to invite reading as historically accurate. But as we have seen, such distractions are to be avoided. What is more relevant is that John is surprised to discover that his former classmate, who was not as good at following the rules that make up the game of school as himself, is succeeding in the world as our protagonist is not (13–14). This piece, noticeably, does not end in a post-script, suggesting that the moment of self-examination has yielded a very clear truth. This piece seems to distil an idea that has been lying latent in the pieces so far: that John at this period is facing the burden of a failed self. That is, a self not in accordance with who he would like to be. By any of the standards he has held himself to, what he finds himself being in 1973 does not measure up. As a way of feeling his way towards the self he really is, from the vantage point of the self he imagines he would like to be, these pieces indeed suggest a growing realisation on John's part of his marginality.

This would seem to be a suitably assured way in which to end this first section – the protagonist confessing his self-doubt in various ways. But, suggesting that the act of confession is always inadequate to the confessor, we receive one last piece to end the section, a minor musing on the proximity of he and his neighbours to Pollsmoor prison. It is a rumination on the sordid manner in which normality (white suburbia) and the abnormal (the prison system) can co-exist in incestuous harmony, in a society where those two poles have long ago ceased to respond to their signifiers, or have indeed switched places. The irony, John notes, loses its power in the face of the brute reality of human suffering (16).

We may determine at this point that there is something in the tone and register which the work draws on, that draws the reader closer, making her complicit in what is being narrated. If we are tempted to read John as the alienated anti-hero deserving of our sympathy in one piece, his role as hapless victim in the next fragment undercuts this idea immediately. What is foregrounded is that these fragments proceed with indifference to the sentiments they

arouse in the reader. That is to say, they attempt as far as possible to be a pure act of confession, an uttering of truths to and for oneself (Coetzee, *Doubling* 291). Attridge's assertion that "articulated language is always-already premised on the existence of an interlocutor or potential interlocutor" is relevant, here. The confessing subject here is not, and cannot be, self-aware to the extent that his confessing becomes a complete act, shutting out the reader.

And yet, if the scripts that append each section are notes from the author to himself, might they also not be addressed to the reader? The post-scripts alter our reading of the fragments, and it is possible to read them as opening up the reader to the truths that reveal themselves in reading. This revelation is not a drawing back of the shroud or a revelation of truths kept secret by the work. Rather, it is a movement of truth-directedness that, as I have argued, occurs in the course of reading.<sup>98</sup> The post-script, like Hester's scarlet letter, deflects the reader's gaze away from the ultimately unsatisfying nature of the confessions we are witnessing. And if they are unsatisfying, it is because they do not strip the author bare before the gaze of the confessant-reader. Indeed, the confession casts aside the pre-eminence of the confessant in the moment of truth-telling.

This is the ultimately maddening nature of the fragments, which clamour for our attention, but are ultimately incapable of revelation. They seem to be a means for John to analyse himself, but what conclusions does he reach? Why does he choose these moments above any others to write down? Such questions only draw us deeper into the experience of the abyss. An interrogative reader might query why there is nothing in these moments to suggest that Coetzee was at work on his first novel, as though the novel had dispensed with its attempts at verisimilitude. The traditional reading strategy falters and sinks like an animal caught in quicksand. One is reminded of the warning given by another of Coetzee's

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<sup>98</sup> Derek Attridge makes a similar point in his essay on *Boyhood and Youth* (145).

doppelganger-esque fictional characters, JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*: “[t]read carefully . . . You may be seeing less of my inmost depths than you believe.” The reader must read with dilated eyes, attentive to the idea that she is seeing less than appears the case.

Each of these written episodes is too thinly rendered to really withstand the violence of an interrogative reading. The lists that abridge them offer clues to what the author elsewhere describes as “an essential truth about the self” (252), but they too do not carry us very far. In the setting of *Summertime*, the fragments require completion if they are to produce, through reading, the truths the writer wants them to. That completion cannot come about in the absence of the author. As it stands, what emerges does so despite the authorial interventions. I deliberately describe the pieces as fragments, for in *Summertime* the selective process of memory is deliberately foregrounded. The author’s use of the fragment is crucial to the constitution of the work. As Simon Critchley attests, “the specificity of the fragment, its uniqueness, is that it is a form that is both complete and incomplete, both a whole and a part. It is a form that embodies interruption within itself. That is to say, the fragment fails” (*Very Little* 153). But if it fails, it is a necessary failure. The abrupt truncations of *Summertime* illustrate that reality is fragmentary, and the unity of reality lies in its acknowledgement of its breaks and fractures.<sup>99</sup>

If this unsettles the reader, it is because the pact which we enter into in order to entertain the autobiographical work relies on a glossing of just such breaks and fractures. We accept the improbably flawless surface of these works with good grace as part of the familiar rhythm of the autobiographical pact: characters who are able to recall whole tracts of conversation verbatim; above all, the author’s assertion that he is telling *the truth* to us. In

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<sup>99</sup> Simon Critchley argues that “what the form of the fragment opens up is the possibility of discontinuous writing. An *ensemble* of fragments – for a fragment is never written in isolation – is a discontinuous and uneven *field*. Texts of varying length and worth are typographically, if not thematically, organized across intervals and this lends a certain staccato rhythm or abrupt musicality to their reading” (*Very Little* 154). He further notes that the fragment testifies to “the unceasing alternation and differentiation of thoughts” (*Very Little* 154).

Coetzee's work, we are granted no such succour. We are reminded of Desiderius Erasmus's statement:

If a person were to try stripping the disguises from actors while they play a scene [. . .] showing to the audience their real looks... would not such a one spoil the whole play? [. . .] Destroy the illusion and any play is ruined [. . .] All things are presented by shadows; yet this play is put on in no other way. (*In Praise of Folly* 37)

Reading *Summertime*, we are made aware that there ways in which such narratives flow are manipulated and managed. The autobiography necessarily stages time which is condensed and edited: all the facts are too many facts, after all. Here, themes bleed over from one fragment to another, while others are sharply distinct from one another.

If Coetzee is displaying the bones to which the flesh of his story adheres, then, he is also demonstrating that the reading experience can survive the author's exposing of his organising principle. If the fragments are incapable of supporting the reader's weight, they nonetheless provide an experience of the uncanny, an experience confirmed by the way the pieces resist being rendered pellucid by reading. That is to say, if these fragments exhibit truths, they do so only in the most disinterested of ways, and in ways that evade the grasp of the reader's criteria.

I have so far discussed only the first sixteen pages of this work. In doing so, I have resisted revealing the moment where *autre-biography* asserts itself most strongly. In the next section of this chapter, I read through the most explicit unworking of the work before us, an experience in which the ungraspability of finitude and the impossibility of death are all played out in the text. My argument is that when we read this work, we find ourselves in a realm where, as Critchley argues, "we are left unable, impotent and insomniac, trying to imagine what happens when the body dies, when the reverberation of life fades into silence" (191). In such a realm, the reader is attempting to follow a pathless path taken by the writer in his attempt to access the truth of his account, a truth that resides partly in the dark Otherness of excess. The Orphic logic thus applies as equally to the reader as it does to the writer. It is

all the more necessary to read with a dilated eye, opening up the reading eye in a passive attentional (as opposed to intentional) manner.

In what has gone before, I have attempted to define provisionally the idea of the excess. My argument has been for the presence of an irreducible excess in the autobiographical works of J.M. Coetzee. In the next section of this chapter, I elaborate on this narrow definition, reading through the broader section of the novel in a speculative manner that allows the material to speak its own meaning more clearly.

### **A Tale without a Body**

The fragments end, for the time being. What takes their place is a set of five interviews. These interviews, it transpires, are being conducted in the near-present by a biographer looking to write about John Coetzee. The latter is referred to in the past tense, our first indication that things are not as they seem. Mr Vincent, the biographer, meets with a series of individuals who, we are told, were important to Coetzee, or who knew him in the seventies. The conceit of the novel is hidden within these interviews: John Coetzee has died, leaving behind a few notebook entries written in preparation for the final volume of his autobiographical novels. How it comes to be that John has died is never mentioned. It is an event that, in a Blanchotian sense, exists under erasure, an event of absence. It cannot be recorded except as an absence or ceasing, and yet it demands to be supplemented or substituted. Does it alter our reading if we recast the preceding fragments as being spoken in the post-mortem voice?

Coetzee is experimenting with excess here, approaching the limits of representation and thereby allowing the text to signal to the limitlessness which lies beyond its own limits. It is a work that signals to that which it cannot fully comprehend. In place of the event of death, we have the attempt to relive the events of life, through the recollections of the various

respondents to Vincent. If it seems that the text is taking on the characteristics of an epistolary work, then the reader's task becomes one of sorting through the differing points of view on offer. But the author immediately undercuts this task: the interviews do not always line up with the fragments that come before them. While the interviewees may discuss events occurring in roughly the same time-span, these events reveal little about the fragments, or reveal things in a disinterested way that rejects the revelatory techniques seen in other writing.<sup>100</sup> The interviews themselves share no immediate similarities with each other.

Taken on their own, they may seem to shape a different picture of John Coetzee than the one we have become used to. In the first interview, the reader is made aware (from Vincent's opening gambit) that Julia has seen the fragments that we have just read, a potential red herring for the reader looking to assemble the pieces into a coherent narrative. When asked if she recognises John Coetzee in these fragments, Julia's answer is tellingly vague (19). Their meeting in a supermarket is a chance encounter precipitated by an apparently accidental moment of physical contact between them.

When asked how she met him, Julia expounds at some length on the nature of the times. Her attention to this particular context in the construction of her story demonstrates an awareness of the ways in which such a society influences individual relations. Much of the interview is given over to her explanation of the upwardly mobile husband she briefly spurned for John Coetzee, and the role (in a very literal sense) she played as the wife of such a man. Against the greater picture of White South Africa in the seventies, the master narrative of how relations ought to play out publically between the hyper-masculinised white men and their wives is authored by the state and played out in the same way that actors act out their roles in a play. Julia demonstrates how the master narrative from the State encourages just such a depiction of self amongst its citizens' private lives. Of John, she is less than

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<sup>100</sup> The novel that forms the basis of the previous chapter, Mark Behr's *Kings of the Water*, deploys just such revelatory flourishes to good effect.

complimentary, describing him as resembling “one of those flightless birds; or like an abstracted scientist who had wandered by mistake out of his laboratory” (21). Her reading of him is precisely that: she behaves just like a reader, draws us into the familiar Coetzee paradigm of characters who are initially unwelcoming: they must be taken to despite their unpromising appearances.<sup>101</sup> Julia must extend herself to this individual who does not belong to the society in which they find themselves. When she meets John, his actions mark him as being different to the other participants in the game of society. Julia’s immediate sense is that John does not belong.

Not surprisingly, the notion of belonging is crucial, here. In *Boyhood* we encounter John as wanting desperately to belong. He is deeply conscious of standing out from his peers as something to be avoided, in a way that recalls the formulaic adherence to codes and practices promoted in white South African schools, and enforced through corporal punishment:

The very idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame. There is nothing he will not do to save himself from it. In this respect he is unnatural and knows it. He comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day. (6)

His strategies to avoid being beaten at school and to avoid drawing attention to his difference from those around him come down to a simple formula: “know the right answer.”<sup>102</sup> The young John learns to isolate himself, to maintain the appearance of fitting in even as his true desires are incongruous with the outside world. In *Summertime*, the adult John is rather less concerned with what the outside world believes. In Julia’s interview, she recalls how he has “an air of seediness about him, an air of failure” (21). She watches him as he works at the

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<sup>101</sup> One thinks of Elizabeth Costello, Paul Rayment, or Senor C, in *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, respectively.

<sup>102</sup> Compare this with 72–74 of *Elizabeth Costello*, where Costello reads a report on the learning procedures of an ape. The implications for instrumental learning are clear.

futile task of shoring up the walls of the tumbledown homestead, seemingly unconcerned with the social stigma that manual labour carries for white society (23).

What this moment demonstrates, then, is how the society of the period is concerned with maintaining appearances and constructing how those who operate within it portray themselves. Julia is unable to see beyond the discourses of dominance that are, of course, drawn from the society of which they are a part. For one whose body has been inscribed by the power relations of the society by her role as businessman's wife, Julia is compelled to respond to John's singularity, his quiddity, by possessing it (and him) in relations that are automatically inscribed by these same power relations. She pursues him, and it is because she finds him so inadequate compared to the standards of the day, that she takes him on.

Why is John inadequate? Superficially, he is "neither rich nor handsome nor appealing" (24). Julia admits that "John was not easy to take to, his whole stance toward the world was too wary, too defensive for that" (25). Her description of him accords with the one we know from *Youth*, as the awkward self-interested young man stalked by shame at every turn. The lacerating, excoriating descriptions of his failings are thus at one with the self-voicing autre-biographical voice this author deploys in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Also reflected are the intensely private principles which govern John's public interactions.

Given that Julia's recollections occur from her perspective, the reader can only speculate as to John's motives and actions, since these are given neither shade nor meaning by Julia's words. John's actions, as she describes them, are rendered strange by her vantage point. From what we have learnt, we can suppose that he sees her as the Muse who will bring out the artist within him, but such a reading is presumptuous and misses the point. It is Julia's story that the interview develops, with Coetzee's ventriloquism – the author excogitates, but

his characters develop voices of their own.<sup>103</sup> It is a superbly absorbing performance. She acts out the resistance against the repurposing of her story, which turns out not to be a story in the sense that it goes nowhere that concerns us.

Julia's response to John is certainly a self-interested one. She regards the affair between herself and John as a banal mistake, and does what she can to undercut the idea of him as the great author: this is a different John Coetzee from the later public persona. She is not willing to be read as John's *idée fixe*. It follows thus that her recollections are more a retelling of her own life, with John featuring rather peripherally in the events she narrates. In discussing this with the interviewer, she warns him that this will happen, that this will be her story, and not one that can be made, through sleight of the writer's hand, to be about John.

What lesson is Coetzee drawing, here? Is it that archival material cannot be enlisted by the biographer as a means through which to gain unadulterated access to the invisible? It is perhaps that the reading must be accompanied by a divesting of authority: the biographer (and implicitly the reader) cannot arrogate to themselves the right to construct the story by simply reversing or inverting the values present, but must give up the authority implicit in the act of seeking out meaning. Thus, rather than being presented with the narrative, we are presented with a representation of the attempt to create the narrative. That the story Vincent calls forth from Julia cannot be John's story is reinforced by her frequent references to John's insubstantiality and inadequacy. His obsessions, his proclivities, his principles, cannot be adequately invested with substance through externalisation, which is why he fails to convince her. His feelings concerning his first novel *Dusklands* do not reach us through the veil of Julia's scepticism; his thoughts about human feeling are reduced to a bizarre and puzzling sexual experiment (68).

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<sup>103</sup> It is a short distance from these characters as they appear, to Paul Rayment, the rebellious creation of Elizabeth Costello in *Slow Man*, or to Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year*, who moves from being passive subject to dominating author-voice as the novel progresses.

At the same time, Julia is deeply suspicious of her interviewer's motives, a suspicion that affects her responses since she is attempting to make it clear that she was not simply one of John's conquests. While Vincent wishes to excavate his subject, the narrative that arrives proves to be hostile to his efforts. It proceeds with indifference to his intentions. This explains why Vincent takes such a passive role in the interview with Julia. If he is affected by the polemic tone of Julia's recollections, he chooses to remain silent, allowing her to speak as freely as she can. At other times, his questions seem more like banal journalistic efforts, as if Coetzee is parodying this form of aggressive excavation. If Vincent is trying to be a scrupulous researcher, he also betrays himself by displaying rather too much interest in tying Julia's story to some form of narrative about John Coetzee. Limited by her placing, Julia can neither include nor exclude John Coetzee from her story, but resists claiming less or more than her part.

This first interview, in particular, stages many concerns around the psychology of the interview. Julia's constant asides to the interviewer, whose silence or decisions not to respond turn her work into an unwilling monologue. It is a reminder that the reader's attentiveness is being enlisted and manipulated against itself: our awareness of the failure of reciprocity between interviewer and interviewee is initially distracting because the reader is expecting the interview form to be a device that allows the content of the text to be accessed. We *do* expect that the story that emerges can be held up for scrutiny, compared to the passages that have come before it. Our intuition is that the details she reveals will guide us towards "the story", that there will be some gap between her words and what we know that will lead via irony to meaning. But this is not an entirely fruitful exercise. The reader's suspicion finds little purchase within the text. As Julia declares, "there is no body. I can't supply a body because there was none. This is a tale without a body" (51). This refers beyond itself to the corporeal absence of John from the world, and of course to the nature of biography itself. The

attempt to speak of John's part in her story is stymied by the inability to recall the dead. The interview form is a performative enactment of the content, packaging the way in which the subject is recalled.

Insofar as Julia describes moments of physical and emotional intimacy (or lack thereof) between herself and John, the interview can be read as a typical revelatory exercise in keeping with the nature of such an interview. Julia does not reveal the information because she believes it is what her interviewer wants to hear. Her revelations are aimed at telling the complete truth of her experience, as unvarnished as possible. She has no anxieties about revealing her inner life to the interviewer's gaze, but the reader is quickly disillusioned of the idea that this coherent reverie will grant the desired access to John Coetzee's life. The facts to be extracted from the encounter – of the ponderous author who relates awkwardly to the world around him – arrive by accumulation. "The man who mistook his mistress for a violin" – that is her final judgement on John Coetzee. As he is dead, she remarks to Vincent, the story need not spare his feelings.

If Julia's encounter with John does not transform her positively, can it be said to be a failed encounter? It is a negative encounter, in the sense that it reduces John irretrievably to a network of things said or not said, actions performed or not performed. It is undoubtedly a failed encounter in the sense that it presents John as someone who, poised at the brink of giving himself over to another, draws back into himself. As for the critical tryst between them, the reader might be aware of the provenance of music for Coetzee's *autre-biographical* selves. But the sense of the ecstatic fails to translate to Julia: in the most literal sense, the sublime becomes the ridiculous.

What remains of the subject after Vincent's questioning of Julia, rather than what the interview reveals, is what should interest us. That Julia ultimately rejects John is not as important as the reason why she does so. It is because he does not understand the rules of

romance well enough, because he tries to create his own rules for playing the game. The last memory she shares of him, in which he ignominiously abandons her just when she has learned to trust him (84), suggests that, despite her reservations towards him, she is unknowingly changed by her encounters with him. Her sense of betrayal comes from the fact that she has failed to transform him as he has transformed her. He refuses his responsibility towards her at exactly the point where their roles have switched: she has become the child, and it is he who must take care of her.

The second interview alters its form radically. The interviewer and interviewee switch positions, with Vincent rewriting the interview with John's cousin Margot so that it reads in the third-person style of the fragments. With meticulous care, Coetzee has constructed this section so that it *does* read like an emulation of his authorial voice as it appears in *Boyhood*, and *Youth*. If the role reversal is initially confusing,<sup>104</sup> one quickly becomes absorbed in the performance, which seems to tread a more familiar path than the first interview. The tale encompassed in this improvised storytelling is of a visit John and his aging father pay to the family farm. There, he comes under fire from family for his unorthodox habits, which once again distinguish him from the typical South African male: his vegetarianism, his absence from the country and the suspicious circumstances under which he returned, make him a target for his cousin Carol.

It is a familiar setting for the South African novel – the dry, arid farm, the troubled white family, and the estranged son who returns to hostile circumstances. Or, more accurately, it reads this way because of how the facts have been arranged. As an example of truth-directedness, the piece is more revealing for the contrasts it outlines between the facts Margot has told Vincent, and the story in which Vincent has arranged these facts to form a narrative of (at times painful) openness. Again and again, the distinction emerges between a

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<sup>104</sup> That confusion is drawn onto the page in the form of Margot's confused responses to Vincent's imposition of the narrating style.

truth unveiled through revelation, and a truth that emerges during the process of articulation.

Some examples:

1. *I don't know. I don't know if I can let you say that.* (Margot's first protest to Vincent, 90).
2. *[Groans]Did I really say all that?* (98).
3. *I won't let you write that. You can't write that about Carol ... you can't write down every word I say and broadcast it to the world. I never agreed to that. Carol will never speak to me again* (100).

The examples are numerous, and they point to the fact that the truths that emerge from such a process of articulation are not always recognised by the voice behind them. Margot flinches from this sort of truth-telling, or is often unable to recognise her own voice in the story that Vincent gives back to her. The “I-that-is-not-I” of *autre-biography* is blatantly advertised for our attention, and we see from Margot's interruptions that the narrative becomes increasingly unsustainable in the demands it places on her.

The reader is on firmer narrative ground than in the previous interview. One is motivated to take ownership of the text, to read it within the ambit of one's knowledge of Coetzee's other works. This ownership is, of course, founded on the invasive claims of knowledge of the Other. The authorial voice given to Vincent in this section of the novel attempts to anticipate the Other in its transferral of John's writing voice to Margot. This voice, neither Margot's nor John's, attempts to convert the inscrutable events into perspicuous ones. John's peculiar plan to buy the old house in Merweville and have his father live there invites accusations from Margot of filial impiety. While John claims that “fathers and sons were never meant to share a house” (133), his revelation strikes Margot as selfish, self-interested. John's admission – “I want to be able to be alone when I choose” – simply reinforces this view.

John's relationship to his father is the question to which the narratives are yoked. If Julia feels that John's relationship with his father is founded on guilt (48), Margot's story also reveals the mix of resentment and obligation experienced by her cousin. When she confronts

him concerning his plans, he rounds on her and reveals that the anger towards his father witnessed in the earlier novels is still present (132). Against the accusation of wishing to abandon his father, he has no satisfactory rebuttal. The sense that he is ill-fitted for the tasks presented to him by life is unrelenting.

In reading these words, the reader must be aware that the biographer's sleight of hand is at play. Margot's interruptions and protestations are useful here; they act as prophylactic barriers, rendering the interviewer a conspicuously unreliable narrator. In doing so, the process of the reader's separation from the remainder is formalised. Accordingly, one is made aware of the intrusiveness of this project, with Vincent approximating details and papering over gaps in the story with his own inventions. The tale lumbers on, usurping the facts and details Margot has provided into its own project, and it is noticeable that Margot's interruptions grow less frequent, as if the displacement imbued by the third-person narrative negates her control over the narrative. Importantly, Coetzee is parodying the interviewer's acquisitive task, which takes over its host and renders him unable to speak the truth. Vincent's task models that of the reading that attempts to decipher and finds only the incomprehensible and the meaningless. If the deceased is irrecoverable, the interviewer's attempts to transform the remainder – to produce a 'body', as it were – only push the remainder further from the reader. We are here approaching the path where what is shown to us is the impossibility of reducing down to nothing. The attempt to reduce the space between oneself and the remainder only produces further space between the reader and the text being read.

The same irreducibility pertains to the father-son relationship which is constantly discussed or mentioned in the text. In Mike Marais' influential study of the author's oeuvre, he traces the presence of various child metaphors in Coetzee's works. We are confronted with characters, like Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*, Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*,

and David Lurie in *Disgrace*, who are coming to terms with the idea that they have not been the ideal parents to their offspring. In *Summertime*, although John's first response is to think of himself as a child still, the reader will note that in the relationship between John and his father there is a degree of ambiguity at the very least. While John has moved back in with the older Coetzee, as far as *he* is concerned, the ageing patriarch is his ward, rather than the other way around. There is a gap, a lag or a discordance between what we know and what is occurring in the text, a gap that is brought to our attention through the event of reading. This discordance is one of the text's animating impulses, leading the reader into a state of disturbance or restlessness as we speculate on what the links might be.

To be sure, the displacement that cannot be resolved in this text is 'why' – insofar as a reason can be said to be present within the fragmented epistemological system of the work – it is that John is so eager to be rid of his father. The seemingly callous treatment of parent by child cannot be justified or mitigated by sentiments of regret expressed in retrospect. In any event, the text lacks any such justification. As faithful as Vincent is trying to be to the story, his desire to bring some intelligibility to Coetzee's treatment of his father cannot bring about the retrieval of the deceased. He seeks to achieve what cannot be achieved, to fill in the 'why' through the use of this other narrative. Because the 'why' cannot be granted or guaranteed, its power over the reader is limited, and its claims only credible in the most solipsistic of ways.

The third interview is with the mother of the girls Julia dismissively calls "his scatterlings from the ex-Portuguese empire" (52). Adriana Nascimento's daughter Maria Regina is tutored in English by John, whom she refers to throughout as "Mr Coetzee." Like the others, she is immediately struck by his unkempt appearance and his unorthodox personal transportation, and like the other women she picks up immediately that he is not married. She is unconvinced of his suitability for the task of improving Maria Regina's English, more so

when she meets him and finds his eloquence and command of poetry and philosophy disconcerting. The details are familiar to the reader by now, and the picture being developed seems to merely be a confirmation of what has passed between the other interviewees and Vincent. Where Adriana differs is that her reaction to John's way of being in the world is decidedly negative. With her husband having been seriously wounded in a robbery and reduced to a near-vegetative coma, she has to take on the role of family provider. From this point, her sympathies are exhausted in looking after her husband, and in providing for and watching over her daughters.

These details are important: unlike the other women interviewed so far, Adriana does not have the reserves of sympathy and generosity demanded of her by this stranger who imposes himself upon her. Importantly, though, despite her hostility to John – a hostility engendered by her reading of him as an impractical and weak man who may pervert her daughter if given the chance – she accepts his invitation to come on a picnic with him and his father. The picnic is a disaster, with rain ruining any plans John might have for a good day. Of course, this misfortune delights Adriana, who sees this as a chance to show up John in front of her adoring daughter.

Adriana believes that this will mark the end of John Coetzee's involvement in their lives. Then she begins receiving a series of letters from him, letters that are lost to the ever-inquisitive gaze of the interviewer (170). John begins pursuing her, a pursuit that is, Adriana relates, completely unrequited. There is a certain way that Adriana wishes her story to be read, a way that clashes with Vincent's intention to depict her as one of John Coetzee's mistresses. What Adriana needed at that time was someone to help her through the responsibility of caring for her comatose husband. What John offered was not nearly enough. Made a servant of a responsibility to her comatose husband in which she has no say, she cannot extend herself to this unwanted interloper, who turns matters of life into art.

A moment which perhaps captures the tragicomic nature of John's pursuit occurs when he enlists at the dance studio where Adriana works (182). Adriana is, of course, incensed: "I did not greet him. I wanted him to see at once that he was not welcome" (182). Adriana's description of the hapless John as a man "not at ease with his body [. . .] To him, the body was like one of those wooden puppets that you move with strings. You pull this string and the left arm moves, you pull that string and the right leg moves. And the real self sits up above, where you cannot see him, like the puppet-master pulling the strings" (183). Her recollection draws the strongest response yet from Vincent: "*Go on. It is not a very dignified picture of Coetzee that emerges from your story, I won't deny that, but I will change nothing, I promise*" (185). What dancing figures here is a loss of self-possession and a giving over of one's self to the love-game, a game whose rules (again) elude our hero. His attempts at bringing across his feelings to her segue once more into the ridiculous.

Adriana's ridicule of the quixotic hero predisposes the reader to see a certain sort of nobility in his actions: the reader's sympathy is actively manipulated, our position anticipated by the work. John is seen to transform his amorous feelings into art, but (as Adriana describes him) he seems to have a tin ear for the music of the heart – a rather cruel remark if we consider the author's well-professed love of music. Adriana proposes that the grand gestures of love/infatuation are not what John is built for. More importantly, the target of his affections is not in the least interested in him.

Coetzee grants this target a first-person narrative voice with which to express her disinterest, but one needs to be wary of assuming that this gives her any particularly special agency. Once again, we are enmeshed in the author's game, a game in which we receive the information at several removes. The silent presence of a translator mediating Adriana's testimony must certainly affect how we read it. Approaching this text means taking into account how she is defined by her unsympathetic treatment of John, and how this in turn

defines our reading of her. If the reader develops a form of hostility towards Adriana – a feeling characterised by a sense that things cannot surely be as bad as she describes – then we have fallen for the logic of suspicion which is inscribed by the work.

This is to say that the reader is required to supplement the lack of sympathy by reading beyond the positions inscribed by the immediate interviewer-interviewee process. To do this is also to reject the position which the work seems to dictate that the reader should take up. The text estranges us from John at the moment where we are most inclined to feel sympathy for him: his role as rejected suitor is muddied by Vincent's belief in his imminent greatness.

The last two interviews are rather less dramatic than the ones they follow. In the interview with Martin, a colleague of John Coetzee's in the seventies, Vincent begins by reading a notebook extract to this colleague. The extract continues the theme of game-playing, with the job-interview being the chosen sport at which the protagonist lacks skill. Tellingly, the extract bleeds over into Vincent's interview:

*He emerges from the interview in a state of black dejection. He wants to get away from this place at once, without delay. But no, first there are forms to be filled in, travel expenses to be collected.*

*"How did it go?"*

*'The speaker is the candidate who was interviewed first, the pipe-smoker.' That is you, if I am not mistaken. (207)*

The text reminds us that Vincent's position is inseparable from the piece we are reading: it is a position from which interpretation of facts is being performed while those facts are being represented. The relationship between the fragment and the voice that gives witness to it cannot be a passive one. Vincent attempts to enlist Martin in legitimising the reading he gives of John Coetzee, a reading that Martin is often unwilling to endorse. This interview is, more than the others, a contestation over the terrain being covered. It becomes increasingly about Vincent's methods, with Martin interrogating the interviewer as to the choices he is making. When Vincent's remarks reveal that it is (chronologically) the first interview (216), the reader

wonders what effect Martin's probing questions have on the approach he displays in the other interviews.

The interview with Martin is, almost self-paradoxically, a lesson in not following the text too closely. Vincent's attempts to line it up against history, to make it readable in terms of dates and places, takes him further away rather than bringing him closer. Martin's concern that the biography will not do justice to John Coetzee, that it will be little more than "women's gossip" (218) does not agree with Vincent's belief that the truths have the ability to transcend the wills and motives of the confessor. We receive no conclusive answer to this, because the work does not deal out conclusive answers. Vincent's lack of armament against the doubts voiced by Martin can be read as a thematisation of the text's self-consciousness where literary reductions are concerned. This last point has interesting ramifications: by troubling the interviewer's authority as auditor, the reader's position as vicarious adjudicator of the facts presented is also troubled: the 'neutrality' of the interviewer's position as witness/listener is one the reader quite unknowingly adopts as their own. Coetzee may well be suggesting that a proximity to the subject must always be guarded against, because of the sense of mastery over the subject which it invites. That is to say, the interviewer must leave behind the idea of John Coetzee he has formed, and be open to that which he does not, or cannot, expect.

The final interview, with a colleague who had a short affair with John Coetzee while they were at UCT, again leads to the interviewer having to explain his project. Sophie is uncertain about revealing too much of what occurred between her and the late subject. To speak of him in his absence is to be unfaithful to the friendship. Moreover, the subject's death estranges those who would speak of him: it transforms their relationship into one of distance which the speaker is forever trying to bridge. In this interview, Sophie is quizzed by Vincent on John Coetzee's political beliefs. The reader, undoubtedly aware that this is a subject on

which the 'real' Coetzee is known to be guarded, is by this point sceptical enough to pass over the obvious red herrings. The real revelation in the interview is of Vincent's sympathy with his subject:

*there was an image of him in the public realm as a cold and supercilious intellectual, an image he did nothing to dispel. Indeed one might even say he encouraged it. Now, I don't believe that image does him justice. The conversations I have had with people who knew him well reveal a different person – not necessarily a warmer person, but someone more uncertain of himself, more confused, more human, if I can use that word. (235)*

It is this 'other' John Coetzee who Vincent is trying to recall, this 'other' John Coetzee about whom he wants the interviewees to reminisce. As the reader is aware by this point, all the interviewees can call up is the John Coetzee who is, as Julia puts it, "a mysterious automaton." The subject Vincent desires to see recuperated is not one who can be dredged up at will. As the novel has shown, this subject emerges without forethought, when we least anticipate it.

My interpretation of these interviews has sought to emphasise their lack of synthesis, gesturing towards Vincent's inability to make the interviews tell us as readers anything coherent about John Coetzee. The ceaseless unworking of Otherness perpetually frustrates the possibility of making contact with the silenced figure: it makes John's death, the activating impulse of Vincent's project, ungraspable, unworkable. The interviews refuse the ordering hand of the interviewer, evoking for the reader an acceptance of death as the unruly Other, that which evades any ordering criteria we might seek to bring to it. These interviews are an impossible, untenable substitute for the contact with John Coetzee that Vincent seeks. But in their very impossibility, they "quietly recall us to the unworking of the work, the ungraspability of the finite, the impossibility of death and the endless process of mourning" (Critchley *Very Little* 191).

If the interviews themselves yield little, or nothing, might something be gained in attempting to further our non-dietrological reading, taking in the interviewing process itself?

Here, the reading process might draw on the analogy Descartes gives in the third part of his

*Discourse on Method*:

In this respect, I would be imitating a traveller who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can [ . . . ] for in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of a forest (qtd. in Critchley, *Very Little* 195).

As we have seen so far, the novel seems to offer itself up for rich interrogative dredging, but all such efforts exhaust themselves without ever revealing what the process seeks to reveal. The futility of this attempt seems to find its parodic expression in the efforts of the hapless biographer Vincent, and it is this ‘character’s’ position that I will turn to next.

### **Unworking Knowledge**

The interviews stage the dilemma of the aporia, where “speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s silence” (*Mourning* 72). When the interviewees falter, when their voices fall silent, Vincent urges them on, prompts them to speak again, to continue to speak more. At other points, it is the interviewer himself who falls silent, portentously choosing not to respond to the queries or accusations of his interviewees. The words of those being interviewed often gesture towards the off-page responses of the interviewer to what is being said. The interviewees are often deservedly suspicious of Vincent’s motives: Julia refers to him as “your man” and “your man Coetzee.” Yet Vincent takes care to note that he never met the ostensible subject of his work: “I thought it would be better if I had no sense of obligation toward him. It would leave me free to write what I wished” (35). The interviewer’s sense of complicity and guilt in raking over the private life of the intensely private author is mitigated by his attempt to depersonalise the relationship.

Rather than granting the interviewer various confidences about John Coetzee the public figure, the respondents construct a series of bewildering pictures in which John is read

with a cruel eye. That so much of the narrative is so lacerating, where its ostensible subject is concerned, requires the reader to suspend a sceptical sense of witnessing an act of self-flagellation conducted for their benefit. The exercise of cancelling out the author's voice, Coetzee seems to suggest, allows other truths to reveal themselves. These truths are limited truths, certainly, but they illuminate the subject, albeit only in the penumbral sense.

Certainly, these other truths perform functions beyond themselves: for one, they elucidate much on the topic of sympathy to the ultimate alterity of the dead. In each of the interviews, we encounter an interviewee whose story demonstrates their exercise (or lack thereof) of sympathy towards Coetzee, or his failure to exercise due sympathy towards them. We have confessors whose revelations take place within particular economies: they have scores to settle, unresolved issues to work through. The reader, who witnesses the logic of sympathy at work in this section of the novel, is asked to make a decision that we cannot, in truth, make consciously. By displaying its own limitedness, the text asks us to overcome the limited economy in which such confessionals are usually read.

Coetzee's excursion into self-cancellation requires a lot of his reader while paradoxically offering up little or nothing in return. The process is initially distracting for the reader because of how it strips the disguise from the performers. In this regard, Coetzee makes an unusual comedy of the impossibility of making contact with those who have left our realm of existence. There is an interviewer who is often remiss at his task, has clearly had some hand in the extracts presented (he refers to information that is not presented in the fragments we read) and mystifyingly banal at times in the questions he poses. More tellingly, the sceptical reader may find it difficult to believe that these interviewees can recall so clearly events that occurred twenty or thirty years ago. Certainly, Julia sounds a little too much like a mouthpiece that allows the author to excogitate on the various failings of John Coetzee. The author artfully solves the problem by having the characters be academics and intellectuals in

their own right, but the doubt lingers<sup>105</sup>. It is a doubt Coetzee neatly has his meta/fictional characters voice themselves:

how can this woman pretend to have total recall of mundane conversations dating back three or four decades? And when is she going to get to the point? So let me be candid: as far as the dialogue is concerned, I'm making it up as I go along. Which I presume is permitted since we are talking about a writer. What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit, be assured of that. (32)

We are constantly brought back to the artificiality of such narratives, because the autobiographical pact upon which we establish our 'contract' with the author relies on crude notions of authenticity when what is called for are finer distinctions. The perverse acknowledgement of limitedness means the reader is compelled to abandon the search for a secret, authentic centre. In this novel, an assemblage of narratives disembarrassed of the demands of biographical felicity attempt to reconstruct the subject, the John Coetzee who is being sought out by the reader/interviewer. From what we read, it becomes clear that this task cannot succeed: to use the discourse of hospitality, the longed-for guest fails to arrive. This is because the alterity of the Other cannot be accommodated within the realms of the familiar, and neither can it be contemplated from the authoritative standpoint of the interrogative reader. Vincent indirectly addresses the absent subject (John), and so requires a response in accordance to the idea he carries of the subject. The name "John Coetzee" attempts to predetermine this response so that it conforms to the expectations inscribed by that name. The subject must either fit the name and its associations, or be rendered unrecognisable. As the interviews show, Vincent cannot encounter what he seeks: instead, he finds only the spectral figure of alterity who speaks of the infinite ungraspability of itself.

Faced with so little in the way of content, we are prompted to turn to form as a way out. The form and the content perform the same work, but each does so in its own terms and according to its own systems. For instance, when we read the fragments, we are aware that

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<sup>105</sup> One is reminded of Elizabeth Costello's expression of disbelief in one of Coetzee's other fictions.

they have been dated so that they might be read at a future date. They are catalogued in a notebook, but they do not anticipate any other reader than their author. They are a closed circuit, resisting their reader (us).

If the reader then hopes to make these pieces mean, or to render them authentic by checking them against history, that hope is dashed. What we read in *Summertime*, and what Vincent discovers, is that while John may have learned something from the individuals interviewed, that something is not recoverable. The interviewees can only relate their modes of closeness to the deceased: their stories tell us more about how *they* related to John than about how he related to them. Indeed, they ultimately say very little about John Coetzee, who emerges as an unrecognisable figure. The stories, then, are a deception: they do not do what they claim to do because they cannot call back the deceased.

In this, we are reminded that there can be “no witnesses” to the life of the deceased: those who Vincent selects speak only of *their* memories – it is self-directed commentary. The work’s refusal to submit to reading requires a new mode of approach from the reader, one which “would only preserve before him [sic], under the cover of objectivity, meaningless and strange pages” (Chalier, “Levinas and the Talmud”139).

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The novel ends, not with the set of interviews, but with a selection of fragments similar to the ones which begin the work. These fragments, undated, carry on the theme of the son who struggles to relate to his father. In the first of these fragments, which are longer and more introspective than the earlier ones, John relates the experience of a club rugby match he attends with his father. The match is played in a dreary rain by half-hearted players, while the last devotees of this dying ritual (his father included) watch from the stands. John himself is there purely out of a sense of duty, a responsibility to his father whose source he reveals in due course. During his childhood years, when there reigned a contest of supremacy between

he and his father in the household, he destroyed his father's beloved record of Italian arias (249). This "mean and petty deed" for which he has spent the last twenty years feeling "the bitterest remorse" is narrated from a retrospective perspective that differs markedly from similar confessions of shameful deeds in *Boyhood* which occur without expressions of regret (Attridge, "Confessing" 154). When the adult John attempts to make amends for his act, he finds that his father, broken down to "his present crushed and humiliated existence", has seemingly lost his interest in Italian opera (250).

Divining his father's interests and passions seems an impossible task. It emerges that the gestures with the opera and the rugby are half-hearted attempts by John to gain some access to his father's inner life. They are half-hearted because he fears that, were he to seek his father's forgiveness, it would emerge that his father had never considered him significant enough to affect his life: "*What makes you think my life has been a misery? What makes you think you have ever had it in your power to make my life a misery?*" (250). The fear that his father is "playing a terrible game with him" (250) paralyses him, trapping him in a world where he is uncertain who is the victim and who the perpetrator. He is forced into an intimacy with his father from which he cannot withdraw without abandoning the older man.<sup>106</sup>

The second extract carries on the sense of self-doubt alluded to in the previous fragment. He speculates on his mother's decisions in educating him, decisions which have placed him at odds with the world in which he lives. He ponders whether a traditional upbringing would have led to his living the ideal (unexamined) life in white South Africa, a traditional life as a stern schoolteacher, perhaps. If his mother's decisions have led him to the place where he is, precariously employed and living in a tumbledown home with his father, then might it not have been better that he be raised conventionally? Again, the tone is

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<sup>106</sup> One is reminded of the earlier fragment concerning the Kurosawa film. But, as the engaged reader will be aware, abandonment is a key motif working its way through Coetzee's works, with *The Master of Petersburg*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year* only being some of the texts where this motif appears. Coetzee's novels script an ethics where, in the words of Mike Marais, "to respond indifferently to anyone or anything is to stand accused of abandonment" ("The Writing of a Madman" 127).

retrospective, the speaking voice looking back at his earlier self and evaluating decisions made then.

The third extract is concerned once more with his father's private life, and how it remains closed to John. Hired temporarily by the firm his father works for, John gains some insight into the older man's working life, a life of figures and columns and ledgers that is soul-deforming in nature. He meets Mrs Noerdien, his father's assistant, and is immediately taken aback by her beauty. It intrigues him how his father, who seemingly has no great passions in life, can spend his days working alongside such a beautiful woman:

The question he cannot ask is: What does it do to the heart of a lonely man like yourself to be sitting side by side, day after day, in a cubicle no larger than many prison cells, with a woman who is not only as good at her job and as meticulous as Mrs. Noerdien, but also as feminine? (259)

The postscript (*why say that his father is in love with Mrs Noerdien when he has obviously fallen for her himself?* – 260) reveals John's wish to identify with the older man, a wish that cannot be fulfilled as long as it occurs on his terms. Presumably, it would not have occurred to the younger John that his father might not fall so easily under the sway of his emotions. Whatever the truth is, it eludes John.

With the fourth fragment, we are presented with an idea for a story. Therein, the unnamed man notes down "thoughts, ideas, significant occurrences" (260). Things, we are told, take a turn for the worse, and the man writes down "Bad day" (and no more) in his diary. The bad days multiply until he simply resorts to crossing them off like a man on a desert island. He is in the grip of a malaise he lacks the tools to extricate himself from. If he could write poetry, he might get at the root of the matter. As it is, he has only prose, which is more exhausting and requires more commitment than he is willing to exercise if it is to interpret the chaos of life. Instead, the man drafts a list of ways to kill himself, noting the various methods and the drawbacks of each. Eventually, he decides on drowning himself in a very literary way. If the reader is tempted to speculate that this is John turning his fictional

thoughts into fiction (as the shared use of the third-person pronoun seems to suggest), there is no purchase for such thoughts.

The final fragment, the note on which the book ends, details the ‘discovery’ that his father has cancer of the larynx. Watching his father lying stricken in the hospital bed, John wants to reassure his father, to take his hand and comfort him. In this moment, where he is required to relinquish his role as child and comfort his father, he cannot extend beyond his solipsism to sympathise enough (262). It is important to note that it is not that John simply lacks sympathy: it is rather that his sympathy is not enough. The demands placed on him by this death-directed interruption are, to his mind, insufferable. Presented with the reality that he must care for his dying father, he shrinks back: “I can’t do this”, he says (265). The fragment, and thus the text itself, ends without the comfort of a true resolution:

He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye.* One or the other: there is no third way. (265–266)

Ending with the discomfiting notion that John may be about to abandon his father, that he may finally be unable to transcend himself, the work displays the “intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction” (Said, *On Late Style* 7) that clings to acts of closure.

### **Late Style?**

The procedural manipulation of form in this book provides ways of thinking through death and our inadequacy before it. The apparent carelessness of the work and its disregard for its own continuity stages the ways in which the story of the dead resists being reclaimed by the living. How then does one read and interpret, if all that reading reveals is absence? It could be argued that what is required of the reader is a reading that engages in “the concrete reconstruction of the negation of meaning” (Critchley, *Very Little* 178). If we accept that language produces both distance and silence, then what is required is an attentiveness that

allows the silence in the work to utter its own impossibility: the impossibility of bringing into existence that which is lost to the world, in all its ruined state of being. As such, Coetzee's work, a work of scrupulous self-reflection, rejects the comforts of reconciliation and resolution. In returning to the style and themes of his earlier works, the author alienates himself even further from the story he is trying to tell, in order to better get at its truths.

If this text plumbs new levels of truth-directedness, then we must still be able to read with as faithful a reading as possible: the tendency is that the more failings are revealed, the more we are willing to mitigate. The novel works against this by ending on an ambiguous note, with John once more being 'not enough', not suited to the task at hand. It does not grant the reconciliation of father and son, but ends instead at the reader's point of departure. It is an unsatisfying ending, but one which hints at the ultimate source of the book's attempt to make sense of things.

And what of our own attempts to make sense of the book? As this chapter shows, the reader is left with little recourse but to refer to the markers left by the author in the form of his previous works. One thinks of the character in Coetzee's *Foe* who remarks that

The trick I have learned is to plant a sign or marker in the ground where I stand, so that in my future wanderings I shall have something to return to, and not get worse lost than I am. Having planted it, I press on; the more often I come back to the mark [. . .] the more certainly I know I am lost, yet the more I am heartened too, to have found my way back. (135–36)

The reading conducted here is thus a hapless one, aware of its failure to make ground, yet resolved to press on regardless. *Summertime* demands supplementation, placing this demand upon the reader who is tasked with interpreting the text. This, finally, is the crux of *Summertime*. As Derrida would have it, "[t]o live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death" (*Specters of Marx* vxii). This, then, is the nagging question we are returned to over and over again: How to live under difficult circumstances?

## **Chapter Four – Clean Spaces and Contagions: Ishtiyaq Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret***

*Then they fell from a joyous life in the moment into the anxious contemplation of the vanished past and the distant future.* – Margaret Atwood (*The Year of the Flood* 88)

The relationship of literature to the aporetic has been a key thematic throughout this study. I have attempted to trace, through the preceding three chapters, a particular current that manifests in selected works of South African literature, as they operate at the limits of the Sayable. Writing, in the various texts I have examined so far, aims to bring to light that which cannot be seen – the invisible, the unseen, the absent, and so forth. It attempts to contain within itself that which exceeds containment. My argument is that each of these texts produces a certain kind of absence that can be theorised very broadly as an aporetic arresting of knowledge for those who are left to give account in the afterness (and this is not a chronological or even transcendental afterness) of this absence. These texts each illuminate the point that meaning is, and can only ever be, provisional and contingent in nature. Indeed, they use this ungroundedness as a starting point from which to perceive relationality. In this final chapter, I examine Ishtiyaq Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret* as a novel that uses absence as a means to theorise different ways of working through the cataclysmic irruption that this absence represents.

### **Saudade: The Politics of Disappearance**

Disappearance is a phenomenon that has a perduring significance in South Africa. Its use during the Apartheid era, as a means of displacing and/or suppressing dissent from individuals who were a threat to the status quo, has resulted in disappearance assuming an especially sinister place in the South African social imaginary over the years. Those subject to the erasure of presence that occurs in the act of disappearance assume a presence-as-absence, suspended in the unknowable between life and death. They become ghostly non-presences, haunting the world they have been expelled from through the processes of

memory. Those affected directly by the disappearance of a loved one enter an interminable mourning, unable to act out the rites of closure that attend to the formerly living.

To say this is to note that the spectre of the disappeared holds a particular place in the work of the aporetic. The disappeared status of the lost individual gorgonises mourning, and delays the routines and procedures by which mourning achieves its purpose. To disappear is to occupy a non-space, a space of possibility and speculation where the concrete is granted no hold. It is to be displaced by loss, a sense of absence which conversely brings with it the awareness of the disappeared individual's prior status as 'appeared'. For those who are left behind, to be made aware of this absence is to be made aware of indifferent temporality, where what exists today may, without our knowledge or blessing or approval, cease to exist tomorrow. The disappeared refuses the vocative address.

In South Africa, the idea of disappearance has an enduring symbolic valency. The Apartheid government's use of disappearance as a means of subjugation and control, as a means of maintaining order over those who placed themselves outside the ambit of the state because they disagreed with its actions has been well-documented. The state, perceiving itself to be injurable, enacted a model of public order premised on the maintenance of its illegal order.<sup>107</sup> Forced disappearance was one of the tools the state wielded, wherein individuals could be detained for lengthy periods, subject to vanishing, erasure or other forms of complete removal from the public domain, has passed into historical lore as one of its most devastating actions. Many South Africans suffered deleterious violence at the hands of the South African government, which had the power to withdraw the political and legal status of those it deemed to be transgressive. Acting with impunity – that is to say, acting outside even their own laws – the South African government of the day committed outrages which

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<sup>107</sup> As I argue in this chapter, the slippage between the local and the global is ever-present. The illegality of the state, or its actors, is ignored by the state itself, whose sovereignty allows it to assert that it cannot commit a crime, since it makes the laws defining crimes (Coetzee, *Diary* 49). See Also Judith Butler's "Indefinite Detention" (*Prearious Life* 50–100).

excluded these individuals from the realm of the human, consigning them to a condition of being in which political rights and legal safeguards are stripped away from the subject. So rendered, the subject is “deprived of a determinate legal status” (Žižek, “Biopolitics” n.p.), by a state that operates in a “lawless and unaccountable manner” (Butler, *Precarious Life* xv), simultaneously within and outside its own laws, in order to achieve total dominance.

More significantly, those who disappear escape the bounds of temporality. It no longer becomes possible to speak of the disappeared subject as though s/he occupies our space and time. They occupy, in Javier Marías’ terms, “the kind of time that has not existed, the time that awaits us and also the time that does not await us and therefore does not happen, or happens only in a sphere that isn’t precisely temporal” (*Your Face Tomorrow*, 39). Their lives are ungrievable (and thus the subjects of a melancholic *saudade*<sup>108</sup>), and so their disappearance instantiates a yearning for closure or reconciliation on the part of those left behind, a drive to make known what is unknown. Here, I am re-emphasising the argument I make in Chapter 2: in the absence of knowledge, we are driven to narrativise. If we narrativise to resolve some fundamental antagonism, then here that antagonism is the void left by the missing/disappeared. The void is an Amfortasian wound, something that is incongruous to the symbolic network of reality and so demands incorporation into the Same. Nowhere is this more apparent than with the advent of the TRC, in the years following the formal demise of the Apartheid regime, which comes an attempt to “establish the truth in relation to past events as well as the motives for and circumstances in which gross violations of human rights occurred, and to make the findings known in order to prevent a repetition of such acts in future.”<sup>109</sup> In the TRC, we see a desire to give account before those who have endured loss, to console those who have been the subjects of an inconsolable (because

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<sup>108</sup> *Saudade* is a word that slips the bounds of English definition. Of Portuguese-Galician extraction, it describes a deeply emotional longing for an absent subject/object whom/that one loves. It carries with it the notion that the subject/ object may never return.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Durrant, “Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J. M. Coetzee’s Inconsolable Works of Mourning” 430.

inadequate) mourning, and to bring into the light of representation those who were forever absented or disappeared by the deeds of the Apartheid regime. The TRC's work was of a recuperative nature: its aim being to make it possible to speak of the absent *in their absence*; to close the temporal gap between the parenthetical time of the disappeared and the time that continues without them; and to enact an ethical process of coming to terms with absence or loss by showing fidelity to those whose exist in the present only as memories.

I recognise here that the aim of this recuperative project is to bring light to the great unknowable excess in which both death and disappearance linger. While symbolically aimed at recognising the efforts and sufferings of those who have crossed over into that non-space, the TRC process also stands as an attempt to re-imagine a sense of community constituted by those left behind, in the shared reckoning of loss. Such a reckoning might establish the grounds for a set of precepts that would safeguard the community thus constituted, against future losses. In *The Silent Minaret*, the TRC is woven into the novel's genealogy of loss, its singularity at once clarified and made transitive in the slippage between itself and the other forms of loss the novel bears witness to.

One cannot speak of disappearance in the South African milieu without noting that it was also utilised as a political act, as a defence strategy by those who were resistant to Apartheid. Activists opposed to the regime actively used disappearance as a means to flee confinement or imprisonment, or as a means to further the cause of the resistance movement. Disappearance here represents a willed acting against repression and a response to the sovereign power wielded by those one is opposing. To exile oneself, during this period, was to step out of the boundaries of the state, to choose a third way between placid servitude and open revolt. To disappear in this manner is to enact a wilful secession from the overdetermining relationship of power, an anarchic turn which throws open the ostensibly accomplished fact of the state's sovereignty. In this novel, certainly, the protagonist's

disappearance is presented as an internally-willed insurrection that cannot hope to achieve anything (what it achieves is little, less than little) but where what matters is the disruptiveness of the gesture, its power to cause those who bear witness to it to rethink, to confront the failure of imagination that causes the atrocities which stain history.

The argument I wish to make here is one that the TRC process demonstrates implicitly: that the act of survival entails a need for ethically rethinking the one-to-one relation that is disrupted by the act of disappearance. In *The Silent Minaret*, the protagonist's vanishing into an elsewhere creates a need for those who are left behind to make sense of his disappearance, to close the incommensurable gap between the vanished corporeal individual and his symbolic referent – the name that he is not present to answer to. This last point is significant: the name of the disappeared no longer corresponds to a corporeal self that responds to the spoken utterance. The name of the disappeared no longer refers to an entity that can no longer be “unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable” (Derrida, “Signature Event Context” 1). Disappearance severs name from bearer, and in doing so it calls the name of the Other into question, and in so doing it makes the self aware of the limitations of the discursive position in which that self has been installed by language. The shock, the displacement or force of disappearance, its affective power, renders the self without control, by making the self aware of its vulnerability to loss. Thus the various characters in Shukri's novel are made aware that they have lost “someone through whom the world . . . will have opened up in a both finite and infinite – mortally infinite – way” (Derrida, *Mourning* 107).

In tracing the weave of this strand through late twentieth-century South African history, my aim is not to overstate the emphasis on the local that occurs in Ishtiyag Shukri's *The Silent Minaret*, but to connect it to the more global machinations of disappearance that manifest in this work. Shukri's novel weaves the local into its discussion of post-September

11 London and finds that there are intersections and continuances between the sort of precarity occasioned by colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa and the more modern, more global effects of the war on terror. The South African past is a backdrop to the novel-present, but Shukri scripts his characters' experience of that past as a blending of past and present that calls the fixity of both categories into question, the better to affirm a precarious solidarity between them.

To be sure, this work operates at the limits of language, taking narrative to the cusp of the unsayable. It constantly calls attention to the fact that we operate from, rather than with, language. The absence of the one who was present, Issa, occasions various acts of sense-making or truth-telling from those he has left behind in the world. While this novel is perhaps more transnational in its reach than the other works that I examine, my argument here will be that it is of a piece with them in the way that it takes as its point-zero the condition of being Other, situating it across diverse geographical locations and multi-temporal zones, from Britain through pre/Apartheid South Africa and on to occupied Palestine. Shukri's novel demonstrates that history is the totalising order of the Same, in the way that it utilises its novel-present to open out onto wider narratives of loss. As Mike Marais argues, history is "an order premised on the violent reduction of the other. While the degree of violence involved in this reduction of difference may differ from one location to another, and from one period to the next, the logic of exclusion and the indifference to others that it inscribes cannot not remain the same" (*Secretary of the Invisible* 194–195). Thus we see that in *The Silent Minaret*, the hedge which the Dutch Settlers to the Cape of Good Hope plant in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to distinguish European settlement is coterminous with the West Bank barriers and with the immigration and influx-control policies practiced by a twenty-first century Britain gripped by the rhetoric of Terror. Historical context, as it is provided in this novel, allows for an appreciation of the continuities of Western Imperial praxes. As the novel itself declares,

“The procedures of dispossession and domination implemented here . . . would be repeated around the globe for the rest of the millennium, and then again at the start of this new millennium” (65). Tellingly in this regard, the novel’s epigraph states that “history includes the present.”

Much of the critical scholarship that exists on Shukri’s novel has focused on the transnational aspect of his writing. In her seminal position-piece on post-transition South African literature, Meg Samuelson praises the way the novel scripts connections between the local and the global (“Scripting Connections” 115). Tina Steiner’s article “Pockets of Connection Against the Backdrop of Culture Talk in Ishtiyahq Shukri’s novel *The Silent Minaret*” suggests that Shukri’s novel “challenges notions of authentic original culture and identity vis-à-vis the complex transcultural exchange characteristic of a globalised world” (Steiner 67). Dobrota Pucherova’s article “Re-imagining the Other: The Politics of Friendship in Three Twenty-First Century South African Novels” notes that “Shukri goes far beyond the frame of contemporary South Africa to analyse the post-9/11 world as a society living under global Apartheid” (939). Jane Poyner, meanwhile, finds that this novel “adopts a world purview whilst recognising that this is always-already shaped by colonialist-imperialist structures of power” (316). The attentive reader of this work must recognise the text’s worldliness – in Edward Said’s use of the term<sup>110</sup> – and in so doing must recognise how that worldliness operates as an alternative politics in the way it exposes decontextualised rhetorics of ‘terror’ – though they may project themselves as universal – as in fact working in the politics of power as they are manifested by imperial or colonial entities.

This power – sovereignty, by any measure – is what the novel sets out to resist. Shukri proposes that it is the ordinary connections between individuals that might best combat the incursions of the state. In my reading of this work, I give greater weighting to

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<sup>110</sup> Said develops the notion of worldliness to define the dialectical engagement of the text with the world. The work engages actively with the world, while the world influences the work (*Orientalism*).

how these personal connections are written into being, in order to keep intact the serendipitous flow of the writing in this work. That is, rather than attempting to map a grid of hermeneutic theory onto this work, I adopt an openness towards the space of reading, a passivity in the encounter that allows potential spaces for ethical communication to occur.

Issa's disappearance disturbs the "normalised quiet", to use Edward Said's term. That is to say, it troubles the notion of a homogenous being-in-the-world, and in so doing estranges those Issa leaves behind from themselves. This novel is thus made up of their attempts to give account to the singularity of their relationships, from this unsettled position. Importantly, this irruptive act presents a space for those left behind to accept the irreducible alterity of the Other as the starting point of any possible action. This irreducibility opens a space for dialogue that accepts as its starting point the heterochrony of society (Bourriaud, *Altermodern* 13).<sup>111</sup>

What possible action there may be occurs because disappearance always leaves a trace: the area around the site of the disturbance cannot but be marked by this disturbance. In *The Silent Minaret*, we cannot consider Issa's mobility without acknowledging that this ability to move about in the world is made possible by the state's control over information.<sup>112</sup> Disappearance, I argue, is never pure; it always leaves traces, residues, residuals. The prospect of vanishing completely is negated by the subject's placing in society: the community of people who knew Issa is still present to reckon, to recount, to relate, to give account to the singularity of their relationships with him.

Here, it must be pointed out that this society, organised around absence, exists in contradiction of itself: it is Unavowable because in order to operate as a community it must

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<sup>111</sup> For Bourriaud, this heterochronous state takes as its starting point "a vision of human history as constituted from multiple temporalities . . . a positive vision of chaos and complexity" (*Altermodern* 13).

<sup>112</sup> I have deliberately avoided a lengthy discussion of the politics of space, as it would detract from the focus of this chapter. For a considered treatment of this issue, see M. Neelika Jayawardane's article on this novel.

disavow the singularity of each individual's singular experience of Issa's effect on their lives. As Blanchot attests, such an Unavowable community can only know itself "by ignoring itself" (*The Unavowable Community* 47). In *The Silent Minaret*, the 'community' brought together by the work affirms, in Blanchot's words, "both the difference and being-together of singularities" (*The Unavowable Community* 17). I invoke this notion of Blanchot's as a way of thinking through the infinite demand of absence. The reader of this novel enacts, through reading, an experience the novel itself theorises, namely the difference-and-being-together occasioned in the singular (but infinitely repeatable) but shared experience of reading.

This experience of reading is shaped by its relation to disappearance, where what disappears is still representable – it still appears, if only as a trace that alludes to its absence, or a clue that hints at, but ultimately never reveals. Bataille's words – "it is he who speaks in me, who maintains the discourse intended for him" – are demonstrated in the discursive project of this novel, to tell Issa's story (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 60). For those who are left behind are granted no succour, no refuge, no "consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 25).

In arguing that this discursive project is one the reader is implicated in, I am no doubt retracing ground I have covered in this thesis: I have spoken in the previous chapters of the affective nature of the reading experience, and the point is no more strongly emphasised than in Shukri's novel, which becomes prosopopeial in the act of reading. My reading emphasises that this novel, like the works examined in the other chapters, forms an unavowable community that is mirrored in its readership. That is to say, if the reading experience is always a singular, non-repeatable event, then there are still similarities or points of connection that draw these novels into a kindred union. The reader who encounters Shukri's novel cannot but experience a loss of control premised by the always-futile search for the

missing protagonist. The reading subject who encounters a text in which the protagonist is a vanished presence is required to read attentively, to supplement the lack inherent in the work. All the while, the reader must be aware that to do so is to risk showing bad faith to the work. My reading of this novel is not an attempt to draw, in Derrida's words, some "supplementary force" from the work, nor an attempt "to raise oneself to the very heights where we presume [the aporetic] has placed the other beyond all suspicion" (*The Work of Mourning* 51). Rather, it is a reading that advocates the primacy a yes-saying to the possibilities occasioned by the unpredictable. The unpredictable is that which occurs in the event of reading, that which infiltrates the reader's consciousness subtly and without warning or pre-expectation. The reader, as I will argue below, becomes a host to the Otherness of the work. In so doing, we are taken over by the Other, acted upon by this Otherness in ways we have no control over. In this way, the ordinary is defamiliarised.

To say this is to reiterate the point I stress in the previous chapters, namely that a different ontological and analytical optic is required in order to draw meaning from this work. In proposing a theory of disappearance, I seek out a way of talking about *The Silent Minaret* that is conceptually freighted but which emphasises the constitutively relational nature of the work. In the next section of this chapter, I attempt to trace the metonymic force of this work through a close reading of the narrative within it.

### **Precarious Enrootings**

*For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live – Theodor Adorno (Minima Moralia 87)*

The reader who engages *The Silent Minaret* comes across a story which at first glance appears curiously withholding, whilst simultaneously being voluble in its flow of information. In the beginning moments of the narrative we encounter an elderly woman whose identity is kept from the reader initially, until it is revealed that she is the neighbour of

the vanished protagonist. This opening gambit does not expend the story's important information swiftly. It reveals slowly, by omission and through the non-movement of stillness, that it will be about the disappearance of the neighbour Frances is trying to recall. Issa's importance has already been established in the portentous lines that introduce us to him:

Another hot day has been forecast and news images from France have unsettled her; old people who have succumbed to the heat are being kept in refrigerated trucks till away on holiday relatives return to claim them for burial. Some have already been placed in temporary graves. She draws the curtains against the bright light. Unless she shuts out the sun now, the room will soon become unbearably hot and she will have to retreat to her tiny bedroom at the back of the building for respite. She settles back into her armchair and pours her rosary beads, like precious grains of amber, from a cupped palm into a red satin pouch in which she also keeps the tasbeeh he gave her. (12)

We see, behind this accumulation of information, the old woman contemplating her fragile mortality amid the stifling ritual of the quotidian. If she is not quite waiting to die, then we are aware that her sense of frailty is linked to the ringing absence of the "he" who gifted to her the tasbeeh, an absence reflected in the silence of her room. The tasbeeh leaches its rich colour into the etiolated, greyed world, its passage through her fingers marking the falling-away of time. This generous gift stirs in Frances a brief retrospective, as she revisits the occasion on which the stranger (he is still unnamed at this point) gave her the beads (12). We then learn that "[i]t was she who first realised that he had gone missing", foregrounding from the first few lines Issa's status as missing. The 'he' in question is Issa, a clever student from South Africa who moves into the apartment below hers (13). Crucially, Frances has prefigured him: she expects Issa to be a rowdy youth, anticipates "the music, the endless cycle of noisy friends" (13). The reference to loud music testifies to the inefficacy of the walls behind which she shelters, an inability to completely shut out the Other. Frances is taken by surprise soon after, unprepared for "the rare sound of footsteps" that signals Issa's first arrival at her door. In this opening scene, we are made aware that Frances has pre-existing expectations – her position makes her hospitality inadequate because from it she is

able to overdetermine the way she experiences Issa. His unexpected arrival liberates Frances from her psychic containment in herself by allowing her to put a face to the figure she has been passing judgement on.

Issa, for his part, escapes this overdetermination by being courteous and quiet. Frances is compelled by the newcomer's divergence from her expectations to extend her hospitality. She invites him in for tea and they become friends (13). The arrival of the Other – for that is how Issa is presented here – is a liberating gesture, a fresh wind that frees the self from itself. Issa's presence downstairs becomes "a comforting, harmonious accompaniment" to Frances. The two develop a connection founded on minor, mutual, moments of friendship in which each extends their hospitality to the other: Issa doing the old lady's shopping, or bringing in her milk for her, and the old lady allowing the use of her television so that Issa can watch the news. Frances' recitation on Issa's habits is thus also a rumination on the significance of personal connections. Her interactions with Issa, minor in the larger scheme of things, cause her to ponder the similarities between Islam and Catholicism, a similarity symbolised by the slippage between the beads Issa gives her and her own rosary:

Sometimes, when she hasn't been attentive, she's found herself saying the rosary with his tasbeeh. When this happens, she doesn't stop to swap prayer beads, she just continues by counting the decades on her fingers, the tasbeeh dangling from her old bent hands. (18)

That this occurs in moments of inattention is of course important: alterity slips in unnoticed, its influence on the self interrupting the economy of difference and exclusion that engenders ethical indifference. What we read is not (or not only) what happened between Frances and Issa, but Frances' account of being affected by Issa. What impels the prose forward in this novel is memory, the recollection of Issa and the effect of his nomadic presence on those around him. His effect on Frances, for instance, is profound. Later, as she sits on the rooftop with Kagiso contemplating the eponymous silent minaret, she recalls a conversation with Issa in which the latter describes a mosque in Durban that sits in such close proximity to a

Catholic cathedral “that from certain angles the two buildings almost seem one” (81). At another point in the novel, she interrogates her priest on the points of connection between their religion and Islam, recognising that his identitarian rootedness carries with it the same differentiating logic of self and other that occasions discrimination. In her challenge to him, she draws on the connectedness of the seemingly distant, uprooting the fixed logics of difference in favour of the more hospitable radicant subjectivity, a way of being that acknowledges the precarious nature of all claims at belonging.

Of Issa himself, the novel is slow to give up its details. His absence from the novel is marked by the use of italics to represent his direct utterances in the scenes where he features, a stylistic feature that emphasises that nobody in this novel can perceive Issa in focus. The blurring sway of the text also affirms that what we read is really outside the time of the novel: indeed, it belongs to the time of the novel in only the most provisional, atemporal of ways. He is thirty-two in the novel-present, and has been in London working on his doctoral degree for three years: most of the reader’s exposure to him in London takes place in the last year of this doctorate. This project, which is interwoven into the novel via a series of extracts, concerns the doings of the Dutch East India Company in seventeenth century South Africa. Issa is concerned with the patterns, repetitions and echoes that accrue to the machinations of imperialism, or as he puts it in his thesis,

the hybrid dynamic, the complex trans-cultural exchange and fusion that, though fragile and uneven, nevertheless formed an integral feature of the early settlement and ensured its development; the heterogonous bartering, which, by the time of the disaster of 1948, had been almost entirely obliterated from memory. (66)

The novel draws a clear link between the South African historical events Issa is writing into prominence in his thesis, and the more nebulous events taking place in the post-9/11 novel-present. The Dutch East India Company’s faceless encroachment on the land surrounding their outpost, and the company’s subsequent disruption of human lives on a global scale in pursuit of its corporate interests, is shown to be of a piece with the faceless Coalition war

machine that runs roughshod through Iraq and Afghanistan. Issa's thesis mentions the arrival at the Cape in 1694 of Abadin Tadia Tjoessoep, the first political prisoner to be detained at the colony (72). The thesis further notes that

Company directors decided to import slave labour – already illegal in the Netherlands – to the Cape; in a global corporation that was, in effect, ‘a state outside the state’<sup>113</sup>, the attainment of economic profit and the power to pursue it, unchecked, superseded any obligation to an already acknowledged and adopted ethical policy . . . During the second half the seventeenth century, resistance to Dutch Colonial rule in Southeast Asia lead the Company to make a more sinister reassessment of its remote settlement at the Cape. Faced with the threat of increasingly militant opposition to its lucrative enterprise in the East, the Company now saw the colony as . . . a place, far removed, suitable for the incarceration of political prisoners and exiles from the Eastern Batavian Empire. (72–73)

The parallels with the extra-legality or anti-legality of Guantanamo Bay are luminously perspicuous. Because the crimes of the past are inadequately understood, and yet central to the constitution of the present, they cannot be forgotten – indeed, they demand representation. Issa is compelled to force this ‘underwritten’<sup>114</sup> history into being, in order to arrest the cycle of forgetting that enables such crimes to be perpetrated.

This information the author makes known to us quite readily. He does this in order to make the point that history is never inert, and he uses the protagonist of this novel as a vehicle for enacting this point. Issa, we learn, is born into a world constituted by restlessness and unease. The book covers the span of his life from his childhood in Johannesburg until his disappearance in London in April of 2003, via an array of set-pieces scripted from different points of view. His youth – as it is revealed to us here – is grounded in the uncanny. As a young boy, Issa challenges the received history on the South African War (and Baden Powell's involvement in it) by compiling a list of revisionist South African histories, which his teacher dismisses as “conjecture and “speculation by a bunch of new age leftists at Wits” (26). Issa stands against his teacher's conservative injunction that “[h]istory *is*” (Shukri's emphasis, 26). To invoke a thematic that runs through the previous chapters of this study, he

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<sup>113</sup> Issa notes here that he has cited this information from Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa*, (Yale University Press; 1995: 33).

<sup>114</sup> I borrow this term from Sam Durrant.

refuses to play at the game, rejecting the rules of history as they are presented to him. He sets out to prove that there are other discourses deserving of more attention, and in doing so misses out on an 'A' for his History exam as a result. The point of this set-piece is to show how this quest to revise history is Issa's animating impulse. His disaffection with the rootedness of received discourses lies behind his decision to go to the left-wing University of the Western Cape, even though he has been accepted to UCT: he chooses to go against the safety of being assimilated into a world anchored by tradition, in favour of the radical, the new and the precarious. Shukri's protagonist is perpetually in pursuit of what lies behind rooted claims to identity, constantly seeking to expose the limitations of a life lived from a fixed perspective, and this is how the novel captures him. Education serves an aleatory function, exposing to Issa the insufficiencies of language in its attempt to capture that which is outside the order of the Same. It also allows him a form of social and cultural mobility he takes full advantage of, rooting himself always in the presentness of whatever moment he happens to inhabit. It is notable that while Issa studies history, he engages with it in a dynamic way, rather than perceiving it as a fixed entity from which his knowledge of self must stem. His is, in Bourriaud's terms, a "radicant" subjectivity which is constitutively relational in form (*The Radicant* 55). Issa's restless subjectivity involves continued movement and self-displacement as a way of being in the world that encourages new ways of seeing that world. For this character, 'home' and other such relational fixities are always better envisioned as spaces of disruption: in one of the novel's more luminous moments, we read a moment from the boys' childhood:

When they were little boys there was sometimes the novelty of playing hide and seek indoors, with their mothers. With each game, their hiding places grew more and more elaborate: in Ma Vasinthe's secret bathroom behind the built-in wardrobes in her bedroom; behind the geyser in the roof. Once Ma Gloria even took them to hide in the neighbour's kitchen, where they ate cakes and biscuits while they waited for Ma Vasinthe to find them. Ma Gloria had thrown them over the back wall, before jumping over the wall herself and spraining her ankle. Wherever they hid, Ma Vasinthe would always find them. As she approached their hiding place she would say "Fee fie foe fum, I smell the blood of three South Africans!" And then she would open the door and they would cling, squealing and laughing, to Gloria's skirt, while their mothers nodded reassuringly at each other. (84)

The innocence of the childhood game masks something more sinister, as Issa realises that these games are the adults' way of hiding Gloria and Kagiso from the police raids, incursions on the home by authorities who seek to enforce the restrictions on racial mixing. The home space is not a refuge: it provides no shelter from the pervasive and invasive state force. And yet here, it is the game that calls the strangeness of the world into question. Ma Vasinthe identifies them as South Africans at a time when their claim of belonging is denied by the actions of the state, in a world in which the only position to be adopted in response to the perversity of this state is a restless or fugitive one.

This restlessness is encoded in a scene of expansive symbolic depth, in which the young boys pose for a photograph. The moment is recalled by the adult Kagiso, who discovers the photograph in Issa's room:

It is one of the two of them as boys. He remembers Ma Vasinthe taking it with her new camera, Ma Gloria watching from behind. It was springtime. She had got them to crouch on the lawn in the front garden.

"Say cheese."

"Cheese," he smiled, self-consciously obedient.

*Paneer*, Issa said, leaning on his cricket bat. In the picture his mouth is poised for p.

"Why do you *always* have to spoil things, Issa?" Ma Vasinthe complained.

"Let's do it again." But Issa was already halfway up the garden path, eager to return to his cricket match in the street. (42)

Issa's moment of defiance against the English language is captured here, as is the resistance such defiance receives. His mother's inhospitable response foreshadows other encounters in the novel with that which disrupts the order of the Same: the slip, an *Augenblick* that stands aside from the retentional control the camera attempts to exert, evokes the spirit that will later seize Issa and cause him to perform the performative act that will undercut the ordering, essentialising gaze of the televisual. As it is, this act interrupts temporal experience, so that even as Kagiso remembers it as an event that occurred in the past, he muses that "even at that age, Issa's steely confidence, his intense good looks, were already apparent" (42).

Issa's subjectivity is indeed a restless one and "one that is not reducible to a stable, closed, and self-contained identity" (Bourriaud 55). As the moment above indicates, he is

constantly depicted in motion, supporting Bourriaud's assertion that "it is movement that ultimately permits the formation of an identity" (55). The family's relative prosperity allows for such movement, although this always carries with it the threat of butting against the deformed outgrowths of the Apartheid order. In an early scene that shares the superficialities of Alex La Guma's "Coffee for the Road", the family is on a road trip when they stop in Victoria West. The young boys walk into the small shop across the road from where Vasinthe has parked.

They have promised to cross the road carefully. They will buy their iced lollies, not forgetting to say please and thank you, and return immediately to perch themselves on the low wall beside the car. They will sit quietly; they are not at home now. They disappear into the store. Vasinthe reclines her seat and shuts her eyes. Gloria rolls down her window and remains vigilant. (51)

The family's freedom is circumscribed by the ever-present threat of discovery. The boys enter the store, only to exit it shortly, empty-handed. They have been directed to queue at a barred window in the hot sun, the implication being that they cannot be served from the main counter because of their race. In the grandiloquent scene that follows, Vasinthe dispatches Gloria to pay for the boys' iced lollies. At the window, she politely presents the baffled shop assistant with a large sum of money, instructing her to include a bicycle in the purchase. The shop assistant instructs Gloria to come around to the front of the store – the rules can be subverted to the economic reward. Gloria refuses: "I'll take it through the window. *Asseblief*" (52). The caught balance of the *asseblief* (please) compresses multiple energies into itself, expressing defiance beneath its deferent surface that tells us a great deal about the shop assistant (who is not described) and the failure of hospitality occasioned in this encounter. In La Guma's story, the woman is made monstrous in the author's attempt to place readerly sympathy with the Indian woman who is turned away. In Shukri's story, the woman is not presented at all: the absence of her face evokes the failure of the ethical relation we witness in reading this scene. The stand-off between the two women escalates when Gloria, exposing the illogicality of the Apartheid laws, proposes that the shop assistant must

dismantle the inhospitable bars that cover the window if she wishes to take their money. The woman is incredulous and protests that there is no law preventing them from being served in the front of the store. The restriction, she states, is her husband's doing, "and you'd better stop playing these silly games. He'll be back soon" (53). Gloria stands firm in the face of this threat, and the deadlock paralyzes the queue of shoppers, who are unsure what to do in the face of this defiance. The woman's husband arrives, and it is again notable that he is not defined at all. He asks Gloria if the boys are with her, pauses for a moment, and then declares (to his wife's surprise) that the bikes in the store have been sold. The deadlock thus dissolves unsatisfyingly. The family resumes its journey, with Issa staring intently "out at the dry and barren wilderness that stretches out eternally beyond the windows of their speeding car" (55).

This last moment crystallises one of Issa's prevailing characteristics, what might be termed a productive alienation from the world around him. His eclecticism is unsettling for those around him, who cannot understand why he does not wish to submit to the rules of the social institutions in which he finds himself. We witness a school scene in which his teacher is unable to understand why Issa does all his school projects on deserts. Issa's reply – "*Because they're clean*" (57) – captures his wish to access a space that escapes definition, a 'clean' space devoid of the limits that community imposes in defining itself. The young Issa quotes often from *Lawrence of Arabia*, a metaphor that becomes a theme for Issa's desire to play the game of life by his own rules.<sup>115</sup>

It is notable that while the adult Issa of the novel-present has evolved his fascination with *Lawrence of Arabia* into an appreciation of deserts as spaces of coterminous isolation and possibility. There is a floating memory early in the novel, when Issa and Kagiso are

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<sup>115</sup> The 1962 epic film based on the life of T.E. Lawrence. Issa is dismally fond of quoting from this movie, but it is never explained why he treasures it so. The allusions to Lawrence tend to occupy several levels of possibility at once: we are meant to infer affinities between the temperaments of Issa and Lawrence, in their shared quietness which masks a fierce sensitivity to human relations with the world; On the other hand, the grain and texture of Issa's enthrallment with Lawrence connotes an obsessive-compulsive streak that is reinforced by the reports of his odd washing habits.

returning from university, where we witness Issa thinking of “the harsh honest isolation of the Great Karoo, where everything is exactly as it appears” (56). We read that Issa “prefers it. Can position himself in relation to it . . . to him, the desert is an honest landscape” (56). If it is an anomaly that a character as perceptive as Issa sees no contradiction in having a hero whose relational approach to being in the world is imbricated in the essentialising gaze of the coloniser, and inextricable from projects of colonialist expansion, then this anomaly speaks itself in his essentialised view of desert spaces, which still manifests itself as a discursive prefiguring of the unknown. The supra-discursive space is not available to us, the novel suggests. It can only be glimpsed subliminally.

Nevertheless, there is a perceivable shift from the humanly engaged younger Issa and his subdued older self. The adult Issa takes up the inscrutable nature of his beloved desert, and seems to be possessed of a more internal, almost mystical understanding of the world as a blank page upon which history is ceaselessly reinscribed. History, Issa learns, is never neutral, but a discourse composed of information that can always be questioned, always be opened to another reading. Thus, while the young Issa’s obsession with Lawrence is formulaic – rebellion as a divergence from the normative does not circumvent the authority of that normative – in nature, the adult Issa embraces a more provisional, more truly precarious way of being in the world that is less bound to both the verticalities of the normative and the horizontalities of the rebellious.

We glimpse this in the adult Issa’s departure for England, a move that is a refuge from a South Africa he has grown disillusioned with. In this new dispensation, Issa has become alienated from his affluent family, and from “successful career-oriented comrades, paralysed by self-congratulatory nostalgia for their part in an amicably settled dispute” (70). His post-1994 disillusionment prompts him to uproot himself, taking advantage of the mobility at his disposal. Ironically, however, with mobility comes the need to account for one’s movements

to the State, not unlike the restrictions of the old South African order. In one of the novel's key scenes, Issa is stopped at Heathrow airport:

*I was at immigration. Despite my student visa, or because of it, I was stopped. My luggage was searched. Even sealed packages were opened. Then I was taken to a small windowless room. 'Where are you from?' one of the other detainees asked me. I told him. 'Then why have they stopped you?' I don't know. 'What's your name?' I tell him. 'That's why. In here, we all have such names.'* (Shukri's emphasis, 181)

This moment, drawn from one of Issa's journals, is the terroristic grasp of the modern state made real in the control it exerts over his body. Because his name 'sounds' Islamic, he is regarded as a potential suspect, flagged, his being Othered and inscribed with difference. His body, political and corporeal, is a bearer of meanings he has no control over. His identity is prefigured by the state, removing any sense of agency: he becomes a subject in a deleterious discourse. He is interviewed by a functionary of the state, an officer he views as an "interrogator" (181). Like the shopkeeper in the incident that is drawn from Issa's childhood, the man has no identifying characteristics. The moment is all the more perverse for the impersonal nature of its occurrence: the functionary enacts a law that cares not for Issa's specificity as an individual. Indeed, Issa is placed (and made to feel placed) in an oppositionally-defined position which, by virtue of being pre-existing, cannot not occlude his quiddity. Issa angrily explains to the bewildered man that he has been out of the country attending Vasinthe's inaugural lecture (she has been made Emeritus Professor). He is angry that the machinations of surveillance have invaded his private life in this manner.

*I need to ask you to co-operate, Sir.  
And I need you to write this: Ph.D. Yes, Big P, small h, stop. Then big D. Because that's what I am doing here. Now let me out of this fucking place before I start reciting my thesis for you to write in that fucking little book of yours. You might find it interesting. Bits of it have to do with islands of interrogation, a little like this one.* (182)

Issa's scholarly work, his control of the alter-historical, is all he has to counter this humiliation. After this mistreatment, he moves into the apartment in East London<sup>116</sup>, where he maintains a distance from the world by immersing himself in his work. The London he finds himself in, once his entry has been sanctioned, can no longer be a space of freedom. His awareness that, as an immigrant he is designated, made to be the subject of a constant illuminated scrutiny, via the panoptic vision that connects him (or his physical appearance) with that of men in Afghanistan and Iraq. The solution he adopts is to undercut the ontological 'illumination' of the State by leading a Spartan lifestyle and remaining indoors during the day, limiting his contact with the people of London as far as possible.

In this regard, Issa's thesis is a retreat from the dissatisfactions of this life, and from interpersonal relationships, an immersion in the story of the past. We note that his aversion to personal contact becomes pathological over time: Frances tells Vasinthe how Issa would wash himself every time he had been outside. In another scene, Katinka notes that he always keep a handkerchief in the left pocket of his trousers: "careful never to touch anything in the public domain, he uses this one, inconspicuously, as a protective shield between himself and the city's contaminated door handles and water pipes" (64). There is no explanation forthcoming for this peculiar derangement – it is just compacted into Issa's isolationist character. The reader is led to speculate that Issa's apartness in a world marked by the disappearance of critical seeing initiates a struggle on his part to keep himself 'unstained' or clear of the ideological grime and contamination of the world.

Vasinthe is disturbed by the different picture of her son that emerges from the lips of others who knew him. Tina Steiner reads Issa's behaviour as being symptomatic of a Fanonian nervous condition, a physical and psychological manifestation of the oppression

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<sup>116</sup> Has Shukri chosen East London deliberately, in view of its provenance as a site of bombing during the Blitz? Certainly, what Marlowe says of England in *Heart of Darkness* – "and this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" – seems to echo throughout this section of the work (Conrad 8). England was once intimately acquainted with terror.

being visited upon his body political (“Pockets of Connection” 62). Issa is haunted by that which is invisible, as we see from a note in his journal that Kagiso comes across:

I am sitting on Derek Lane’s bench tucked away in the affluent heart of this splendid city, but with my own accursed ‘Sixth Sense’, I only see the ogres – the hideous ones, the invisible ones. They roam the city, the unwanted ones, with vacant stares. Absent and preoccupied, here only in an unwanted, despised, brutalised, foreign body; Europe’s untouchables. (134)

Issa, I argue, feels himself tasked with responding to that which history has occluded. In order to do this, he must transcend history, and his position in it. He must uproot any sense of home, for home carries with it the power to name, to act on behalf of history. He must become a stranger to the life he has led so far. We are conscious that Issa constitutes that “engaged self that only finds itself after it has traversed the field of foreignness and returned to itself again, altered and enlarged... othered” (Bourriaud *Altermodern* 55). When Issa’s supervisor advises him to take a break from his thesis and “get away from this dark war-mongering winter” (70), Issa rejects the notion that a holiday in South Africa would allow him to escape the world in which he is enmeshed. Issa’s forfeiture of home opens up a new set of precepts for apprehending the nexus of local and global, and he recognises that there is nowhere he can go, no hermetically sealed other space that will place him beyond the reach of the dishonour he feels.

This realisation is prefigured in the sms message Issa sends Katinka in the dead of night: “we r all afghanarabs now!” (218).<sup>117</sup> This message is sent from Issa’s favourite haunt, the aptly named Baghdad Cafe, where it is his wont to sit and observe the world while remaining unseen behind a screen. After a meeting with Katinka, Issa is about to leave, but finds himself “detained”<sup>118</sup> by the drama unfolding on the screen (70). He watches, forcing himself to take in the horror, as the contusions of the War on Terror unfold on the screen, a

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<sup>117</sup> This moment, like many of the characters’ utterances in the text, bears the mark of the literary craft. Issa’s message is recycled Kafka, alluding to *The Metamorphosis*.

<sup>118</sup> Surely a deliberately evocative choice of words on Shukri’s part?

war in which the opposing poles of visibility and invisibility are controlled by the powers that be. The spectacle of the war – its deliberately manipulated visibility – transfixes those in the cafe. The waiter who arrives to pour Issa's mint tea is so taken up in observing the images on the screen that he neglects to stop pouring. "*Shukran!* [Issa] exclaimed to prevent a spillage. And then, in fluent Arabic, added, *my cup over-floweth*" (Shukri's emphases, 72).

It is a moment which highlights one of the novel's more continuously problematic elements. Why is it important that Issa's command of Arabic is 'fluent'? The reader who encounters this passage might query whether the author is at times too preoccupied with semaphoring his main character's enigmatic nature: unlike Coetzee's evocations in the minimalist and fragmentary *Summertime*, Shukri exerts himself to show what the reader might already gather on her own. The effect of this is a cloying over-accumulation of narrative around and about Issa, so that for all that we read about him, he is still an unknowable character. Because we have seen so little of Issa's inner world, and because what we know of him is only what we have been able to pick from the swirling, disjointed narrative with its liberal use of cinematic flashbacks and free indirect discourse, Issa's character can sometimes appear empty, where the author means for him to be profound. Too often, the protagonist's resources are more hinted at than they are actually apparent. Where Shukri means for Issa to come across as mysterious, the externality of the gestures by which this is achieved leads the reader to suspect that the 'enigma' of Issa's character is more a paucity than an inner and unseen depth.<sup>119</sup>

One clear instance of this is the piece of music that Issa listens to repeatedly. Francis describes it as "a gentle, lilting, sorrowful tune – just beautiful" (18), while Katinka refers to it as "mournful" (68). We are presumably meant to make the conceptual leap from this Issa's unfathomable communion with this piece of music to an understanding of the transcendent

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<sup>119</sup> Shukri is overly fond of using 'telling details' rather than explanation. There is a (perhaps unwitting) orientalism discernable in the inscrutable and enigmatic characterisation of Issa.

capacity of music, its ability to occupy an elsewhere or to instantiate a space of the otherwise-than. But the effect is excessively gestural, revealing little beyond itself: it says nothing that is remotely specific about Issa. What is it about this piece of music that makes him carry it about with him? Shukri seems to invest this symbol with an uncanniness it cannot contain: the uncanny is by its very nature a matter of perspective, rather than an innate quality contained by the object. But the writing falls short of capturing the idea: what we read is not Issa's possession by the elsewhere that sounds in the music; rather, we read *an account* of Issa's unexplainedly solipsistic relation to this music (we intuit that it helps him work), the idea falls flat. That is, by imputing to Issa a mystic or ontological motive for his actions, the narrative unwittingly dilutes the agentic dimension of Issa's actions.

The problematic is exacerbated by the novel's filmic nature. The narrative's character development is in the model of a short film rather than a novel, which has the effect of making it appear as though Shukri means for Issa to be, on some level, a hero in the epic mould. In *Kings of the Water*, the Mark Behr novel I examine in Chapter Two, or especially in *Summertime*, the J.M. Coetzee work I examine in Chapter Three, the reader is given some idea of the protagonists' inconstancies and weaknesses. Here, Issa is presented as rigid, as an apophatic young man replete with "steely confidence" and "intense good looks", possessed of an inwardly inviolate core the reader is given little access to. We know that Issa is an ascete, but we lack access to the inner workings that have driven him to this asceticism. His animus is uncertain, and thus the reader is obliged to read on without being quite sure of what exactly it is that draws the other characters towards Issa.

It is, however, just this cognitive uncertainty that compels the reader forward. That is, in the moment of reading, the reader experiences or enacts the same bewilderment or confusion that the other characters in the novel experience: the limits of our knowledge and our positioning are exposed. Like those characters, we are required to reach beyond the

limitations of our discursive positioning, knowing that this labour of reading is one that cannot be successfully completed. The affective dimension of this novel is realised, as I see it, is in its self-reflexive enacting of the possible loss of control that can occur in a hospitable engagement between self and other.

If the subject who reads this novel enacts the extreme passivity I theorise in the previous chapters, then it follows that determining Issa's identity (as a fixed entity) is futile. A speculative reading might seize upon the fact that the name "Issa" is the Arabic correspondent of the name "Jesus", and taking this as evidence then propose a set of possibilities to account for the enigmatic character Shukri imputes to his protagonist. While there is certainly something of the messianic in Issa's character, and while the pyrrhic lento of his last visible act lends itself to being read in this way, such a reading is purely speculative, with the limitations that adhere to all speculations. An attentional reading, by contrast, allows that there is an ambiguous quality to this act that removes it from the realm of epic action. If Issa feels dishonoured by what he is witnessing<sup>120</sup>, then is his disappearance an aleatoric gesture or an attempt to save his honour? Is this act committed in the spirit of despair, defiance, or outrage? Or is it, in a Jabèsian sense, a search for meaning, a "quest by and for a self that cannot take refuge or find comfort in the security of some presupposed identity" (Derrida, *Mourning* 121)? We might presume from the fatalistic calm that envelopes Issa as he sits in the Baghdad cafe that he has given up his fighting spirit. But ultimately, what we know of his final motives is little or less than little.<sup>121</sup>

What the reader has grasped thus far is that there are various strands of connection between the televisual and the project of empire. His last visible moments in the novel are

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<sup>120</sup> JC, in J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, glosses this sense of dishonour aptly: "how, in the face of this shame to which I am subjected, do I behave? How do I save my honour?" (39)

<sup>121</sup> Pace Paul Virilio: In an age where our view of the world has become not so much objective as teleobjective, how can we persist in being? How can we effectively resist the sudden dematerialization of a world where everything is seen, déjà vu – already seen – and instantly forgotten?" (*Art* 120–121).

here in the London cafe, watching images of “heavily shackled men in orange overalls behind high-security fences, their arms chained behind their backs to their feet” (71). The visual representation of the War on Terror is depicted as a tele-objective dematerialisation of Otherness, a way of seeing that is unreceptive to the radical difference of the Other. To watch, as Issa watches, is to be aware of the distancing medium of language as it is simultaneously disguised by the instant always-on nature of the televisual. The agent of violence is proximally distant in the encoding of this footage of prisoners on their way to the extra-legal prison camps: there is no sign of human cause, no sign of the state actors who have authorised this violence. The true horror, Shukri intuits, is to be found in the senseless spectacle of Shock and Awe, a sight that is senseless because the language through which it is given meaning is one of distance. What is *not shown* is what is important.

Issa leaves, “forced into a new consciousness of himself” (75), his silent departure unnoticed. His visible life is replaced by another unknowable way of being in the world, what Paul Virilio terms a “picnolepsy” (*Aesthetics* 140)<sup>122</sup> and his presence grows immediately faint and faded. But the reader will be aware that the novel is itself contaminated by the economy of visibility: Issa’s is a presence that has ceased to be. By recollecting Issa’s presence in the time of the narrative, its irruption from temporality flattened out and obscured, the work fails to perform the task demanded of it, namely to recognise and so avoid the panoptical working of visibility as it used by the agents of state power to homogenise meaning. The author’s struggle to write disappearance on the page risks saying too much, risks literally overwriting this absence. In this bind, the bind of writing I discuss in Chapter Three,<sup>123</sup> the event of reading becomes important, as the reader is made subject in an encounter over which we have no control: we negotiate our way onwards, venturing beyond

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<sup>122</sup> A sudden and inexplicable absence from time.

<sup>123</sup> See Simon Critchley’s discussion of Orpheus and the paradox of inspiration (*Very Little* 49).

the economy of the in/visible, estranging ourselves from its limitations the better to perceive the elsewhere to which the novel gestures.

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It is a provocation on the part of the work, to re-enact this disappearance without disguising the corruption of this re-enactment by its own form. The narrative has the protagonist vanish midway through the plot, to be supplanted (but never truly replaced) by a garrulous meta-narrative play whose enactors are a loose network of Issa's family and friends who survive his disappearance. To perform so aesthetic a public act (paradoxically, disappearance is a withdrawal from the public space which is committed in the public space, is a vanishing *from* the public gaze) is to highlight, for the reader if not for the society into which the disappeared individual is cast, the danger of the occluding discourses that enable terrorism and other cataclysmic failures of ethicality. Javier Marías proposes that “one can always doubt anything that ceases and does not persist” (*Your Face Tomorrow* 119) But, as the narrative from this point in the novel-present demonstrates, the possibility of slipping the bonds of the visible world and entering the invisible one is never completely realisable. In the current era, every action leaves a trace. If Issa has at his disposal all the mobility of the modern citizen, then the reader is aware that this mobility is a ceaselessly ordered one: the regimen of access controls that limit and circumscribe access to the first world is manifold: from one's first entry into the world, where “the perfected state holds and guards the monopoly of certifying birth” – i.e. certifying that one exists (*Coetzee Diary* 4). This certification, the certificate of the state, grants the individual an identity which in turn “enables the state to identify [the individual] and track [the individual]” (*Coetzee Diary* 4). Issa has an identity, one that he has carried with him through his days in South Africa and on his passage into the first world, a passage that again requires the sanction and certification of the state via immigration controls and so on. Once in London, Issa is subject, we assume, to the state's monitoring of the city space

itself – Simon Critchley notes that “if one travels from one side of London to the other, it is estimated that one is photographed by surveillance cameras between twenty and thirty times” (“Crypto-Schmittianism” 135). These things, the novel suggests, are enforced by the state in the name of security, its way of maintaining control over the fantasy it has authored. Against this walling-in or fortification of community, Issa contests the idea that the handover of power to the state is irreversible. His disappearance is an improbably dramatic act that radically unmakes knowledge by calling its own mimeticism into question.

The jacket copy on the back of the novel implies the possibility of “sinister forces” at work in Issa’s disappearance. There is nothing in the narrative that bears this out. If the passage of Issa’s phenomenological self into the pinolectic space is a willed decision to cease engaging with the economy of shock and awe, then it becomes possible to read what he has enacted as, in David Graeber’s terms, “a new language of civil disobedience.”<sup>124</sup> To say this is to recognise that the decision to disengage from the politics of the state is itself a political decision, but one that articulates its politics at what Simon Critchley terms “an *interstitial distance* within and against the state” (“Crypto-Schmittianism” 148). It is to recognise that Issa’s decision constitutes the taking on of an infinite responsibility towards the Other, one that interrupts the totalising discourses of power.

An attentive reading of Issa’s non-presence in this novel recognises that the attempt to interpret his actions is ultimately futile. His silence cannot be transfigured; he cannot be followed, much as the work asserts this as the task of reading. His story cannot be rendered with any exactitude, and to attempt to do so is to let slip what is most important, namely the conditional mood in which the work occurs. What is the reader to do, then? If we accept Blanchot’s assertion that man was condemned not to be able to approach anything or experience anything except through the meaning he had to create” (*The Work of Fire* 323),

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 12.

then what recourse is left to the reader? The gaze of the reader cannot penetrate the dark back of time. Instead – and here I retrace the motif of reading I developed in Chapter Two – the reader must submit to this unknowable darkness as a constitutive feature of Issa's story. To read in this way is to recognise the importance of letting absence exist not as a stand-in for what was, but as a thing in and of itself.

How do we explore the space left by Issa's disappearance? Is it possible to stitch together the tatters that remain after the tear in temporality caused by Issa's atemporal vanishing? The rest of the narrative, that which exists aside from the fragments which are explicitly concerned with detailing Issa's time in London, consists of the other characters' attempts to recreate continuity, to mobilise their knowledge against the horror of emptiness occasioned by Issa's disappearance. In reading this attempt, the reader is called upon to enact performatively (that is, through reading) what the characters struggle to do. That is to say, we are called upon to enact an ethical yes-saying, where 'saying' is, in a Levinasian sense, an ethical relation to the Other that unworks the ontological certainty of the 'said'.

### **Inventing Presence**

Issa's story, such as it is, is refracted through the other characters in the novel. In addition to Frances, who comes into acquaintance with Issa during his time in England, there is an ensemble of characters who know Issa from his past in South Africa. Kagiso and Vasinthe are Issa's family, while Katinka is a close friend of Issa and Kagiso. They are a dissonant group, to be sure: Kagiso is Black, Vasinthe is of Indian descent, and Katinka is a young white Afrikaans woman. They share neither ethnicity nor culture, and they are not bound by ties to religion. Despite this, their different experiences of searching for clues about what happened to Issa help to shape the reader's understanding of the protagonist's history. They form a liminal community around the site of the aporetic encounter, a group of diverse individuals

who are brought into proximity by their shared desire to know Issa's whereabouts. He is, Kagiso thinks to himself, "the improbable silent force that held us all together" (43). They each move about in the London of the novel-present, attempting to think themselves into the parenthetical existence Issa has undertaken while living abroad.

The first of the three characters we encounter is Kagiso, whom we witness arriving by plane at Heathrow Airport to pack up Issa's belongings and return them home. Kagiso, a film producer, is effectively Issa's brother, the unknowing beneficiary of an act of hospitality. Kagiso is two months old when his mother Gloria knocks on Vasinthe's door, a moment that Shukri presents through Kagiso's eyes as something retold to him, an event that vanishes in the instant of its telling, always-already past. He is writing in his journal as his story opens, and the narrative follows his attempt to find the words to bring himself into being.<sup>125</sup> The text shifts between the first and the third person, the free indirect style mirroring Kagiso's consciousness as he carries out this labour of mourning. There are moments when Kagiso finds himself alone in Issa's London flat, and he finds himself compelled to write. But when he picks up his pen, what emerges onto the paper are the words "disappear" and "disappearance" (35). It is only after he takes a shower (symbolically washing away his rootedness in the world) that he is able to write,

the words forcing at his fingertips, making them twitch. He does not shave as he had intended, does not dry himself, does not get dressed, but immediately returns to his journal to write, not like Katinka is doing, slowly, deliberately, letter for letter, but swiftly, his fingers responding nimbly, dishing out words and phrases that have stewed for decades through a keen and agile pen, beads of London water, like teardrops, weeping from his skin. (37)

Writing is figured not simply as the giving-over of the self to an inspiration that arrives unbidden, but as the work of mourning, a work of transference in which Kagiso finds himself. It is notable that while immersed in this labour of writing, and memory, Kagiso's narration switches to the singular personal pronoun during his moments of writing, where an

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<sup>125</sup> We are reminded of Mrs Curren's response to a character who calls on her to give account, in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*: "I must find my own words, from myself" (91).

impersonal force takes over him. He discovers his interiority through immersion in the ambient energy of the Other.

Shukri has this character narrate his own history in a loping passage that uses the personal pronoun to reflect on the immense depth of history each individual carries with them. Kagiso records in his journal that his history is also one inflected by the struggles and contestations of the past (24). He recalls stories from his grandmother, in which she counteracts the ignoble official histories that Kagiso and Issa are taught at school, revealing that Kagiso's Barolong ancestors were part of a military unit which aided Baden-Powell during the Siege of Mafeking but received no compensation for their sacrifice. In another of his grandmother's recollected stories, Kagiso's great-uncle is said to have been instrumental in the discovery of the prehistoric skull for which Taung is famous. Both of these facts, as Issa points out, are "missing from history. Missing from archaeology. Like a missing link (29). The historical excess, that which is excluded from the historical narrative, fascinates Issa, who sees how personal memory, "an auratic sense of the past's presence beyond the temporal constraints of secular-rationalist historical consciousness", can counteract the eliding closures of the hegemonic historical narrative (Scott "Archaeologies" 9).

Kagiso is less inclined to destabilise the stability of dominant historical interpretations. Throughout the recollections that make up this novel, he is pictured as being quiet or passive where Issa is active or direct in his criticism. The schism between the two boys grows wider as they grow older; when Issa chooses to go to UWC, Kagiso goes to UCT. Where Kagiso sees the beautiful scenery of the Cape winelands, Issa sees

the deceptive liberal prettiness of the Cape – the picturesque wine farms, where labourers are paid by the tot, the plush southern suburbs, whose residents know little of the squalor and violence that afflicts their neighbours in the slums of the Cape Flats" and "the breathtaking panoramas from Table Mountain, which also reveal the black hole at the middle of the bay into which his hero has been sucked. (56)

The point is re-inscribed almost excessively: Issa's different way of seeing the world is more attentive to what lurks beneath the surface. Where Issa challenges the relentless censorship and limitations of the regime, Kagiso seems to choose the comfort of political quietism at "the 'Ivory Tower' on the slopes of the mountain" (86). Shukri constructs a sequence in which the Purple Rain protest of 2 September 1989 takes place. Kagiso is absent from the demonstrations, "having opted instead for a matinee screening of *Dangerous Liaisons* in Rosebank with Sophie, Richard and the other bright young things from Upper Campus" (87). They spend a day immersed in the quotidian details of their student existence, "oblivious to the chaos that had erupted on the other side of the mountain" (87). While they discuss the dynamics of a movie filmed on the other side of the world, they are mere kilometres from where activists are fleeing armed police in full riot gear, who mark their targets with purple dye (rendering them *visible*) and cart them off to police stations round the city (rendering them *invisible*). Kagiso and his friends are reduced to peals of laughter when the bedraggled protesters crowd into the square where they are sitting. It is only in the midst of this laughter that Kagiso "recognised Issa, stained purple, staring at him from among his purple comrades" (88). The distance between them is complete. In a fell swoop, the positions are inverted, and it is Kagiso and his friends who are made unseemly: the unstained are guilty of inaction, and by extension are complicit with those who turned the purple dye upon the protesters. By mocking the protesters, Kagiso divides himself off from them, and from history, and Issa's gaze makes Kagiso's quietude heinous.

The moment resonates with the weight of a truth that Issa has access to but which Kagiso can only glimpse. The novel at all times places its sympathies with Issa, and it places the political within the realm of the ontological. Is the novel suggesting that to turn a blind eye to the politics of the day – politics which this novel codifies as epic – or to be ignorant of them is to fall into obscenity? If the novel is suggesting that Issa's scrutiny of history and his

engagement with it as a discourse to be challenged are what is correct and true, then it is guilty of reifying the limited sympathy that Issa shows himself to be against. Here, I would argue, the novel arrives at an impasse it calls upon the reader to solve. As I have argued in the previous chapters, the insufficiency of language is something the reader is given the responsibility of supplementing. The reader's position in relation to the narrative renders explicit the idea that what is required is a reading beyond the limitations inscribed by the deformed politics of the country. We are aware that the Kagiso's politically irresolute nature, and its treatment within the narrative, compels us towards a reading of the work in which our sympathies reside with Issa. That is, the reader is compelled to take up an oppositional position and thus becomes a part of the novel's economy of contestatory positions. But if we read in this way, then we are implicated in the novel's economy of ethical failure. What is needed, what the text constantly calls for, is a position outside the limitations of the work.

The formation of this position relies on the reader recognising that Kagiso is situated in the discourses of history that Issa seeks to challenge. Thus, if we note that prior to his visit to England, Kagiso is unable to read the world as Issa does, it is because his ways of seeing the world are corrupted by the codes and positions these discourses install. This point is made clear when Kagiso comes to London with the task of ordering his brother's affairs. "Now," Kagiso says, "sitting in his chair, at his desk, surrounded by his simple things, I am trying again to piece together his story" (Shukri 43). In reading of Kagiso's seeking an entry point into Issa's story, we read of the former's attempt to commit his brother to memory, to reassert the symbolic order of the Same. Kagiso's time in London is an attempt to 'read' his brother, to see what clues Issa might have left behind that would account for his absence. He thinks that he ought to "eliminate the gloomy layer of grime that had settled between him and the flat", the dirt a sedimentary evidencing that the stop-time of Issa's disappearance is in danger

of being overrun by the chronicity of the present (Shukri 99). He feels himself an intruder to Issa's personal space, as though there is something distasteful in going through Issa's things:

What if he comes back? Catches me? What will I say? We thought it best. Had given up on you. Decided to pack up your stuff and take it home, to your room in Ma Vasinthe's house. (100)

Latent in Kagiso's fear of disturbing the wholeness of Issa's room is his reluctance to commit Issa to memory by laying claim to his things. If his present-day things are packed away, then the illusion of his continued existence is no longer sustainable: the emptiness within the semantic operations of language is exposed by Issa's absence. As Kagiso removes the objects on Issa's bookshelf, a city of objects and the memories that they symbolise, he feels as though he is committing an act of erasure: "by the time I leave London," Kagiso says, "I will have made his disappearance complete" (43). The narrative slips freely between inhabiting Kagiso's thoughts and observing him as he reads what Issa has read, trying to intuit his brothers' attachments to the objects that populate the room. The prose captures Kagiso's labour as an unavoidably destructive act, evoking the spectre of 9/11 as it describes how "only the foundations of the towering city now remain" (102). To remove Issa's things is to bring motion to the petrified space, to commit him to memory and bring closure to the rites of mourning.

In the desolation of this room, he finds Issa's copies of the TRC report, and opens one volume. Therein, he reads about Steve Biko's death in detention, and the Apartheid government's callous denials, and recalls how in their university days he had invited Issa to see *Cry Freedom*.<sup>126</sup> This is an event Kagiso had suggested as a way to bridge the gap between them, to "find a way forward" (108). His intentions are thwarted when they arrive at the cinema to find that the film has been confiscated by the security forces. Such atemporal

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<sup>126</sup> A filmed adaptation of Donald Woods's books *Biko* (1978) and *Asking for Trouble* (1980), the movie explores the friendship between Woods and Steve Biko, and the crisis of conscience occasioned for Woods by Biko's murder in detention. For an astute discussion of the ethical project that underpins this movie, and its shortcomings see Flannery and Van Der Vlies, "Introduction" in *Scrutiny* 2 13, 2008, 6-7.

remembrances of key moments from the past shape Kagiso's time in London. Not quite a remembering of his vanished brother, it is nonetheless an encounter with the Unknowable in which Kagiso, through displacing himself, is able to find himself. He is struck by the lacunae in his subjectivity, gaps in his self-knowledge that are attributable to the discursive machinations of the Apartheid state:

it strikes him that, more than a decade later, he has still not managed to fill in all the gaps inflicted upon him by a censorious dictatorial regime. The books not read, music not heard, histories not known, have become, like the holes in the expensive smelly cheese for which he has developed a liking, a part of his truthfully reconciled and liberated life. (108–109)

The surfeit of illuminating details in this passage draws out Kagiso's conflicted character. His sense of ontological certainty in his current life, its prosperity parodically emblematised by the smelly cheese, is riven with holes occasioned by a past whose incompleteness marks the present the way metastasised melanoma would mark a body in the terminal stages of skin cancer's complications. The ironising distance between reality and Kagiso's idea of 'his truthfully reconciled and liberated life' is exposed. He feels himself to be like the censored newspaper page reproduced for us in the novel, "a collection of blank spaces, defined more by what I don't know, than by what I do" (110). Only through remembering, as Issa has sought to do, will Kagiso be cured of the emblematic malaise of the community to which he belongs.

In this space of afterness, remembering what he has been complicit in forgetting is an act of re-presenting that allows Kagiso to suture the ragged gaps in his being<sup>127</sup>. He recovers, not Issa himself, but Issa's way of seeing the world. He travels the city, sometimes alone, sometimes with Katinka, inhabiting the spaces that Issa frequented. As a flaneur, Kagiso is

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<sup>127</sup> The motif of suturing here recalls Leon De Kock's influential metaphors of the seam, which he insightfully borrows from Noel Mostert. In De Kock's words, "[t]o see the crisis of inscription in South Africa following colonization in terms of a 'seam,' I wrote, deliberately conjoining the literal with the figural, was to see the sharp point of the nib as a stitching instrument that seeks to suture the incommensurate. The seam, fundamentally, is therefore the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of the suture" ("Does South African Literature Still Exist?" 73).

rather poorly equipped to see beyond himself. But as he walks the city, he begins to adapt to his task, learning the argot of the streets.

At one point Kagiso is watching a singing man during a protest outside Zimbabwe House, he feels a moment of connection, a sense of fellowship with this outsider about whom there was “something that was unmistakably home” (137). The man turns out to be deranged, and Kagiso begins to let go of his idea of finding Issa. The man announces to him that he cannot go home again because “Zimbabwe is no longer home” (140). He recounts a bilious memory from his childhood in colonial Rhodesia:

“I was this old” he drops his hand down to his thigh with his gathered fingers, like a closed tulip, turned upwards, “when one day, I was shepherding my grandfather’s sheep. My grandfather had many, many sheep. So one day, I was shepherding the sheep when two white men came. They came up to me and said, ‘hey, whose sheep are these?’ I said they belonged to my grandfather. You know what they did? They cut off their heads, like this.” He chops his arms around my neck, as if in a game of oranges and lemons. “Yes, like this,” the man continues. “Chop chop chop. All my grandfather’s sheep. I saw it. With my own eyes. And I was this high from the ground, man. This high from the fucking ground. How can you only remember a little of Smith when I remember so fucking much?” Then the singing man starts to cry. (141)

This story, and the man’s sorrow, once again indicts Kagiso, making his ahistoricism intolerable. Kagiso is not naturally empathetic, but his encounter with the man forces him into an awareness of his own positioning in language, his own complicity with the violence occasioned by language’s indifference to alterity. The man’s use of the accusative pronoun in the encounter calls on Kagiso to give an answer for himself. The narrative abandons the third-person during this scene, allowing Kagiso to offer himself as an “I” to the narrative. This “I”, we note, is not Kagiso’s speaking voice, but the voice in which he records to himself his actions in the pages of his journal. It is a narrated “I”, a metaphor for the self that allows Kagiso to access the elsewhere of Otherness.

This access, it must be pointed out, is always a limited one. What we read is not the scene of the address itself, but Kagiso’s report of the scene of the address, with all the limitations his way of thinking brings to it. If the novel posits Kagiso’s narrative as an apprenticeship to Otherness, then it also makes it clear that he is ill-suited to the labour

demanded of him. Written by Kagiso, the man's story is blanched of its force, becoming reported testimony as it is forced onto the page by Kagiso's pen. It is significant, in this regard, that Kagiso is unable to represent his own position in response to the alterity with which he is confronted: he remains silent before the unbridgeable gap between himself and the Zimbabwean man, as he is pictured being silent before Issa's gaze during the student protests: there is no sign of any reflection or feeling from him until the man leaves him. As a story that he writes down, it is thus interesting in what it reveals or, more precisely, fails to reveal about himself. Kagiso's inability to react to the man's pathos in the moment is something he recognises and is able to reflect on. After this incident, Kagiso takes a ride on the London Eye, the passivity of his observations a fitting metaphor for the position he finds himself in: "the futility of choice leaves him empty inside" (144). He sits on a step by the river, "watching the murky water rise, wishing for it to engulf him, suddenly, and carry him away" (144). The water does rise, quickly, and soon it is tugging at him, lifting him from the step. He offers no resistance, gives himself over to the flow of the river. This imagery cannot but evoke the onset of dispossession by the "other dark", the katabatic descent into otherness presaged by the emptying out of Kagiso's solipsistic interiority to the transporting flow of the river. Importantly, this process is figured as a sleep that comes over Kagiso, as he is acted upon that which cannot be contained. But, as I argue in Chapter Three, the results of this katabatic event are ambiguous at best. Kagiso awakes just as he is about to slip completely beneath the water. The immersion in the river bespeaks an immersion in alterity, a washing-off of selfhood. He recovers himself, finds that "he has not been taken far" (145). "Get up," he instructs himself, the ontological distance between himself and his written self still in place. He sits on the train, "barefoot and ashamed", unsure if he has achieved anything. The reader who reads this scene reads of an experience of incompleteness, what Kagiso finds is

not Issa, but the “neutral alterity of the *il y ya*” (Critchley *Very Little* 126).<sup>128</sup> The novel theorises social relations as a means of achieving transcendence.

Where does this leave Kagiso? He has undergone a process he could neither refuse nor fully comprehend, an encounter with alterity that exceeds the limitations of his discursive and epistemological positioning. He emerges from this moment of being acted upon, to resume his place in the symbolic order. But he carries some form of affirmation with him that, if still un-memorable (in the sense that it cannot be integrated into the present) nevertheless incarnadines his waking life. The encounter with alterity, to be sure, has had a transformative effect on Kagiso. The documentary project he has been working on, a project that has been stalled by his partner’s unwillingness to compromise the ethics of the project by having it narrated by a ‘distinguished’ white voice. Before his trip, Kagiso was prepared to be “less petulant, more accommodating”, but when he flies back, a change has come upon him, and he decides against using the white narrator. It is a step, albeit a minor one, towards the reconstitution of his past.

This novel scripts Kagiso’s time in London as a deeply aporetic moment, an encounter with the limits of knowledge. There is something excessively literary about this moment, in which the failure of epiphany is itself co-opted as success. It blithely offers that healing can be achieved in a simplistic bodying forth of alterity, then the novel’s treatment of Issa’s mother Vasinthe is a suitable foil to this. While she is also a figure acted upon by alterity, the novel scripts her passage through time in a more complicated fashion. She exists as an increasingly visible figure in the novel, figuring first as a presence in the recollections of the boys, and then in her own right as the novel discusses her struggle to find her son. She lives prosperously as a surgeon in South Africa, but her compassion in the novel is informed

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<sup>128</sup> See Simon Critchley: “the relation to the Other is neither positive nor negative in any absolute metaphysical sense; it is rather neutral, an experience of neutrality that – importantly – is not impersonal and which opens in and as that ambiguous form of language that Blanchot calls literature” (*Very Little* 125).

by a trauma from her youth.<sup>129</sup> Vasinthe witnesses, in the extra-temporal space of childhood memory, her mother dying after they are involved in a car accident. While her father comforts her, the young Vasinthe is aware that there is a deeper reason for the ambulance taking so long to reach them. One ambulance arrives, only to depart again when its crew realises that the injured woman they have been dispatched to help is not white (51). Her introduction to the cruelties of the South African state comes too early, she feels. Her father, who succumbs to grief for his dead wife a month later,<sup>130</sup> instils in Vasinthe the desire to be a doctor, a vocation at which she is presumably excellent: her career itinerary is summed up in a couple of short sentences that nevertheless absorptively hold meaning. Thus the reader observes Vasinthe's past as something that exists in the novel's *scuro*, a resource from which she draws certain strengths, but which she never approaches directly. In Auerbach's terms, hers is a narrative that is "fraught with background" (*Mimesis* 12).

To be sure, Vasinthe's is a story that requires concentrated attention from its reader, since so much of her past has "been forgotten, revised, deliberately abandoned" (228). She forms her identity in a rhizomatic fashion, a subject borne of negotiation with the situations in which she finds herself. The hybrid household she runs with Gloria is an attempt to fence off a home space away from the tyrannical determinisms of the Apartheid state. In so being, it radically modifies the existing form of the family model. Vasinthe is an individual who has taken control of her relationship to time and space, in ways that can be seen to rub off on Issa. For instance, one of the earliest scenes the reader encounters is of her driving the family across the country, "vrou alleen<sup>131</sup>, as men observed admiringly," on their holidays to the coast: the car – and fugitive movement in general – comes to stand in for the home as a space

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<sup>129</sup> Most of the critical scholarship on this novel devotes only cursory attention to Vasinthe and her history.

<sup>130</sup> This presumably leaves Vasinthe an orphan, but the narrative does not elaborate on this point. If this is so, then Vasinthe's existence is quite literally radicant: roots severed, she has no choice but to remake herself via processes of pure constructivism.

<sup>131</sup> Directly translated, 'Woman alone.'

of dwelling. Her radicant assertiveness is a point of anchorage for the novel, a flight from the conventional which Vasinthe actively (re)defines as normal. As she tells Katinka, “diversity is our normality. It’s what we take for granted. It’s what we nurtured (170). She vivifies her own subjective and embodied existence of this position, although it is a position that, as with Issa, is tasked with standing in for this character’s quiddity. Vasinthe is written in registers of movement, both in her upward career trajectory, and in her attempts to find a hybrid way of being in the world, unsticking herself from the affiliations of culture and race the better to progress through the world. Her story reads as an active remaking of self that Issa surely internalises in his path to adulthood: She wears a sari, but does not practise religion. She heads an unconventional household where the boys are made to understand that gender is not a determinant of one’s social roles.

The reader who encounters Vasinthe’s story may point out here that in attempting to remake the home space, Vasinthe is attempting to re-form, rather than creating anew. Her attempts to forge a new way of being in the world cannot not be influenced by her position in that world. Certainly, her time in London, in the after-moment of Issa’s disappearance, emphasises how much her attempts to keep the boys’ lives free of the dominating discourses of politics and religion have amounted to another form of restriction, a remaking of the old that cannot escape the epistemological and discursive boundaries of the community from which she comes. The memories she has of Issa demonstrate to the reader how he is the possessor of an alterity that estranges all. If Vasinthe initially helps Issa in his first sojourns into the field of historical revisionism, she soon finds that her son’s desire to know more about things that are consigned to ‘the dark back of time’ alienates her. His otherness exceeds her efforts to truncate and impose order, as the photo scene I discuss above indicates. The dissonance between her and Issa grows as he becomes older and more active in the political world, with Issa constantly escaping her grasp. In one of the novel’s flashbacks, she tries to

prevent Issa from leaving home to join a protest in Cape Town. We see a litany of alterity in the “clenched fists and Palestinian kefiyas and V-fingers raised into the air through narrowly-opened tinted windows”, the dark threat of the unknowable apparent in the tinted windows of the sleek kombis waiting to carry Issa away from home towards the battle with the state (113). Vasinthe argues that he is foregoing his school work, casting herself amongst the older generation for whom education was thought to be more important than violent contestation of the Apartheid order. The standoff that ensues is generic in its form, but the scene takes a different turn when Issa makes a run for the door. Gloria, who recognises something in Issa that his mother does not, lets him through without attempting to stop him. Kagiso leaps to stop Issa, grabbing the latter’s rucksack while they struggle at the threshold of the home. Issa slips free and is gone, “carried away in an expensive motorcade of defiant resistance” (115).

This moment sets the pattern for how their relationship plays out in the novel. During another of the novel’s highly charged scenes, which unfolds over seven image-rich pages, Issa stuns his mother by turning up at a prestigious dinner luncheon with the new President, dressed in a shabby Che Guevara t-shirt, which he has the president sign. Vasinthe is horrified. “That’s how you stir resentments, make unnecessary enemies. I just wish you would develop a sensitivity for these things” (148). In a scene that runs over with authorial ironising, Vasinthe grows wrathful as Issa is unrepentant. In a fit of pique, she flings her wine at him. It misses and splashes over the shirt, destroying it. We read that “in a flash, it all came back to her, the relaxed air of the proceedings, the lack of pomp and ceremony, the way he really *does* make one feel at ease” (150). Through this rather contrived flashback, she experiences the quiet contagion of the interpersonal ethics stealing over her. She sees what the reader has gathered from the authorial distance: that her reaction to Issa is a failure of sympathy. This moment, both surreal recollection and concrete happening, challenges the reader to see beyond the limits of Vasinthe’s position. Issa strips his shirt off – the narrative

pans over him, consuming his body in a moment of visual noticing that curiously eroticises as it essentialises – and then withdraws from the scene, leaving Vasinthe estranged by her own behaviour.

The point is made once again: the encounter with alterity estranges the self from itself. For Vasinthe, as with Kagiso, the engagement with Issa is an engagement with that which evades the grasp of her criteria, exposing the limitations of her world. She is disarticulated, left speechless and entrapped in the strictures of knowledge. But if the novel suggests, in its depictions of Kagiso and Vasinthe's struggle to overcome the bonds of their positioning in the world, that it is almost impossible to respond to alterity in terms not overwritten by the self's epistemological strictures, then its depiction of Katinka emerges as a countervoice, suggesting that there are other ways of being which at least partly escape cultural and discursive determinisms.

Katinka is the voice through which the novel's ethical project is finally spoken. We encounter her first (chronologically) as a hitchhiker the boys pick up while driving to Cape Town for Mandela's release from prison. The boys witness her being left at the side of the road, and, peculiarly, it is Kagiso rather than Issa who insists that they help her. Issa's resistance is a failure to see the individual beyond her discursive identity as a white female, a pre-reading of Katinka's phenomenological politic that indisposes him to act charitably towards her. It emerges that she has been abandoned by the lift she had obtained in Bloemfontein, a lift she regretted due to the driver's racist views.<sup>132</sup> She is jettisoned because she questioned his racist views and declared that she was travelling to Cape Town to see Mandela. We later discover that she has been disowned and rejected by her right-wing Afrikaans family because she disagrees with their political views. Shukri here creates a character who is aware of the limitations of her community, an awareness she experiences as

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<sup>132</sup> In common with other such moments in this novel, the driver is not seen or described.

a dissatisfaction with the way things are. Katinka's expulsion from her community is, like the expulsion of Michiel in *Kings of the Water*, an act that exposes the limitations inherent in how such communities constitute themselves.<sup>133</sup>

Nevertheless, Issa is initially suspicious of her, especially when she tells them that she is from Ventersdorp. She reads from a T.E. Lawrence book (we know this is Issa's), conveniently opening the book to a passage the novel presents to us to drive home Issa's growing fondness for "the things in which mankind had had no share or part."<sup>134</sup> She immediately associates this with the silent figure of Issa behind the wheel, who is playing a song she has not heard before. When he tells her that it is banned music, he responds that "it's beautiful music. Like the desert. Like here" (122). His words encourage her to see beyond the deformation and the stunting effects of the state, the better to engage affectively with that which is unknown.

For Katinka, home is fundamentally a space of estrangement, a space rendered intolerable by what she knows. She is disillusioned with nationhood and the torsions of power that go on in its name. In one of the novel's scenes, she remembers the moment during 1994 when the old flag is lowered for the last time. There is a pause, an atemporal gap in which she wishes she could linger:

[N]o flag to wave, no anthem to echo, no eternal enemy against which to perpetually defend, no God-chosen nation for which to die in gory glory. She looked up at the empty flagpole, the muted brass, not wanting this stateless moment to end. (251)

The moment of arrest, of placelessness, belongs to the order of the sublime, and it vanishes all too quickly. But once glimpsed, it animates her, investing her with a different way of approaching the world. The novel figures this investiture through Katinka's interpersonal associations with people (Kagiso, Issa and Vasinthe) who are outside of her cultural ambit.

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<sup>133</sup> Both Michiel and Katinka come from Afrikaaner farming communities.

<sup>134</sup> This is from T.E Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, qtd in Shukri (121).

Through exposing herself to Otherness, she displaces the self as the locus of discourse, creating an ethical awareness of that which would otherwise be elided or erased.

This much is shown in Katinka's relationship with Karim, a Palestinian man she encounters and falls in love with while in London. She undertakes to learn Arabic, displacing her cultural foreknowledge in an emblematic giving-over of the self to alterity. In doing so, she finds that "a veil is being lifted and slowly, a whole world – its symbols, its rules, its logic – is beginning to reveal itself to her . . . [w]here once she was blind, she can now do so much more than see. She can read" (200). Importantly, this transformation is theorised in the novel as one that can never be complete. The self's relativistic and conceptual foreclosures are ineluctable. If Katinka is further along this process than Kagiso, she is still tied to the not-home of her past, even as she acknowledges her community's history as one which instantiated itself by "relishing exclusion, celebrating subjugation" (246). Her way of countering the effects of this history of exclusions is to adopt as her animus a fugitive way of being that recognises that South Africans are, in Jamal's terms,

the persistent subjects of an imperial arbitrage; subjects denied the fullness of the bildungsroman; subjects intrinsically flawed, stained, who, because of an originary bastardization could never be neatly parsed according to the binary logics of empire or Apartheid. ("Bullet Through the Church" 17)

From this starting point, she is better-placed to engage with the absolute alterity proffered by Karim, who is "an ultimate other removed behind the multiple barriers of language, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and the West Bank Wall" (Pucherova "Re-imagining the Other" 942). In the novel's post-script, we learn that she has moved to the ostensibly inhospitable West Bank city of Qalqilyah, where she and Karim live behind the walls that constitute the Israeli West Bank barrier. In this inhospitable zone, whose meanings are policed by the state (with deleterious consequences for those who oppose it), Katinka finds the will to go on through the clasp of the interpersonal. This, the novel finally proposes, is the labour to which we

should commit ourselves: not being-in-common but being-in-difference, as that which will ultimately be the affirming point of our survival.

It is, if anything, a non-ending, a failed transcendence of the symbolic order which suggests that the foreclosures of knowledge are ineluctable. Katinka's radicant unrooting of herself through language is an ecstatic moment that vanishes in the instant of its perception. The attempt to locate this ecstasy in the realm of action denies its origins in impossibility. If this ending is disappointing, if the reader feels that Katinka's taking up residency represents the re-assertion of the everyday, that disappointment is nothing if not the realisation that the ecstatic experience of alterity cannot be conceptualised within any symbolic system. If the work were to succeed, it would only be in gesturing towards the known, returning to language. As a subject located in the world, Katinka cannot suspend the limitations of discourse. Put differently, discursive closure is an ineliminable condition of the self's finiteness, and that in turn is an inescapable facet of the self's being-in-the-world. The novel ends on a meaningless note, or rather, a note that overcomes meaning,

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The reader who encounters this novel encounters a prodigious flood of information, a concatenation of what Jabès terms "words soaked in silence." The aporetic encounter which the novel's characters experience when they bear witness to Issa's disappearance, amplifies for the reader the necessity of forging an interpersonal ethics based on mutual connectedness and the understanding of difference this generates. It has been my argument throughout this thesis that this argument, an argument that, if it can be said to be present outside of the event of reading is certainly present in the various works that underpin this study – is always moored to the restless dissatisfaction that our own position in discourse prevents us from completing the labour of the work: we can never sympathise adequately. We are, as I have argued, tasked with an impossible responsibility in the act of reading ethically, but the

knowledge that we are always-already unequal to what is demanded of us still impels us onwards. In being acted upon by the novel, we thus re-enact the same encounter with the aporetic we read of. The encounter with the aporetic, that which is outside of our ability to reckon with and bring over to the epistemological order of the visible,<sup>135</sup> interrupts the closures of knowledge that accrue to the redemptive act of meaning-making. These texts provide the possibility of a form of reading in which meaning fails.

In this novel, perhaps more than any of the others, the importance of such a reading is stressed by the threat of the technological as it works in the service of the erasing and thinning-out of difference. Presented with a monstrous collapse of ethics that, through its near-instantaneous recording on digital media has always-already happened, we are motivated to think through new possibilities of being. Our task is not to recover and resume, for to do so would be to risk the annihilating turn inwards symbolised in the quote Issa recalls as he, Kagiso and Katinka drive towards Cape Town and towards Mandela's freedom and their own: "[y]et, when we achieved and a new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to re-make in the likeness of the former world they knew (123)." The new must be sought out, not in the entombing densification of the inward turn, but in the pursuit of an interpersonal ethics – at this individual level, we form the building blocks for a tentative community, an Unavowable community united in its being-together. This novel, then, elevates the interhuman level, what Bourriaud theorises as "relationships between people, communities, individuals, groups, social networks, interactivity" (*Altermodern* 17).

Ultimately then, I would argue that *The Silent Minaret* carries within itself a generative space which the reader accesses through her negotiation of the narrative. I must point out here that this occurs despite the difficulties of the novel's form. This is a compacted novel, structured by three sections that are themselves carved up into 31 declamatory tracts.

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<sup>135</sup> We may gloss this as the seen and the said.

Despite its 280 page length, the novel does not display much of its characters' inherent capacities, and neither does it give them enough in the way of action to support the narrative project: they cannot be said to display much depth of life. While there are moments of intrigue (the relationships between Katinka and Karim or Vasinthe and Gloria are deserving of more attention than they receive), the characters are gifted little more than the characteristics essential to their supporting roles in the narrative. The novel's treatment of its characters is architectural: they are scaffolding upon which the plot is suspended, but there often seems to be too little attention given to the fabric of form.

As a result, it can feel curiously stunted, as if a novel has been compressed into a novella without the requisite trimming of detail. The critical question "who am I" is in this novel subverted to the politic "what is to be done?" If the novel does not answer that question directly, it is dogged by it at all points. Shukri's solution is a sedimenting of narrative that can occasionally venture into the prolix. The narrative proceeds by description rather than by explanation: indeed, it is replete with gestures that point but do not explain; Issa's silence is the novel's, but there is little narrative space given over to explaining the interiority of the white-hot heat we see in Issa, particularly as his complexities are buried under a cloying sauce of literary details. Detail accumulates, so that what we are left with is a life, but not a self. We have information, but little, less than little, almost no meaning. Issa is evasive, and it is an evasiveness the narrative colludes with – it runs over with recollections and reckonings and to his accomplishments, to a set of events and places others remember him in. This effect is exacerbated by Shukri's decision to interleave the narrative with large sections of Issa's doctoral thesis. This leaden scholarly theory interrupts the tight plotting of the novel, coming across more as an authorial flourish than a natural part of the context of Issa. The reader may find it difficult to sympathise effectively with a character whose inner workings are kept from us. Similarly, the reader is often distanced by an excess of mimetic intensity – information

proliferates in this novel, with characters referencing pop music or literature as though the author was concerned that the narrative would collapse if it did not have these historical markers of meaning to prop it up. These stylistic faults seem to arise from the conflict between Shukri's desire to use all his expressive power and the need to present the language and perceptions of his characters in a plausible way. Detail clamours for the reader's attention, and the overall effect can be unsettling, if only because their placing seems at odds with the ragged unevenness that the novel melds into its form: they seem there more for effect than voice.

To be sure, Shukri's novel is one of epic scope, an ambitious text in which a large cast of characters across a wide geographical and temporal range voice themselves in discontinuous ways. This work is also marked by a laudable structural ingenuity: its plot is impelled forwards by the bearers of communication – email, sms texts, Missing Person posters, clippings from newspapers and archival material from the TRC hearings – these convey meaning while simultaneously pointing to the ways in which information flow has taken on a global character, in the way that these scripts sign outside of themselves. The work itself thus exhibits the openness or hospitality it advocates in its very form: it opens itself up to the influence of these other events through the inclusion of forms that disrupt the text. The reader is of course implicated in this: our absorption in the text is interrupted by these discordant paratextual fragments. If we are to follow the narrative, we have to be open to the alterity these paratexts embody; if we are to make sense of this text, then we have to make sense of it in its bulging fullness.

It is perhaps ironic that this novel, in so many ways the most contemporary of the texts examined here, is the most entangled in “relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation” (Coetzee, “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech” 98). The counter-argument that speaks itself in an attentive reading of this work is that *The Silent Minaret* is a novel animated

by the sense that, if we are not quite ready to let go of these fundamentals of nationhood, then there is nevertheless the possibility of moving forward if we fix our sights on the more compelling, the more close-at-hand, the more inter-personal. Its meaning is to be found “in interrogating the limits of the recognisable and formulating a politics precisely there” (Butler, “Ungrievable Lives” n.p.). This then is the crux of the novel, its essential task: to acknowledge the insuperable, the Amfortasian and the incommensurable, and find therein the kernel of a will to life.

## By Indirections Find Directions Out: a Conclusion

Imraan Coovadia, in a prescient and incisive interview on fiction in South Africa, declares that

We don't need political novels anymore. In fact we may not even need novels. You'd have to say that the vital energies of South African culture aren't confined to literature anymore. We have the doodle raised to a transcendent form by William Kentridge, the puppet as a work of art from the Handspring Puppet Company, the cartoon as practised by Zapiro, Lauren Beukes's science fiction or fantasy novels, and the grotesque of *Die Antwoord*. There's a lot more energy there than was ever contained in the standard model of the political novel. (*Sunday Independent* n.p.)<sup>136</sup>

The point Coovadia is making is that the novel has ceased to be the bearer of cultural meaning it was under Apartheid. My argument in this thesis has been underpinned from the first by the fact of literature's finitude, the idea that "art acts poorly and little" in the realm of worldly action (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 243). Literature has little that is unique to say about the state of precarity that prevails in South Africa: the task of transubstantiating the restless dimension of South African life into art, if it is to be undertaken, can certainly be done more fruitfully via other mediums. What literature achieves in this realm is, *pace* Simon Critchley, very little, *almost* nothing.

The 'almost' is where our attention is drawn: my contention throughout this thesis has been that there is some succour to be taken from what lies resident in that *almost*, some glimpse of human consciousness in the recoil of the mind before the abyssal being of nothingness. What emerges from the works examined is that the exteriority of literature to the realm of social action is, conversely, where its affective power lies. That affective power is glimpsed best when we understand reading as an event, as an experience in which the reader relinquishes interpretive control. Importantly, my argument has been that each of the texts displace the authority of the reader to interpret them, unsettling the promise of redemptive resolution that so much of the literature in South Africa returns to. That is, their power lies not in their ability to ease the anxiety occasioned by the precarity which Ashraf Jamal

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<sup>136</sup> Coovadia was responding to the question put to him by Mary Corrigan, of whether the nature of the political novel has shifted in the post-apartheid era.

characterises as “the either-or of the off-shore or the trellidor” (“The Third Space” 117), but in turning towards this precarity and enlisting it creatively.

The *idée fixe* that this thesis has attempted to unfix is that literature can bring into being some form of social change that influences the real. Indeed, the texts that form the subject of this study are works of literature which, rather than seeking to augment the real, are experiences of ‘lessness’ where the real recedes: in J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime*, for example, the story is fragmented, ultimately revealing nothing about its subject. The texts in this study are constitutively founded upon precarity, and they open themselves up to the experience of that which cannot be related, disputing the notion of a utopian ‘elsewhere’ as something to make the unsettled state of the present more bearable. In the first chapter, my reading of Kgebetli Moele’s *Book of the Dead* lists the unsettling dimension of that novel’s effect on the reader as precisely the sordid presence of the uncanny, that which stretches the sinew of meaning to breaking-point. Similarly, the works of Mark Behr, Anneli Botes and Ishtiyag Shukri take the stock figure of the *isolato* and its attendant narrative codes, and then each text goes about unmaking the sedimented layers of meaning which accrue to their themes. This unsettling of settled states of being calls attention to those moments where language fails to speak by unmooring the reader from any position of stability. It is from this ungrounded position that meaning must be sought, a contingent position in a realm where certainty has no hold.

To be sure, the capacity of these works of literature is that which Levinas terms “the resistance of what has no resistance” (*Totality and Infinity* 199). In examining them, my intention is to open up a different, more fructiver way of understanding literature, one that is attentive to the implicit evasiveness of the genre, as art which opens onto that which exceeds our capacity for understanding. Indeed, the excess as I perceive it in this study is that which interrupts any such quest for meaning. It is only through this experience of the self’s

knowledge being interrupted that we are able to see beyond the limitations of our placing in language. If the gnawing problem that dogs the South African cultural psyche is one of co-existence – how to live with others – then the experience of ek-stasis in these novels is an ethical approach towards answering that question, though the question is always finally unanswerable. The work of this literature, then, is to be found in the ‘almost’ that it reveals. These texts proceed by indifference to revelation, by allowing the objects of their insight a form of autonomy, and by conceptualising motion, the movement of mourning or progression or even, as in Coetzee’s *Summertime* and Moele’s *Book of the Dead*, the movement of restlessness that constantly returns to itself.

The reader who is au courant with the study of South African literature may point out that this concern with interpersonal ethics is not new to the field. Several critical scholars have examined literature, most notably that of J.M. Coetzee, through the lens of alterity. My study shows that if this is a re-emergent phenomenon, it is transformed by its situation in the contemporary moment such that its conclusions are quite different. In any event, my study is concerned with the singularity of literature, and the theories of alterity I draw into the orbit of these works of literature are non-prescriptive yet simultaneously instructive in allowing us to read the possibility of a new and more wakeful space for literature to inhabit.

By way of conclusion, I return to the thematic that has impelled this dissertation onwards. The aporetic is at its very essence that which is resistant to illumination. Yet while it is invisible, the aporetic leaves some trace of itself. Whether in the spare textures of Moele’s writing, or the evocative richness of Johnson and Awerbuck and Behr, or even in the hole and shard of Coetzee, the aporetic is that which impels narrative onwards by the force of its mute enormity. To conduct a study of the aporetic, a sort of guerrilla-raid in which the hitherto-unknown secrets contained in the darkness of alterity are borne into the light of meaning, is to commit an irreducibly violent act. The task of the reader is not so much a

revelatory process as it is an inhabiting, or attempting to inhabit, a state of Otherness. It is, to be sure, a way of reading towards the darkness, rather than a method of reading cast as a means of casting artificial illumination on that which resides in shadow.

My point, I must make clear, is not that the various authors examined in this thesis successfully represent alterity. On the contrary, as I show in my readings, each of these fictions fails to successfully inhabit the interhuman relation with which this avenue of South African literature concerns itself. The foreclosure of knowledge cannot be withstood. Thus in *Thula Thula*, *the Native Commissioner*, or *The Silent Minaret*, the realisation of survival/living on is precisely the triumph of the normative. The domestic re-establishes itself. The story cannot be finished except in the closure of the novel, and the contestation between those two incommensurate goals challenges the novel form's claim to eminence, as well as any idea of closure. In so doing, we are made to realise that abandoning the comfort of closure does not bind us to the dread of the uncertain. On the contrary, it allows us to perceive the precarious and contingent present as always-already with us, and so presents the possibility of stepping out of the infinite regress in which attempts to narrate the present are always caught.

My theory of the aporetic nature of reading opens onto a politics founded by a set of circulating ideas that are not always mutually qualifying. It constitutes an attempt to attend to the aporetic, and then begin to articulate it. In so doing, it emphasises the necessarily performative nature of reading. It is clear from my reading of this dimension of South African literature, that the path to be followed is pathless, aleatory and always uncertain. Yet this very uncertainty provides us with a new way of reading literature, a non-violating ethics of literature that articulates the meaning *qua* meaning of the literary experience at its most unsettling and consequently its most ecstatic.

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