

Desire and Disinterest in *Dusklands*

Abstract

Disinterest is one of the most distrusted of all the terms which pass down to us from post-Kantian aesthetic theory, because it is often taken to imply an ideologically suspect transcendence of the desiring embodied subject. Yet the need to which it points persists, as is evident from Coetzee's discussion of 'free play' in his essay 'Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry' (1992), where a certain conception of aesthetic disinterest (a sought-for 'evasive (non)position inside/outside the play') is seen as being related to, rather than disavowing, the desire of writer and readers alike. This paper traces the prehistory of these important remarks back to the period of *Dusklands*, and to Herbert Marcuse's attempt to conjoin Freudian psychoanalysis with post-Kantian aesthetic theory. I will argue that Marcuse was an influence Coetzee needed both to assimilate and to challenge.

Disinterest is one of the most distrusted of all the terms which pass down to us from post-Kantian aesthetic theory, and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's condemnation remains the most resounding:

Detachment, disinterestedness, indifference—aesthetic theory has so often presented these as the only way to recognize the work of art for what it is, autonomous, *selbständig*, that one ends up forgetting that they really mean disinvestment, detachment, indifference, in other words, the refusal to invest oneself and take things seriously. (34)

In comments like these Bourdieu positioned disinterest as unwholesome or even perverse: it makes us cease to "take things seriously," where seriousness involves taking direct action to realize our desire. He takes it to imply "a sort of moral agnosticism, the perfect antithesis of the ethical disposition which subordinates art to the values of living," and as such it "can only contradict the...norms of the ethic which, at each moment,

defines the legitimate objects and modes of representation for the different social classes" (47). But aesthetic disinterest is not only unethical, it is also dishonest about its own desire. Where it is claimed by artists it serves to disguise their drive to power (3); where it is claimed by readers it masks "a social function of legitimating social differences," distinguishing the "lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile" from the "sacred space of culture" (7). In the final analysis, the ideal of disinterest uselessly idealizes "the distance from the world...which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of the world" (55).

It is widely assumed that by "outing" aesthetic disinterest in such hostile terms Bourdieu struck its death-knell, and within literary studies it remains the case that to use this word is to be exposed to the potentially humiliating prospect of being outed oneself as an apolitical aesthete who wishes to rob various needy others of their legitimate desires.¹ As a result, most of us have long since stopped using this term. But that does not mean that the need to which it points—however inadequately—has ceased to exist—not least as evidenced by Coetzee's 1992 essay on the efforts of the humanist scholar Erasmus to "comment on power from the outside" (100). While Coetzee avoids using the term "disinterest", in this essay he introduces two lines of reflection about desire which both point towards its enduring significance.

What if the truth of our desire is not, as Bourdieu appeared to assume, plainly before us, but is hidden by the form of rationality which constitutes us as civilized subjects? This was the question posed by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), to which the "Erasmus" essay

alludes. While admiring of Foucault, what interests Coetzee in this attempt at a historiography of madness is the larger problematic which it implies but does not successfully resolve. He names this problematic “the economy of inside and outside” (88): given that every inside necessarily produces a conception of its outside (that is what is meant by an “economy of” these terms), how can we have knowledge of that which is genuinely outside our seemingly rational version of the good and the true, which is not framed in the terms our own insidership has already projected? Following Derrida’s well-known critique of Foucault in *Writing and Difference* (1967), Coetzee views the historian as attempting to write about madness as if he already knows what it is and what it means; he points out that in doing so Foucault inevitably positions it as a negation projected from an insider’s position. If the repressed truth of desire cannot therefore be known from the position of self-certainty which Lacan names “the subject supposed to know,” the question necessarily becomes more complex: “What kind of knowledge is accessible from a position outside, a position that does not know itself?” (88).

These reflections on the “economy of inside and outside” lead Coetzee away from Bourdieu’s strictures on disinterest, and that direction of travel is further confirmed by his ensuing thoughts about desire as being disastrously subject to imitation. Not only is it the case, Coetzee maintains, that the truth of desire eludes our direct knowledge; desire may also be rendered inauthentic by the all-too-human tendency to take an envied other as its model. Here he follows René Girard’s account in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961) of how our drive for “fullness of

being” leads to a form of desiring which imitates admired projections of strength and self-possession, and which leads inevitably to a violent rivalry over the object of desire. “Model becomes rival, rival becomes obstacle,” and there ensues a clash of warring desires, such that “there is ultimately nothing done or felt by one protagonist that is not done or felt by the other” (92).

Both lines of reflection point Coetzee towards the need for some form of aesthetic self-transcendence—not in order to stop desiring, but to learn how to desire in such a way that is not entrapped in culturally pre-determined, manipulative, or self-destructive forms. This need is answered through a highly inventive, yet at times quite obscure, reconception of disinterest which blends traditional Kantian ideas about the “free play” of imagination and understanding with post-Freudian ideas about the relation between desire and “phallic” prohibitions.

In his reading of Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* Coetzee discerns an attempt to exchange an attachment to “the ‘big’ phallus, the pillar of the law behind which the reasonable man stands” for “a phallus of a second species, naked, ridiculous, without robes or grandeur, the ‘little’ phallus... not the transcendental signifier but a *thing* of sport, of free play” (96). The Erasmian text seeks to move, he suggests, from the position of the “subject supposed to know” to “a position of ek-stasis in which one knows without knowing” (95), and crucial to its doing so is the peculiar manoeuvre of “keeping its phallus the size of the woman’s” (100). While this point is never fully clarified, even from a purely anatomical perspective, it is nonetheless clear that Coetzee’s interest lies in

redefining the “outside” position of disinterest not as an escape from desire but as a way of eluding the way in which the “reasonable man” circumscribes it. The “power” of the Erasmian text, he claims, lies not in its abnegation of desire, but in its circumvention of a determining phallic law; it works not through a logic of masculine assertion but through an “evasive (non)position inside/outside the play”, a disruptive modality of desiring which is oddly but strikingly metaphorized as the acquiring of a woman’s phallus (103).

The “Erasmus” essay has a significant place in Coetzee’s oeuvre, and as I have argued elsewhere it sets the agenda for much of his later fiction.² This intriguing, yet also peculiar and opaque, way of fusing aesthetic disinterest with desire had a long gestation which can be traced back to the moment of *Dusklands*, and—I will argue—to Herbert Marcuse’s attempt to join the aesthetic theory of Kant and Schiller to the social diagnostics of the later Freud. Understanding Coetzee’s complex response to Marcuse will help to clarify the preoccupations which formed his earliest work of fiction, and it will also deepen understanding of his attempt to conjoin aesthetic and psychoanalytic terminology in this important yet puzzling essay.

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By the late 1960s Herbert Marcuse was about as famous as it is possible for a philosopher to be, particularly on the American university campuses where Coetzee was based until his return to South Africa in 1972. His fame

arrived with the publication of *One Dimensional Man* (1964), which was widely translated and sold over 100,000 copies—a remarkable achievement given its uncompromising claim that modern technological rationality not only controls every aspect of private and social life, but also co-opts any form of meaningful resistance. As Barbara Celarent observes, the earlier *Eros and Civilization* (1955) was Marcuse's "deeper book," and it enjoyed a renaissance in the late 1960s with the rise of his fame.

Eros and Civilization is primarily a development of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), a metapsychological analysis of how civilization harnesses human desire in order both to control and, in certain limited ways, fulfil it. In Marcuse's summary, Freud's account of the development of civilization entails "two chief modes of instinctual organization": there is an "inhibition of sexuality, ensuing in durable and expanding group relations," and also a transformation of the aggressive instincts (the "death drive") into "the mastery of man and nature, to individual and social morality" (81). Civilization is therefore, for Freud, a compromise in which we accept various kinds of repression for a greater measure of freedom from material need and protection from the violence of unregulated desire.

Marcuse's chief departure from Freud was his reversal of the central claim made in *Civilization and its Discontents*. What this book explains, Marcuse claimed, is not how civilization is successful at controlling and channelling our aggressive and destructive desires, but why it manifestly fails to do so. Marcuse was of course writing from the other side of World War II: from the perspective of a post-Marxist German Jew that civilization-

building “alloy” between erotic and aggressive drives, which Freud had defined as an ambivalent bargain struck for self-preservation, seemed instead a recipe for disaster. “Concentration camps, mass exterminations, world wars, and atom bombs” are not a “relapse into barbarism,” Marcuse claimed, “but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination. And the most effective subjugation and destruction of man,” he observed, “takes place at the height of civilization” (2).

Coetzee did not need Marcuse to teach him about the connections between aggression, high-minded moralizing, and modernity. His experiences as a young man in apartheid South Africa, and then as a computer programmer unexpectedly working on nuclear technology at IBM, had sufficiently attuned him to the strange shapes of modern violence. But nonetheless, Eugene Dawn’s chilling “report” on how to settle the war in Vietnam, which he carries about in a briefcase with twenty-four pornographic images, does rather neatly illustrate Marcuse’s point about the “explosive” way in which modern civilization harnesses erotic and aggressive desire to its catastrophically destructive ends. Dawn’s ultimate solution is for a “total war,” involving a chemical “assault upon the mothering earth herself,” to convey to the Vietnamese our shared “evolutionary duty toward the glory of consciousness” (28-9). In both of its paired narratives *Dusklands* conveys libidinal and death drives as seamlessly knit together with the highest civilizational purposes, yet in such a way that creates a rationality which is perfectly blind to its own insanity, just as Marcuse had argued.

This diagnosis of modern civilization as being in the grip of increasingly uncontrollable form of aggression masked as rationality was in itself nothing new: in *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse only provided a firmer basis in psychoanalytic theory for what Adorno and Horkheimer had already argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). What made him such an attractive and popular thinker in the social ferment of the late 1960s was his refusal to give up on the utopian transformative possibilities which other Frankfurt School theorists had mostly abandoned. Against Freud and Adorno alike, Marcuse advanced the dazzling claim that “a non-repressive civilization is possible” (13)—not only possible, in fact, but in urgent need of realization. His reasons for believing this are complex, but they can be summarised, following Joel Whitebook, as “attempts to locate the good Other of instrumental reason and the autocratic ego” (3-4) in the Freudian unconscious. As Whitebook also points out, Marcuse’s search for this “good Other” is in many ways parallel to Foucault’s “tendency to valorize madness as the good Other of excluding modern rationality” (263). And as we shall see, both accounts suffer from comparable problems.

Marcuse’s path to the good Other was unlike Foucault’s insofar as it lay not through historical research, but a philosophical scrutiny of what Freud called the “reality principle”. This is a psychoanalytic concept which names the process of adjustment by which the human subject divides into an unconscious dimension, which becomes a refuge for repressed and unacknowledgeable desire, and an organized ego, which learns to strive for what the prevailing forces which govern reality deem to be useful and attainable, “without damage to itself or to its vital environment” (11).

While Marcuse accepted the need for some version of the reality principle in normative human development, he claimed that Freud's understanding of it was too rigid and lacking in historical nuance. He distinguished the "basic repression" entailed by any formation of human subjectivity from an unnecessary "surplus repression"; in doing so he differentiated the basic reality principle from a "performance principle" which inculcates the "surplus" level of repression which he connected with the specific deformity of modern civilization. Dominated by the performance principle, the desire of modern subjects in a post-industrial economy is packaged, Marcuse argued, into ever more socially-useful units, through a tightly organized (or "totally administered", in Adorno's phrase) life of work, "genital" sexuality, and consumerism. Yet the level of repression demanded by the performance principle, Marcuse claimed, has been rendered unnecessary by its own success. The "rationalization and mechanization of labor in industrial civilization tend to reduce the quantum of instinctual energy channelled into toil (alienated labor), thus freeing energy for the attainment of objectives set by the free play of individual faculties" (69). Our advanced technological development, Marcuse believed, has generated a level of wealth that, correctly distributed, could enable a large-scale release from surplus repression—were it not for the way in which the performance principle is so powerfully reinforced by the culture industry's inculcation of consumerist ideology.

For Marcuse the source of utopian hope was not, as in classical Marxist theory, a revolutionary class: along with Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse regarded the desire of the working class as having long since

been co-opted by the vapid enticements of modern consumerism. It was instead the unconscious, which he understood as a deep memory which “preserves the meaning of past stages of individual development at which integral gratification is obtained,” and can therefore bear witness to the possibility of non-repressive states of being. “Its truth value,” he claimed, “lies in the specific function of memory to preserve promises and potentialities which are betrayed and even outlawed by the mature, civilized individual, but which had once been fulfilled in his dim past and which are never entirely forgotten” (14-15). This utopian source, Marcuse further argued, reveals that the organization of desire into those determinately libidinal and aggressive forms which Freud described is only a belated conception of desire’s truth—a projection of its reality seen from our repressed “insider” position. Its true nature, he claimed, is hinted at by the mythical figures of Orpheus and Narcissus, who “recall the experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but to be liberated—a freedom that will release the powers of Eros now bound in the repressed and petrified forms of man and nature” (126).

We can be confident that Coetzee was familiar with these influential claims because he refers to them directly in his notes for a talk on “Obscenity and Pornography” given in Cape Town in 1974. Citing Marcuse by name, he refers to his argument that modern civilization tends “to concentrate sexual feeling in the genitals,” in contrast to the memory of a more “polymorphous perverse” sexuality held in the unconscious, “so that the body could be de-eroticized and rendered fitter for labor.” In this way the “performance principle triumphs over the pleasure principle,” he

grimly concludes.³ Further evidence of a rather more interesting kind is provided by an early draft of “The Vietnam Project” named “Pornography Inquisition.” This fascinating text is written as a dialogue, almost as if a play-script, between a woman named Mrs C and her therapist. Mrs C is a rather conventionally-minded woman who finds herself at odds with the countercultural atmosphere of campus life in Buffalo; she is complaining to the therapist about her husband’s attempts to involve her in threesomes with his girlfriend. As if Mr C’s efforts at regaining a polymorphous perversity were not bad enough, Mrs C soon finds that her therapist is also a paid-up follower of Marcuse. He regales her with a skewed version of Marcuse’s argument about the advanced mechanization of labor, claiming that modern technology is going to release us all from work and liberate the pleasure principle whether we like it or not, and that bored housewives (like Mrs C) are on the front line of this brave new world. “We are going to have to breed a whole new race of hedonists,” he gushes:

People are going to have to love their bodies instead of hating them, to pamper and indulge them and spend lots of time gratifying them. And they are going to have to train their bodies, to heighten their receptivity to stimulus, so that their threshold of satiation isn’t so miserably low.

To which Mrs C wryly responds: “You should meet my husband.”⁴

Mrs C’s take on the Marcuse-inspired men in her life is sardonic, and she ends up berating both therapist and husband for their infantile “penis worship”. Her plucky and determined voice is given the upper hand, and

in this early draft of *Dusklands* Coetzee is sending up the way in which campus radicals, perhaps including himself to some extent (as Mr C?), tended to literalize Marcuse's teachings in the service of their own sexual interests. But while Mr C may have been influenced by a sub-Marcusean form of "penis worship," the more significant point about *Dusklands* is the way it reveals the influence of Marcuse's aesthetic theory upon its author.

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Art was central to the utopian thread of Marcuse's teaching about desire. Like Freud, he saw it as fundamentally akin to "phantasy" (Freud compared it with day-dreaming), because its autonomy from ordinary modes of judgment allows it to channel the unconscious. "Behind the aesthetic form," he pronounced, "lies the repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason—the eternal protest against the organization of life by the logic of domination, the critique of the performance principle" (110). Yet he also followed Adorno in arguing that in a "totally administered" world art can only be oppositional through spectacular acts of negation. "Art survives," he observes, "only where it cancels itself, where it saves its substance by denying its traditional form and thereby denying reconciliation: where it becomes surrealistic and atonal. Otherwise, art shares the fate of all genuine communication: it dies off" (112).

It is not easy to see how this conception of the aesthetic as at once a positive utopian content (a channel for unconscious memory) and an act

of spectacular negation or self-cancelling could be reconciled. This faultline in Marcuse's view of art is equally evident in his engagement with German idealist aesthetic theory—and it is at this point that aesthetic disinterest comes back into focus.

In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) Kant conceived aesthetic disinterest as involving a free play between the imagination and understanding in which the various moral and epistemic categories which form the subject's desire are no longer determinative in the act of judgment. Marcuse takes this condition of "purposiveness without purpose" as pointing "beyond the Kantian context" to "the essence of a non-repressive order," because the free play envisaged in the aesthetic relation is suggestive of "the free play of the released potentialities of man and nature" (137). In short, Marcuse is trying to attribute to Kantian aesthetic disinterest an interest in circumventing the way in which the dominant reality principle frames desire in the name of repressed memories of its truth. This claim only really makes sense if the free play involved is understood through the redefinition Schiller gave to Kant's theory in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). Here Kantian free play becomes a "play-drive" [*Spieltrieb*], which disinterestedly mediates between two other fundamental human drives: our drive to moral rationality, or the "form-drive" [*Formtrieb*], and our countervailing drive towards the concreted embodied specificity of life, or the "sense-drive" [*Stofftrieb*].⁵ Schiller understood the play-drive as a way of educating and refining the high conception of universal justice in Kant's ethical system, by putting it in touch with life's resistant particularity.

Instead of dominating human difference with its abstract duty-bound moral imperatives, the form-drive could learn how to realize itself in non-violent ways through an aesthetic education which places it in an ongoing dialectical relation with the unbiddable alterity of life. Yet as various critics of Schiller have observed, the problem with this imagined dialectic is that it can only ever progress in one direction.⁶ The gradual realization of the drive to universal justice is the ultimate telos of aesthetic education, meaning that whatever in life is revealed by the sense-drive as resistant to that end will ultimately have to give way. Inevitably this demand will tend to empty the “volitional openness” enjoined by the play-drive of its openness, making its effort at disinterestedness serve an already-known desire.⁷

The same problem is evident in Marcuse’s adaptation of Schiller, but with the competing drives now in a reversed polarity. Marcuse reinterprets the form-drive as the dominative modern rationality which *Eros and Civilization* so exhaustively describes, and the telos of aesthetic education is now firmly tilted towards the recovery of a buried pleasure principle, which is what the sense-drive now represents. The “aesthetic reconciliation,” as Marcuse calls it, “implies strengthening sensuousness as against the tyranny of reason” (138), and “the ‘free play’ of creative imagination” is understood very determinately as bringing out “freedom from the reality principle” (142). What this means is that the kind of “free play” Marcuse envisages is neither particularly free nor playful, if play is understood in the active sense of opening unexpected imaginative possibilities, because his thumb is so firmly on the scales. It is in this way

that Marcuse's attempt to recover the buried memory of desire through art is subject to the same problem as Foucault's attempt to excavate madness through historiography. In both cases the "good Other" is already a knowable quantity, in such a way that ignores the problematic of "the economy of inside and outside", as Coetzee named it. That is to say, the good Other is projected from a subject position which is inside the prevailing repressive order in such a way that risks mistaking its projections for truth.

The further implication of this point is that the work of art, insofar as it remains an effort at recovering repressed desire from the position of the "subject supposed to know," is made redundant because its truth is already known—or at least thought to be known—prior to any act of writing. Marcuse knows, for example, that the genuine work of art will never be able to compromise with, let alone betray any affection for, a society as dominated as ours is by the performance principle. The genuine work of art will therefore need to be (all of this can be deduced before any writing has occurred) a work of "radical satire":

The most uncompromising, most extreme indictment has found expression in a work which precisely because of its radicalism repels the political sphere: in the work of Samuel Beckett, there is no hope which can be translated into political terms, the aesthetic form excludes all accommodation and leaves literature as literature. And as literature, the work carries one single message: to make an end with things as they are. (*Counterrevolution and Revolt* 116-17)

This way of describing Beckett could equally be applied to *Dusklands*, which is every bit as uncompromising and extreme in its indictment of the

“political sphere”—as if the achievements of Western rationalism amounted to nothing more than a pure logic of domination which needs to be unmasked. As Coetzee later reflected in his composition notebook for *In the Heart of the Country*, “I can now see that *D[usk]lands* was a product of the passionate politics of 1965-71, USA. I was a satirist in *D[usk]lands*.”⁸

While the satire in *Dusklands* is often exuberant and memorable (just recall Dawn’s grimly post-industrial description of sex: “my seed drips like urine into the fertile sewers of Marilyn’s reproductive ducts” (8)), it quickly becomes flat and ungenerative as a work of art. This short text rapidly exhausts both itself and the reader’s desire to carry on with it—as testified most strikingly by Bessie Head’s response: “It has echoes of *A Question of Power* all right,” she remarked, “but none of the driving hope and push out of death of my book...I became repelled half way and put it down.”⁹ Part of the problem she identifies can be traced back to Marcuse’s claim that radical satire conveys a radical injunction “to make an end with things as they are.” As Stephen Bronner points out this claim is “merely an assertion,” and there is little reason to find it convincing. “If politics as such is denied,” he argues in response to Marcuse, “then an emancipatory politics and its values will be denied as well. What subjectively *may* be experienced as rebellion, can also appear as a purely stoic resignation to the repression of the given order” (127). In support of Bronner’s observation it is significant that years later, in the autobiographical sketch which concludes *Doubling the Point* (1992), Coetzee described the young man who composed *Dusklands* as writing in a spirit of “cynicism” (392). This judgment feels right: while there are lots of literary games going on in

Dusklands, its play-drive is very limited and by no means free, and there is not enough dialectical movement in the writing to keep us attached to the world it indicts. In fact an earlier judgment made by Coetzee is more negative still. Continuing on from the notebook passage quoted above, he claims that while he was a “satirist in *D[usklands]*,” this was not “out of moral conviction but because I was being aroused by events in a way I feared to be aroused...Sex and violence—I know my satire was an attempt to rationalize my attraction toward sadistic sex and violence.”¹⁰ This judgment rings even more true. Far from being a discovery of unrepressed desire, *Dusklands* is transfixed by the sadistic spectacle it denounces, trapped inside the deformed condition of desiring it so scorchingly repudiates.

Naturally this is not the whole story, either of Marcuse’s aesthetic theory or of *Dusklands*. Marcuse’s utopian conception of art as winning a positive relation to the unconscious through its autonomous form also finds expression in his valuation—again as a deduction, without needing specific works of art to disclose it—of the genre of the idyll, a form of writing which reverses the polarity of radical satire. His interest in idyllic writing takes many forms, among the most interesting of which is his discussion of Brecht’s poem ‘The Lovers’ in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972)—a poem which imagines the flight of two birds escaping the trammels of the world “into the freedom which is also the realm of beauty” (121). More salient to *Dusklands*, though, is Marcuse’s tendency to treat non-Western cultures as instantiating the longed-for “good Other” to the condition of desire under the performance principle. For example, in

Eros and Civilization Margaret Mead's research on "libidinal work relations" in Arapesh culture is taken to reveal a practice of relating to nature "not as an object of domination and exploitation, but as a 'garden' which can grow while making human beings grow," and which "experiences man and nature as joined in a non-repressive and still functioning order" (166).¹¹

While Coetzee is more circumspect about primitivism than Marcuse, there is more than a trace of this kind of idyll in *Dusklands*, most particularly in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'. In fact the word is used by Jacobus himself: his own "idyll" (89) involves the pleasurable bursting of his anal fistula, which enables the regaining of full productive control over his body. But this malign idyll is pointedly contrasted with the Namaqua idyll which Jacobus presently inhabits, yet is wholly incapable of perceiving. Right at the end of his oddly double-voiced narrative, which both articulates Jacobus's sensibility and allows for Coetzee's implicit authorial commentary upon it, he asks, "How do I know that Johannes Plaatje, or even Adonis, not to speak of the Hottentot dead, was not an immense world of delight closed off to my senses? May I not have killed something of inestimable value?" (106). Manifestly he has, for we are constantly nudged to read through his bristling sense of civilizational superiority to a picture of the Namaqua as exemplifying both a capacity for play and a polymorphous sexuality which modern civilization has so disastrously repressed.

Given Marcuse's own emphasis on the play-drive as liberatory it is striking how frequently the Namaqua are presented as being at play. They

have a playful curiosity towards Jacobus when he arrives (which he repudiates); they play various games (which don't interest him and which he refuses to understand); and despite Jacobus's boorish behaviour they put up with him until he loses his temper with a group of playful children, biting the ear off one of them. "Do you not know how to play with children?" ask the Namaqua elders, in bewilderment (91). Most significantly, their evening of banqueting and festivities comes to an end in a kind of polymorphous "love-in," which Jacobus angrily disturbs:

I returned to the Tamboer brothers' hut and, overcoming a false sense of shame, entered. The boys were lying as before, the girl was still awake. I looked hard at her, uncertain whether she might not call out and embarrass me. She smiled back, presumably a smile of invitation, though I could hardly believe she was so simple-minded as to think I would share a bed with my servants and their trollop...The next sleeper was the missing Klawer. He slept with his arms clasped round the waist of a woman..."What would master like us to send?" called Plaatje. "Would master like some tail?" The inside of the hut exploded into giggles and whoops, over which soared Plaatje's voice: "Maybe we will send master some nice young tail!" Gusts of ribaldry sailed past me on my way out of the sleeping village. (88)

Of course we're happy to see Jacobus humiliated, but the problem with idyll is really the same as radical satire: it is too literalistic and too static. Instead of conceiving of play as something that can reorient the desire of writing itself at the level of form, Coetzee's text follows Marcuse in sentimentally literalising the play drive and the polymorphous as an oppositional content. As a result it is vulnerable to seeming clichéd, and nowadays its utopian aspects seems a bit dated; at any rate, its

conception of what is outside the repressive structures of desire never gets beyond an insider's perspective.

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Dusklands stands out in Coetzee's oeuvre for the tightly-clenched nature of its satire and the dated sentimentality of its idyllic moments; it presents a static and cynical picture of modernity which is incapable of transforming the desires which constitute it. But if, in all these ways, it is stamped with Marcuse's influence as a limiting factor, this was a limitation Coetzee was swift both to acknowledge and to challenge.

Even before *Dusklands* was published Coetzee was aware of its failure to access a non-predetermined condition of desiring. He draws attention to this shortcoming in a note he wrote to a friend ("Daniel") which accompanies the "Pornography Inquisition" narrative in the archive:

You will notice that these two stories ['The Vietnam Project' and 'Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'] are thematically and formally identical. I'm puzzled by this phenomenon and would be most interested to have it explained to me.¹²

While there is an ironic nod here to Eugene Dawn ("I have high hopes of finding out whose fault I am" (49)), the point is a serious one: *Dusklands* does not transcend and rediscover its author's desire, it merely repeats and entrenches it, remaining—as he elsewhere so tellingly observed—fixated on the sadistic violence it ostensibly denounces.

In his next attempt at fiction, an unrealized project named “Burning the Books,” Coetzee tries to release himself from the desire which animated *Dusklands* by escaping from desire as such. If its “radical satire” and its “idyll” were equally configured by what they were seeking to escape, what would it instead be like to write a “fiction of apathy,” which tries to prize open a pathway to the “good Other” by discarding any kind of animating desire? These are the thoughts which preface Coetzee’s draft:

Fiction, being a serious affair, cannot accept pre-requisites like (1) a desire to write, (2) something to write about, (3) something to say. There must be a place for a fiction of apathy toward the task of writing, toward the subject, toward the means.

If fiction is to be serious it cannot assume the objects of conventional literary productivity, which will inevitably be in service to the existing order of desire. Therefore “apathy toward the task of writing,” and a work of fiction which stages that apathy, might be a way forward. But then he discloses the problem:

The following won’t work. (1) Fiction without a subject. (2) Fiction whose sole subject is apathy toward the notion of a subject. (3) Fiction whose subject is solely an occasion for apathy toward it.¹³

Fiction is not “serious” if it is driven by an already-given desire; yet it cannot be fiction at all if the writer is not animated by a desire to write it. Coetzee is already starting to prize open the paradox upon which the “Erasmus” essay will turn: writing must be animated by desire, but it must

also—to be “serious” writing—in some sense not emerge from a position of knowledge about what its desire really is.

Coetzee’s attempt at a “fiction of apathy” is telling for the way it exhibits the impossibility—and hence the undesirability—of writing from a position of pure disinterest in the highest Kantian sense. In “Burning the Books” various tropes of contemporary fiction (the political novel, set in Latin America no less, with its “aftermath of revolution” and its “burning city”; the existentialist novel of “the impoverishment of the sense of authentic identity”; even his own novel of “radical satire,” which links sadistic torture and rape to a grim post-industrial condition) are taken up and ironised by an apathetic narrator, in the hope of escaping the “boring metaphysical morass” he inhabits.¹⁴ Yet abrogating desire leads not to a new way of envisioning it, but only to the absence of a desire to write, and the collapse of that project. In his composition notebook for *In the Heart of the Country* Coetzee confronts Marcuse more directly: “The real story,” he observes, “is being deprived of one’s story by psychoanalysis (consciousness of one’s motives).”¹⁵ The very diagnostic power of psychoanalysis, he now concludes, has the power to deprive writing of its desire by the definition it brings to both the desire which is to be repudiated and the desire which is to be embraced.

In developing his attempt to acknowledge and transcend the limitations of *Dusklands*, Coetzee started to consider the subject-position from which writing needs to emerge if it is to be “serious.” Consider this passage from the same notebook:

The novel is masculine in that it goes out and makes a story. Novel-reading is feminine in that its delights are the delights of having the story done to one. Now the perspective I am interested in is the latter: having the story done to one, but from inside the book. In other words, a feminine novel of things happening without the masculine story-twist. In the masculine novel, there is an ego ∇ being conducted. Identifying with the ego ∇ the reading is conducted and enjoys the passive experience. What I project is an ego ∇ 'in' the book waiting to be conducted, as the reader 'outside' the book usually waits to be conducted. Loosely, then, I am interested in a project not of 'writing' a book but of 'reading' a book.¹⁶

In attempting to occupy a position of female desire, as he conceives it, Coetzee wants to place himself, through his narrator, in a position of desiring which is released from the "masculine" demands of an emplotted story. He envisages a form of writing which takes the position of feminised reading, and thereby opens itself to the position of a subject which is not the phallic "subject supposed to know" who is "being conducted", but instead a "waiting to be conducted."

These reflections open a recognizable path to the handling of plot *In the Heart of the Country*, even though Coetzee is presently imagining the book as a story about a child rather than a young woman.¹⁷ And of course it also opens a path to the ambiguously female "little phallus" of the "Erasmus" essay. Yet a later passage in the notebook complicates this resolution:

I am suddenly hard up against the ultimate question. Desire. All my writing is a circling around and around the question of evocation, of bringing the object of desire under the illumination of desire, rather than ironised desire, which is a movement of distancing...In myself I find the following stages: (1) evocation: the listing of adjectives like 'slender', 'clear' attached to the object; (2) despair at evocation because it is a masturbation that works less and less. What one wants is to get through the paper. (I am no further here than I was with 'The Vietnam Project'). (3) Modification of attitude toward

disgust, weariness: emotions which are representable features of the subject 'I' rather than unrepresentable features of the object 'she'.

I can get nowhere until I have found out more about desire.¹⁸

Notice how the metaphor has changed: it is no longer the phallic versus the feminine; now it is the masturbatory versus a relation he cannot name ("I can get nowhere until I have found out more about desire"). His new concern is being trapped in a masturbatory paradigm, a way of containing desire by spending it upon oneself, which he obscurely connects with attempting to evoke the other in an adjectival way. Unproductive onanism appears to be a direct consequence of the feminised and readerly approach, for the next entry in the notebook reads as follows:

Another thing one gets dissatisfied with is being a passive central awareness rather than a central actor.¹⁹

Coetzee's own emerging practice thereby in certain ways clarifies but also subtilizes some of the more puzzling formulations in the "Erasmus" essay. That later text constructs quite a firm opposition between the phallic "subject supposed to know" and a writing which "keep[s] itself to the size of the woman's phallus", which is imagined as a receptive or ek-static subject position. Here Coetzee leads himself to recognize that if the former possesses its desire in too rigid a fashion, the latter, it would seem, can collapse into a masturbatory self-spending—which implies a conception of aesthetic disinterest as requiring a traversal of gendered roles and subject positions, rather than a secure inhabiting of any one of

them. Of course this may be precisely what the peculiar concept of a “little phallus” which is the “size of a woman’s” is trying to evoke. But what Coetzee’s composition notebooks illuminate is the necessary provisionality of any conceptualisation of aesthetic disinterest, due to that problematic economy of inside and outside which the “Erasmus” essay so deftly identifies.

*

If the story about Marcuse which I have recounted is therefore mainly a critical one, about an influence that Coetzee needed to challenge and overcome, Marcuse’s defining presence in his early writings nonetheless importantly set the terms for an astonishingly generative meditation on the relation between writing and desire, appreciation of which would only deepen with further attention to the later composition notebooks.

Marcuse’s conception of art was at once very elevated and very rigid, and Coetzee would need to puzzle out a more viable account of aesthetic disinterest from this overbearing and even, in its own way, decidedly “phallic” conception of art’s ultimate content and critical purpose. But what he took from Marcuse was nonetheless crucially important, and it included not only a distinctively post-Freudian idiom for thinking about writing in relation to the disclosure of desire, significant though that was. He also took from him an understanding that Kantian aesthetic theory, with its high notions of free play and disinterest, is at once indispensable

and inadequate, and that its central terms need to be confronted and reconsidered rather than repudiated.

¹Endnotes

However in philosophy this is increasingly not the case: see Thomas Hilgers' revival of Kantian terminology in *Aesthetic Disinterestedness: Art, Experience and the Self* (2017).

² I develop this point in *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* (2010), ch.5 to 7.

³ 'Obscenity and Pornography, MUSED Seminar', dated 3/4/74, typed; Harry Ransom Center (hereafter HRC) container 114.9.

⁴ 'Discarded first sketch of Vietnam Project', dated 1972-3, handwritten draft with light revisions; HRC container 33.2

⁵ See Schiller, *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, esp. letters 10-15.

⁶ The case against Schiller is made by David Lloyd in *Under Representation: the Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2017)

⁷ See Matherne and Riggall, "Schiller on Freedom and Aesthetic Value" for the phrase "volitional openness".

⁸ 'Small notebook', dated 16 March 1974—9 February 1976, handwritten with dated entries, this entry dated 28/6/74; HRC container 33.3.

⁹ Letter to "Pat & Wendy", dated 16th July 1974 [archival citation?]

¹⁰ 'Small notebook', entry dated 28/6/74; HRC container 33.3.

¹¹ See Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935).

¹² 'Discarded first sketch of Vietnam Project'; HRC container 33.2

¹³ 'Burning the Books (unrealized)', dated 1973-4, handwritten; HRC container 33.1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'Small notebook', entry dated 6/7/74; HRC container 33.3.

¹⁶ Ibid., entry dated 30/10/74.

¹⁷ The first concrete sign of the text we know comes in an entry dated just over a fortnight later, 15/11/74: "This afternoon my father brought his new bride home."

¹⁸ Ibid., entry dated 21/8/75.

¹⁹ Ibid., entry dated 24/8/75.

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