J.M. Coetzee and the Christian Tradition:

Navigating Religious Legacies in the Novel

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Abstract

This thesis examines how J.M. Coetzee's engagement with Christian thinkers and concepts has shaped his fiction. Through a series of close readings, I show how Coetzee, who does not identify as a Christian, reworks and reimagines concepts from key Christian interlocutors across his writings. Each close reading is informed by a consideration of what Coetzee had himself been reading during the writing process, based on evidence in interviews, essays, monographs, and archival materials. Attending to Coetzee's reading and writing, together, illuminates the distinctively self-conscious nature of his engagement with Christianity. Whereas current Coetzee criticism has given attention to specific Christian themes and lexical choices in his fiction, this thesis demonstrates that Coetzee's engagement with Christianity is more profound and pervasive than has been credited hitherto. In addition to the vast body of allusion to Scripture in his writings, Christian thinkers have in fact played a major role in his innovative approach to the novel, a genre predominantly forged in Christian contexts, and in his handling of narrative more generally. Through its explication of Coetzee's extensive dialogue with Christian thinking, and with the Bible, across the full span of his career, this thesis seeks to describe the nuanced and diverse ways in which Coetzee's writings have revised and reimagined this vast and complex religious legacy.

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Introduction

For an academic and writer who earned his doctorate in America during the 1960s, the seriousness of J.M. Coetzee's (1940 -) engagement with Christianity may initially appear surprising. Although Coetzee does not claim to be religious, from the start of his career his fictions have incorporated an unusually rich array of Christian idioms, concepts, scriptural allusions, and narrative structures.[1] At a time when the "secularization thesis," as it became known, had attained a *de facto* position of intellectual orthodoxy on matters of religion, Coetzee began writing fictions that specifically engaged with Christian texts and thinkers. Yet his dialogue with Christianity has not been understood within the available literary criticism either in its scale or in its full complexity.

Coetzee's engagement with Christianity does not amount to anything as coherent or schematic as a "project," and it has shifted very markedly over time. But nonetheless, it is useful at the outset to consider one instance in which he himself drew attention to the complexity of his approach to religion in a specific way. In the introduction to *Giving Offense* (1996), Coetzee pointedly – though ambiguously – described himself in relation to "[r]ational, secular intellectuals," pointing out that "I myself am (and am also, I would hope, to a degree not) an intellectual of this kind" (3, 5). In a characteristically Coetzeean form of serious play, he went on to claim that, for such intellectuals, "reason" has gained a status of omnipotence as the "unframed framer," recalling Aristotle's formulation of God as the

[1] Coetzee's most direct public comment about his own relation to Christianity was, to my knowledge, in *Doubling the Point* (1992), "As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet" (250).

"unmoved mover"[2] and Derrida's "unnamed namer."[3] As such, this conception of reason has become "a form of power with no in-built sense of what the experience of powerlessness might be like" (4). In distinguishing himself from this foundationalist approach to secular rationality, Coetzee drew attention to a central characteristic of his approach to religion that – for all the variability of his concerns across the span of his *oeuvre* – would remain consistent.

The approach to secular rationality that Coetzee separates himself from, albeit equivocally, was shaped by a foundational adherence to the secularization thesis, which had developed from the early sociological works of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim and gained prominence in the academy, especially in the West, during the 1950s and 1960s. In its most extreme form, the secularization thesis predicted that the spread of modernization would necessarily result in the decline and even elimination of religion, on both individual and societal levels. By this account, religion is understood as a single, homogenous entity constituted of acts, stories, and beliefs that fill out gaps in knowledge. The claim is optimistic about the capacity of reason to generate narratives and systems of knowledge that comprehensively map life, and thereby eliminate any need for religious gap-filling, as is clearly displayed in the writings of one of secularization's more angular proponents, Richard Dawkins.

In *The God Delusion* (2006), Dawkins dismissively identifies Christianity in its entirety with superstition and the restriction of thought. He offers a series of provocative

[2] In his *Physics*, Aristotle asserts, "It is evident then that the prime mover is unmoved; for whether that which is moved by something leads straight to the first unmoved mover, or to something that is in motion but moves and stops itself, in either case the first mover involved by all the things that are in motion is itself not in motion. […] Since motion must be eternal, there must be one or more first movers; and the first mover is unchangeable" (VIII 258b4-8, 10-11).

[3] This is a reference to Derrida's "The *Retrait* of Metaphor," which was originally delivered as a lecture in 1978, and in which he describes Heidegger's "trenchant decision to call *Aufriss*," in his performative writing, that which "was in a certain way still unnamed or unknown under its name" and thus "is already in itself an incision," which "can be named, self-named, and breached/broached only in its own writing." Derrida elaborates upon this problem of naming, in Heidegger's account, saying, "Traditional names have always arrested the essence in this or that aspect or predicate." Quoting Heidegger, he explains, "'the unity of the being of *Sprache* for which we are looking shall be called *Aufriss*' […] And better yet, it is not called, this name, but it calls us […]" (*Psyche* 76).

examples to support his claims, such as an imaginary intelligent design theorist who proclaims, "If you don't understand how something works, never mind: just give up and say God did it […] Don't squander precious ignorance by researching it away. We need those glorious gaps as a last refuge for God" (159). In his at times overheated expositions, Dawkins does not seem to recognize the provenance of the conversionary logic that structures his proselytizing zeal for secularity: "If this book works as I intend," he claims, "religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down" (28). His zeal for protecting modes of inquiry and conceptions of truth from the supposedly pernicious effects of "superstition" leaves little room for a more nuanced awareness of the variety of phenomena and beliefs identified as "religious," not to mention their varied social functions, or indeed how his own religious heritage may have influenced his proselytizing approach to scientific notions of truth. Even as Dawkins proclaims his desire for the conversion of his own readers, upon encountering the truths that he holds sacred, he places himself in a distinctly messianic role.

This thesis will show that, by contrast, Coetzee has in general been wary about any form of thinking that purports to resolve life's complexities into a systematic or totalizing view. His fictions tend to resist endorsing any interpretive position from which readers might presume to distinguish the elect (the "open-minded" and "intelligent") from the reprobate ("dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads" (*The God Delusion* 29)). Nor has Coetzee shared the elevated view of reason assumed by Dawkins and the baldest forms of the secularization thesis, wherein reason would ultimately be able to provide an account of human existence beyond which nothing would remain unknown, unknowable.

In recent decades the secularization thesis has been re-evaluated, and it is often now discussed with greater nuance. A turning point in its reception history was marked by the publication of "Secularism in Retreat" (1996), in which the sociologist of religion Peter

Berger publically reversed his earlier adherence to this thesis. The 9/11 and 7/7 terror attacks in New York and London are but two prominent examples showing that modernization has by no means resulted in any simple subtraction of religion. Rather, with modernization, religious beliefs and practices have morphed and intersected with unprecedented plurality in common public spaces. It has become increasingly clear that differing beliefs and visions of the world are politically freighted, and do not always readily co-exist. This, in turn, has prompted critical inquiry by those such as Jürgen Habermas into how differences of belief might be held together in shared social spaces. Although Coetzee's own engagement with these questions predates this field of enquiry, which has at times been labeled "post-secularism," the recent works of two philosophers, Charles Taylor and Mark C. Taylor, are useful in setting out a broad outline of the more nuanced intellectual terrain in which Coetzee's approach to Christianity takes place.

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor offers a complex, historicizing account of secularization as the decline of a more monolithic Christendom. He argues that, generally, contemporary civic "norms and principles" do indeed less frequently "refer us to God or to any religious beliefs" (2). In place of one legislated divine will, citizens are increasingly bound to various rationalities, connected with the various social spheres in which they participate. Additionally, he argues that in Western European countries there has been a decline of religious identification and church attendance, and in all of these ways secularization has been undeniable. Yet, to Taylor's mind, these more subtractionary modes of secularization also contribute to a countermovement, in which these empirical changes in fact expand "conditions of belief" by enabling greater individual responsibility and choice. Instead of being state-sanctioned or socially-prescribed, religious belief is now less likely to go "unchallenged," or to be seen as "unproblematic," which can serve to expand the modes available for exercising faith itself. For, rather than being inscribed as fact, or law, religious

belief is increasingly "understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (3).

Coetzee's fiction takes up a complex place within the secularizing pressures that Taylor describes. In what follows, I will show that his fictions often work with a skeptical energy, so as to destabilize and demystify Christian mores, concepts, and narrative structures. But they do so in a way that is by no means exclusively defined by the form of secular rationality that – as we saw above – Coetzee in certain ways distrusts. To risk one broad generalization: these are texts whose processes of citation, allusion, and self-questioning are such that readers might attain greater awareness of their own religious and nonreligious beliefs, as conscious options rather than as given truths, which never remain unchallenged or unproblematic.

Charles Taylor describes one of the main religious conditions that this secular age distinctively makes available as "believing without belonging."[4] As Taylor puts it, with the decline of Christendom, "the tight normative link between a certain religious identity, the belief in certain theological propositions, and a standard practice, no longer holds for great numbers of people." As a result, "Many of these [people] are engaged in assembling their own personal outlook, through a kind of 'bricolage'" (514). The kind of self-destabilization that Taylor describes as a general historical phenomenon is an effect that Coetzee's fiction – to risk another generalization – tends to encourage and even to cultivate. His writings accomplish this, in part, through sustainedly drawing attention to the often distinctly Christian legacies that shape apparently secular ways of orienting ourselves in the world.

There is also a certain likeness between the narrative processes that I will describe in Coetzee's fiction and the theory of religion developed by Mark C. Taylor, in *After God* (2007). In this book Mark Taylor attempts to parse (and then, ideally, better integrate)

[4] He borrows this phrase from Grace Davie, see also: *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (1994).

secular and religious aspects of life. It is my observation that Taylor tends to theorize religion as a source of narrative aids for living well, and in so doing he extends the longstanding liberal tradition that has developed from Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* (1873). He sets out by clarifying two central terms: religiosity and religion. Taylor contrasts these terms by claiming, "religiosity […] privileges simplicity, security, and certainty over complexity, insecurity, and uncertainty," whereas "religion" engages experience through narrative in a more compelling and open-ended way (4). Specifically, "religion" describes an "emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals" that function in two apparently contradictory modes. In the first mode, they "figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose," whereas in the second, they "disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure" (12). Held together, in a double-movement, these oppositional modes enable a more flexible and active variety of religious engagement with the complexities of life. Taylor's distinctions, firstly between religiosity and religion, but then also between the component parts of religion's double-movement, resonate with what I will describe, later in this thesis, as Coetzee's doubling and disfiguring engagement with Christianity.

In Coetzee's earliest fictions, his engagement with Christianity is largely aimed at demystifying representations of "religiosity," in relation to the mingling of religion and politics in South Africa. But gradually, and in an uncertain trajectory, his writings expand to include the range of narrative capacities that Taylor associates with "religion." However, by contrast with Mark Taylor's account of religion, which prioritizes its use-value as providing narrative and symbolic systems, Coetzee's fictions tend to emphasize a much less familiar series of concepts, idioms, and (especially) narrative strategies from negative theology and Christian existentialist writers. I will show that, in so doing, these fictions aim to point

beyond the capacities of representational systems, and thus beyond Taylor's rather narrowly prudential account of religion's utility.

One of my arguments in what follows will be that Coetzee's writings at times work to reorient religious attitudes and concepts toward embodied life, as that which in some way exceeds narrative representation, and is other to the ordering processes of myth and narrative. At times this takes the form of drawing attention to the perpetual possibilities of subconscious motivations that may lurk behind actions, as well as the irrational and at times unsavory nature of desires. In a more enchanted mode, it can involve an attunement to what might provisionally be called the existential fullness of moment-by-moment life—though to name the kind of attention to alterity generated by Coetzee's writings in these terms is already to belie it, perhaps even to convert it into a form of secularized "religiosity."

The more enchanted aspect of Coetzee's engagement with Christianity is less reminiscent of Arnold than of a predecessor in the liberal theological tradition, widely recognized as its founder, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Not only did Schleiermacher famously defend against an Enlightenment reduction of religion to moral or rational teachings, but in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers* (1799), he describes religion as a particular mode of knowledge, or discernment, in which the imagination is crucial. He specifically emphasizes art as that which shares with religion a capacity to ignite the imagination with transformative effects saying:

> Indeed, if it is true that there are quick conversions, occasions by which, for someone who thought of nothing less than rising above the finite, the sense of the universe opens up, in a moment as if through an immediate inner illumination, and surprises a person with its splendor, then I believe that more than anything else the sight of great and sublime works of art can achieve this miracle. (68)

While I will show that Coetzee is skeptical about any capacity for "rising above the finite," this emphasis on art's transformative potential for reorienting the imagination becomes increasingly central to Coetzee's engagement with Christian legacies. Indeed, this is

particularly evident in his two most recent texts, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), texts that have done much to enable a revised understanding of Christianity throughout his diverse *oeuvre*.

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Although every major monograph on Coetzee has included at least some attention to his engagement with Christianity, there has yet to be a monograph-length enquiry into this topic. The paucity of understanding surrounding this theme has become increasingly evident through the reception of Coetzee's "Jesus" fictions. Like the man whose name they take, these fictions have repeatedly been heralded as anomalous, unprecedented, and mysterious, even uniquely sacred or religious amongst Coetzee's works. While there is something anomalous and unprecedented about each of Coetzee's fictions, there is also a sense in which each new text enables us to see something important but submerged about the earlier work.

At times the available criticism on Coetzee's engagement with Christianity has been held back by a lack of historical awareness about Christianity itself. In Vincent P. Pecora's account, *Secularization without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee* (2015), Coetzee's writings are understood as a "spiritual autobiography" that translates "supposedly outmoded conceptions" from Christianity in order to produce them "anew, reinvented, in and because of the decidedly secular prose of a most secular age" (150, 166). I show that there is something rather different at stake in Coetzee's engagement with Christianity. Namely, that his fiction engages with, and extends, a long tradition of storytellers, reaching back beyond Augustine and Jesus, who have creatively reshaped available religious resources in relation to their own historical moments to expand, nourish, and repair spiritual life through storytelling.

This claim also contrasts with Justin Neuman's account of Coetzee's fiction, in *Fiction Beyond Secularism* (2014). Neuman claims that Coetzee's fictions are "the

purposeful and systematic articulation of a tragic theology," which fails to represent or advocate human flourishing. He establishes his argument in readings "centered on a group of world-renouncing and self-mortifying protagonists" that he calls "Coetzee's prophets of asceticism" (53). Yet Coetzee's protagonists are neither inspired teachers nor high-minded ascetics; they are all-too-human characters, often groping with limited resources through contingency, self-deception, failure, and disgrace. So whereas Neuman identifies the "*via negativa*" of Coetzee's "theology" with protagonists that model asceticism, I show that Coetzee draws upon resources from negative theology to stage the failure of narrative before the complexities of embodied life for characters and readers alike (94). Instead of presenting exemplary protagonists or offering sacralized sources of truth, Coetzee's fictions tend instead to engage with Christianity in ways that disturb the protagonists' expectations and presuppositions, and perhaps also our own. Rather than alleviating readers' interpretive responsibility, these stories actually position readers to expand their interpretive capacities through relating to narratives that refuse to simply sanction any single perspective.

Identifying the import of Coetzee's religious engagement with his storytelling also draws attention to the various ways in which other critics have provided more specific forms of insight into Coetzee's use of Christian concepts, terms, and narrative structures. David Attwell noted Coetzee's engagement with Calvinism, in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993), while making the larger argument that, "Coetzee might be taken to hold that the *writer inhabits narrative discourse*" and "narrative is itself a historical product, existing in tension with other discourses of the moment that are also the products of history and the bearers of culture" (13). In *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (2015), Attwell has expanded the focus of this observation, arguing that:

> From the linguistics of the period when he was a graduate student, the late 1960s, when American structuralism was giving way to transformational grammar, [Coetzee] derived the broad idea that we have limited power over the cultural systems we inhabit, that language speaks through us. (9)

These observations of Coetzee's historical conception of language certainly inform my own close readings of the Christian registers incorporated across Coetzee's fictions. As I will demonstrate, each of Coetzee's main Christian interlocutors was influential in shaping – or responding to – cultural systems, through writing.

Carrol Clarkson has persuasively argued, in *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009), that "self-reflexive linguistic questions are at the core of [Coetzee's] ethical enquiries" (16). I show that Coetzee's engagement with Christianity specifically expands his understanding of the linguistic resources on which he relies, in writing fiction and reading life. In addition to which, as I am not the first to point out, Coetzee's engagement with Christianity is specifically shaped by what Clarkson calls his "insistence on the ethical value of providing the means of interrogating one's existence" (179).

In *J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (2014), Jarad Zimbler began tracing what he identified as the development of a "spiritual register" and "Christian lexicon" in Coetzee's middle novels (169). He insightfully observed that, in "the context of South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s," Coetzee's use of religious language implies:

> something has happened that cannot be grasped in the terms chosen by the 'secular authorities' […] something has departed from the world, whether this is *charity* or *grace* or even *truth*, which suggests that there is a lack not only of a religiosity but also of what we might call a moral lexicon and indeed a moral sensibility.

Zimbler argues that Coetzee's inclusion of apparently archaic religious registers draws attention to a lost "sense of the world's depth and of ourselves" (198). This thesis expands upon that observation, complicates it, and shows that Coetzee's fictions have in fact incorporated a "spiritual register" and "Christian lexicon" from the start.

As Derek Attridge observed in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004):

> In his reaching for a register that escapes the terminology of the administered society Coetzee has often turned to religious discourse, and there is a continuity among

> several of his characters who find that, although they apparently have no orthodox religious beliefs, they cannot talk about the lives they lead without such language. (180)

Coetzee's engagement with Christianity certainly provides him with registers of language for pointing to ways in which life exceeds narrative representation. Yet, as Attridge implies elsewhere, at other times Coetzee's engagement with Christian discourse is itself an engagement with "the administered society." Indeed, at such times Christian discourse provides the means by which Coetzee endeavors to expose the banal forms of evil associated with deferring moral responsibility to systems of authority sanctioned by God, Scripture, or even commonplace conceptions of good and evil.

In *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* (2010), Patrick Hayes repeatedly notes how biblical allusions contribute to the ways in which Coetzee's fictions attempt to "de-homogenize the concepts that differently positioned readers bring to the text, and thereby to hold open, and place in dialogue, divergent legacies of political thinking" (4). This thesis aims to expand awareness of Coetzee's negotiation of Christian legacies as inextricable from that process. For the influence of Christianity in the development of Western civilization extends to include a wide array of historical events, sensibilities, and ideas that continue to inflect the very structures of language and desire that Coetzee makes central to his writing project. By extending current considerations of Coetzee's engagement with Christian legacies, this thesis seeks to expand critical awareness of the interpretive options Coetzee's fiction works to keep open.

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The unveiling of the J.M. Coetzee Papers collection at the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center, in 2013, provided unprecedented access to notes from Coetzee's own

readings, across his writing life.[5] Informed by fresh archival materials, I have identified five key interlocutors that mediate Coetzee's engagement with Christianity: John Calvin, René Girard, Rudolf Bultmann, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Jesus. Rather than attempting to offer exhaustive "coverage" of Coetzee's diverse *oeuvre*, I have focused on those texts that have been most shaped by dialogue with these interlocutors, or which ask the most powerful questions about them.

While the balance of archival material, and the pattern of allusions in Coetzee's essays, suggests that his engagement with Christianity has been prominently mediated through these figures, it is also the case that Coetzee's engagement with each figure has been transmitted through interpretive communities and traditions. Naturally, this is particularly the case with Calvin and Jesus, and my discussion of these figures takes place through a range of sources, from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) to nineteenth-century "lives of Jesus" narratives. There is also a very significant body of commentary on Dostoevsky that Coetzee was aware of, and which I have considered carefully. At times, as in the case of Mikhail Bahktin, the commentator possibly becomes more of an interlocutor than the source text.

Furthermore, there is a much more diffuse way in which Coetzee's dialogue with Christianity has taken place, which cuts across all his work, and is the subject of no one chapter alone. This is his close familiarity, which this thesis will make evident in its extent and depth, with the language and stories of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. No small part of my research has been the examination of literally hundreds of allusions to Scripture that emerge across his writing, from the very earliest texts to the latest.

By no means do I wish to suggest that the research I offer on these major interlocutors provides exclusive access to authoritative truths about Coetzee's body of fiction. For if the

[5] As the collection's Finding Aid explains, only the materials in Containers 1-32 were previously available at Harvard's Houghton Library, which excludes the notebooks of writing ideas, business correspondence, and "Record of Reading" from which I primarily draw (found in Containers 33, 69, and 99).

process of reading in Coetzee's tracks, guided by evidence from his own published writings and notebooks of writing ideas, expands awareness of the voices inflecting his fictions, it also makes clear that any perception of other voices is mediated, not least by what Quentin Skinner describes in "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" (1969) as "the unconscious application of paradigms[,] the familiarity of which, to the historian, disguises an essential inapplicability to the past" (32). Yet I show that this problem of engaging with any other voice, as truly other, is itself at the heart of Coetzee's engagement with Christianity in his fictions.

In Chapter One, I demonstrate that in his earliest fictions, Coetzee's engagement with Christianity was primarily oriented toward demystifying Calvinist legacies in literature and in life. The works of sociologist Max Weber were formative in Coetzee's early understanding of how Christian legacies contributed to the repressiveness of social structures not only in South Africa, but also in America, Europe, and the novels that circulated between them. Informed by Weber, Coetzee's engagement with Christian language and concepts in *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) contributed to a larger effort at demythologizing relations between narratives and life by exposing how conflations between them disguised and sanctioned an exercise of power. However, I also show that in writing *In the Heart of the Country,* Coetzee would find narrative strategies for imagining the possibility, and the desire, to get beyond the constraints of self-interest and self-contained narrative in the Christian existentialists Søren Kierkegaard and Rudolf Bultmann.

In Chapter Two I turn to examine Coetzee's engagement with René Girard, in the context of his increasing attention to Christianity's creative potential for crafting narratives aimed at expanding available modes of interpretation. Particularly in Girard's concept of conversion as a narrative structure, Coetzee recognized a paradigm that he could reimagine to facilitate his own literary innovations. From Coetzee's notebooks of writing ideas for

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) and *Foe* (1986), I show that each of these fictions reimagines the narrative structure of conversion in a process that entails demystifying key Christian presuppositions about truth and subjectivity that are also commonly accepted as natural by secular rationality. Instead of revivifying the Christian paradigm of conversion, Coetzee re-conceptualizes its foundational assumptions. He specifically reorients revised aspects of this paradigm to depict characters being overwhelmed and changed by encounters not with divine grace, but with processes that – while resistant to conceptualization – are associated with the experience of embodiment. Moreover, I show that Coetzee's shifting engagement with Christianity contributes to a shift in the ways he conceptualizes his writing: for the figure of Girard is one of the key interlocutors in his important essay on the "nonposition" taken by Erasmus's text, *The Praise of Folly* (1511).

In Chapter Three I explore certain ways in which Coetzee further develops the concept of a conversionary literature in relation to the negative theology of Rudolf Bultmann. While writing *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), Coetzee had been reading Bultmann's *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (1941), which deploys "form criticism" in its biblical interpretation to argue that the Gospel of John stages a dialectical reading experience in order to invite readers to encounter the divine as that which exceeds narration. I show that *Michael K* diffusely incorporates concepts and narrative strategies that Bultmann had explicated in order to figure and stage the failure of biographical conventions before the complexity and contingency of embodied life.

It is in examining Coetzee's engagement with Fyodor Dostoevsky, in Chapter Four, that we see him put this re-conception of what is held sacred, now oriented toward choice and the fullness of embodied life, to the test through reimagining the classic Christian problem of theodicy. This test is staged as Coetzee reimagines Dostoevsky's dialogism more deeply into the body, first in *Age of Iron* (1990) and then in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), depicting

author-characters who are certainly not prophets, but inextricably and blindly enmeshed in embodied dialogue with the world around them. To different degrees and in different ways, each fiction challenges more familiar distinctions between writing and life, self and others, private and public, as well as mind and body, in narrative worlds that resist the possibility of identifying any sacrosanct sphere. As author-characters and their writings are shown to be dialogically connected to violence and violation, even to evil, Coetzee confronts readers with the choice, the responsibility, for determining what is, if not sacred, then good, or valuable, in the life of a writer, and the life of writing.

In Chapter Five, the thesis culminates by attending to Coetzee's engagement with Jesus in his most recent fictions. I approach *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* through the conceptual tools that this thesis shows Coetzee to have developed through his engagements with Calvin, Bultmann, Girard, and Dostoevsky. In so doing, I show how these texts intensify demands for interpretive responsibility, and choice, through their prominent references to the sacred figure of Jesus. By making use of a wide array of available narratives about Jesus, in stories that include no character by that name, Coetzee draws attention both to historical shifts in the reception history of Jesus, and to the ways that the stories of Jesus continue to inflect powerful interpretive assumptions and valuations in everyday life. Furthermore, I conclude that these stories distinctly (if obliquely) reveal Coetzee's attempt to contribute to and revise a storytelling heritage that extends to include the Scriptures themselves: a heritage of reshaping the available modes of discernment, which in turn impact behavior. Moreover, this insight itself might effect changes in the shape of Coetzee criticism, which has to date tended to understate the religious aspect of Coetzee's fiction.

I.

"The spirit of Geneva triumphant in Africa":

Calvinist Legacies and the Early Fiction

At the 1988 Weekly Mail Book Week in Cape Town, Coetzee delivered a speech featuring his most direct public discussion of Christianity. In that speech, which Anton Harber would later describe as "one of the most electric encounters in literary South Africa," Coetzee excoriated the Book Week organizers for their decision to disinvite Salman Rushdie in response to Islamic fundamentalist threats against his life, following on Rushdie's recent publication of *The Satanic Verses* ("Clash of the Booker Titans"). Coetzee's speech connected what he perceived to be the cowardice of the organizers with a history of Calvinist fundamentalism that had sanctioned the very problem this literary festival aimed to address—namely, "Censorship under the State of Emergency." Although he later questioned his decision to publicly castigate the Congress of South African Writers, Coetzee's discussion of fundamentalism usefully illuminates his approach to Calvinism in his earliest fictions, *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977).[6]

In his Book Week speech, Coetzee linked the Islamic fundamentalist threats against Rushdie with the strand of Calvinist fundamentalism that had provided theological justifications for apartheid in South Africa by saying, "We know about religious

[6] As Peter D. McDonald recounts, "Indeed, after the fatwa was pronounced in February 1989 and the full implications of the 'Rushdie Affair' became more apparent, [Coetzee] began to question the validity of his own unyieldingly principled position" (*The Literature Police* 214).

fundamentalism in South Africa. Calvinist fundamentalism has been an unmitigated force of benightedness in our history." By Coetzee's account, the connection between these vastly divergent religious commitments was identifiable in their shared approach to embodied life:

> Lebanon, Israel, Ireland, South Africa, wherever there is a bleeding sore on the body of the world, the same hard-eyed narrow-minded fanatics are busy, indifferent to life, in love with death. Behind them always come the mullahs, the rabbis, the predikante ([Dutch Calvinist] ministers), giving their blessings.

Coetzee expressly connects these various "fundamentalisms" not through their doctrines, but through a posture or sensibility that is "indifferent to life," to the point of sanctioning death. To his mind, these qualities also characterize the fundamentalist approach to writing. It is in describing the threat that fundamentalism poses to writing that Coetzee comes closest to providing a definition for his term "fundamentalism":

> There is nothing more inimical to writing than the spirit of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism abhors the play of signs, the endlessness of writing. Fundamentalism means nothing more or less than going back to an origin and staying there. It stands for one founding book and thereafter no more books. As the various books of the various fundamentalisms, each claiming to be the one true book, fantasise themselves to be signed in fire or engraved in stone, so they aspire to strike dead every rival book, petrifying the sinuous, protean, forward-gliding life of the letters on their pages, turning them into physical objects to be anathematised, things of horror not to be touched, not to be looked upon.

By this account, what connects the "various fundamentalisms" is a common mode of privileging a single narrative over life. The "spirit of fundamentalism" is manifested in a posture of deference before one narrative as indisputably authoritative for ordering and categorizing the life of the body as well as the life of letters.

Coetzee's description of fundamentalism may recall the discussion in my Introduction of Mark C. Taylor's account of religiosity. As opposed to religion, Taylor characterized "religiosity" as a force of "simplicity, security, and certainty over complexity, insecurity, and uncertainty" (4). In this chapter, I will examine biblical allusions and Calvinistic resonances in *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* to show how they specifically contribute to the affective force of these books' resistance to any reading that would submit the worlds they

represent to one certain, stable, or authoritative narrative. Although critics have long recognized some engagement with Calvinism in Coetzee's early works, a more sustained examination will bring the skeptical energies of his early writings into sharper focus.[7] Toward that end, I now turn to look at Coetzee's engagement with Calvinism in a general sense, with particular reference to *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), before then examining the more diffuse ways that *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* critically expose this posture and sensibility.

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Coetzee's first critical compendium, *White Writing,* expressly examines "the ideas, the great intellectual schemas, through which South Africa has been thought by Europe," and in the process it makes reference to Calvinism in each chapter (10). By Coetzee's account, "white writing" does not describe a racially delineated literature, but rather a body of literature "generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African" (11). To put it otherwise, *White Writing* conducts an excavation of sensibilities and presuppositions from Coetzee's own discursive heritage, which makes Coetzee's recurring discussions of Calvinism all the more significant.[8]

While Calvinism is, itself, a wide tradition, in *White Writing*, Coetzee's conception of Calvinism was clearly informed by Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Weber's influential thesis argued that the *ethos* of his own historical

[7] Susan VanZanten Gallagher's *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (1991) provides the most sustained attention to date of Calvinism in Coetzee's first novels. She describes this engagement as a response to context, not as a literary resource. Anna M. Louw, in her book review "*In the Heart of the Country*: A Calvinist Allegory?" usefully identifies evidence of a peculiarly local Calvinism, but her conclusion that the story should thus be read as a Calvinist allegory or metaphor risks foreclosing broader interpretive possibilities—possibilities that the text holds open.

[8] Coetzee would describe this early impulse to dissect his own literary heritage, and familiarize himself with the discursive resources on which his writing relied, in an interview in *Doubling the Point* (1992), as a commitment to "demystification […] a procedure of taking apart things—myths, tropes, rhetorical figures—to show how they work" (105).

situation had been significantly shaped by Calvinist legacies. To his mind, the Protestant Reformation had catalyzed a transference of medieval monastic asceticism into everyday life. This democratization of asceticism had come to bind those born into modern capitalist societies to the "technical and economic conditions of machine production," which Weber evocatively described as an "iron cage" (181). The binding agent, in Weber's account, was an *ethos* specifically generated by Calvinist Protestantism, through the spread of individualist anxieties over salvation: anxieties over one's place in the divine narrative of history.

Weber claimed that these anxieties had shaped a habit of perpetual mental accounting aimed at assuring oneself that the evidence of divine grace in one's life outweighed the evidence of sin. As Weber put it, "the doctrine of predestination" had created "the dogmatic background of the Puritan morality," which resulted in more pervasive habits of "methodically rationalized ethical conduct" (125). In view of a democratized sense of vocation, labor itself gained centrality as a source for evidence of divine grace. Moreover, Weber believed that this affectively charged valuation of labor had extended far beyond the religious commitments from which it had developed—as was, to his mind, most acutely evident in that pinnacle of capitalism, the United States.

Coetzee's allusions to Weber's thesis, in *White Writing*, contribute to his analysis of the special significance that labor had attained in narrative justifications for "Christian" settlers taking possession of the land of South Africa. In Coetzee's account, "the Enlightenment simply replaced the old condemnation of idleness as disobedience to God with an emphasis on work as a duty owed by man to himself and his neighbor […] through work man becomes master of the world" (21). By drawing on Weber's logic, Coetzee conducted literary readings that draw attention to the elision of black laborers in colonial photography and in white writings through representational gestures that subtly, perhaps even

subconsciously, provide self-justifications for the exercise of power over other people and their lands.

One of the crucial observations that Weber had made was that, whereas in Calvin's writings divine election is a grace that necessarily remains a mystery, for successive Calvinists that uncertainty was too difficult to bear. What would have been clear to an author of Afrikaner descent, and has been made more widely recognizable through recent historical works, was that South African apartheid applied ethnic markers to the Calvinist concept of election to establish with certainty the Afrikaners' position as "Elect." According to Hermann Giliomee, in the early European settlement of South Africa, "the notion [had] developed among the burghers that some kind of covenant existed with God to preserve this community with its cultural characteristics" (*The Afrikaners* 42). That this was self-evident to Coetzee can be seen from *White Writing*, where he specifically describes:

> the homegrown Calvinist myth in which the Afrikaner has his type in the Israelite, tender of flocks, seeker after a promised national homeland, member of an elect race (*volk*) set apart from the tribes of the idolatrous, living by simple and not-to-be questioned commandments, afflicted by an inscrutable Godhead with trials whose purpose is to test his faith and his fitness for election. (118)

Coetzee clearly recognized that Calvinism had contributed to a discourse of power in South Africa by furnishing narrative justifications for apartheid. In addition to which, he was observably aware of the mediated nature of this political appropriation of the doctrine of election as a "homegrown Calvinist myth."

If this myth distorts the logic of Calvin's own description of Divine Election, it perhaps does so with reference to another central doctrine that John Calvin (1509-1564) had explicated in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536): the doctrine of Scripture. In Calvin's account, Scripture is the primary source of divine revelation, and uniquely undistorted by the corruption of sin. Indeed, Scripture alone provides an authoritative corrective to the distortions of sin:

> Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume […] can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. (I.vi.1)

What makes this privileging of Scripture – to reveal truth, to reveal God – noteworthy is the way in which it participates in and reflects a wider sensibility of the sacred autonomy that narratives can have over lived experience: a sensibility grotesquely evident in the apartheid narrative's mapping of human lives. The possibility is implicitly raised that approaching Scripture as a uniquely authoritative repository of truth about the meaning and significance of life might cultivate a habit of displacing one's own interpretive responsibilities.

When, in *White Writing*, Coetzee describes the Calvinist myth through which Afrikaner nationalists read their lives, this is very likely to be no dead metaphor. Instead, it provides a pointed example of a wider sensibility for approaching representational narrative (whether in history, biography, or even the realist novel) that Coetzee's early works resist.[9] This is the sensibility that facilitates what Coetzee identifies, in "Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style" (1973), as narrative's capacity "to assert [itself] as illusion, as The Word in all its magical autonomy" (*Doubling the Point* 43).

We know that at least by the 1980s, Coetzee had read Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) with interest, in which Watt expressly relies on Weber's thesis to describe the development of the realist novel as shaped by a Protestant emphasis on "individualism" (*Doubling the Point* 86).[10] As Watt puts it:

> Two aspects of this new Protestant emphasis—the tendency to increase consciousness of the self as a spiritual entity, and the tendency to a kind of democratization of the moral and social outlook—are particularly important […] to the development of the presuppositions on which the formal realism of the novel is based. (74)

[9] In this paper, the term "history" is informed by Hayden White's description of a "historical work" as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model or icon of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing* them" (2).

[10] From Coetzee's archived "Record of Reading," from the 1970s-1980s, we also know that he had returned to Ian Watt's "Serious Reflections on *The Rise of the Novel*" (1968).

With these connections in mind, I now turn to *Dusklands*, where we find clear juxtapositions between what Coetzee was reading about nationalist mythology, Calvinist Protestantism, and the presuppositions of the realist mode that his early works so staunchly resist.

Calvinism and Nationalist Mythology in *Dusklands*

An early draft for what would become *Dusklands* also alludes to Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. At this stage in the writing process the story differs dramatically from what we find in the published book, as it centers on conversations between one Mrs. C---- and her counselor in the American Northeast. The topics of their conversations extend to include the plight of bored suburban housewives, romanticized as the "vanguard" for an increasingly labor-free humanity. In the counselor's account, these women are to be heralded as the first to experience a condition that can hardly be borne by a population of "slaves to the Protestant ethic, which we shoved down their throats at school: idleness is evil, happiness is to be found in a steady job" ("Discarded First Sketch of Vietnam Project: 1972-1973" 61-2). While it would certainly be imprudent to read this allusion into the final publication, by viewing it alongside *White Writing* we can see that in the period surrounding his early fictions, Coetzee was specifically thinking about Calvinism, as mediated through Weber's thesis, in relation to certain ideas, beliefs, mores, and sensibilities that had come to permeate public and private life in America and colonial South Africa alike.

Coetzee wrote *Dusklands* between 1970 and 1973, initially from America during the Vietnam War, but completing it in South Africa (Kannemeyer 203, 243). He composed the two superficially disparate main parts of this fiction as set in South Africa and America, by writing each from the inverse location. The narratives of these two main sections span more than two hundred years, and no explanation is provided of what connects them; instead there

is a gap between the two main parts, and this gap is the most prominent instance of an array of narrative limits, failures, and contradictions that pepper this text.

Archived copies of Coetzee's letters to potential publishers for "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," the story that would become the second half of *Dusklands,* repeatedly identify the value of this fiction in relation to the psychology it reveals—that invisible and protean quality which holds together the variations of a living person, a body, over time. In a letter dated "December 3, 1971," addressed to "Messrs. Calder & Boyars, Ltd" in London, Coetzee presents this as a work "of no historical value, in the narrower sense, but [which] does trace a line between so called autonomous fictions and the psychology of the conquistador" ("1969 – March 1976").[11] I will show that this thematic continuity that Coetzee identifies, of tracing a particular psychology, is expressly sustained between the sections, even though the "conquistador" psychology investigated in "The Vietnam Project" is located in Middle America and oriented inwards, through an intensified focus on one character's imagination of myths and their impact in establishing American authority in the minds and hearts of the Vietnamese.

The very layout of *Dusklands* leads readers through narratives that are each identified as successively older than the last; in doing so, the reading process parodies a peeling away of textual layers in pursuit of historical truths in which we too become the veritable conquistador approaching strange literary lands. This reading process thereby invites a measure of destabilizing participation in the endeavor it portrays of, as Eugene Dawn puts it, "finding whose fault I am" (49). For although the first main part, "The Vietnam Project," is not overtly connected to the second, "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," the anti-chronological ordering and thematic continuity invite precisely the kind of critical

[11] On a letter sharing the same date of December 3, 1971 and the same explanation of this fiction's value, to "Julian Bach, Jr. Literary Agency," Coetzee notes that he sent "Pretty much the same" to seven other literary agents. All ensuing references to Coetzee's archived letters in this chapter are also from "1969 – March 1976," *Business Correspondence*.

comparisons and explanations that these fictions also represent with skepticism. By refusing to sanction any particular narrative, the stories in this book invite readers to join Dawn in an "act of ascending consciousness," in an effort to rise above the mediated world to truer truths, in order to "admit the meaning of our acts," even acts of reading (29).

By inviting a certain kind of readerly participation in the project it parodies, this book also shapes the terms of that reading process. Astute readings thus tend to evince a double movement, as we can see in Hayes's discussion of the text, in *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*. Drawing out the representational value of *Dusklands*, Hayes accounts for the gaps between its stories by claiming that they together present "the era of modernity, whose 'dawn' was in the eighteenth century, coincidental with the expansion of colonialism in Africa, and whose 'dusk' is apparently now—symbolized by Dawn's insane scheming and his final neurosis." However, alongside these claims about the text's representational value, Hayes also emphasizes that these stories doggedly resist what they represent as the defining characteristic of the "era of modernity," namely, "the aspiration towards a single rational basis for human identity and political life," which is in fact "a 'white' tribal myth that enshrouds an essentially calculative will to power" (25). In the staging this reading process, the book undermines a capacity for any single, comprehensive narrative account of its representational significance. Moreover, it does so by positioning readers to rely upon a bricolage of narrative resources, which repeatedly fail before the worlds they purport to represent.

Tracing the religious and mythological registers in *Dusklands* distinctly illuminates these elements of resistance in the narrative. In the section identified as Dawn's Introduction to "The Vietnam Project," an analysis of American military propaganda (interchangeably described as mythography) prescribes seemingly random US bombings, accompanied by a radio broadcast in the register of "*The father-voice*" as a means of permeating the psyches of

Vietnamese people (21). As Dawn elaborates on this "father-voice," his descriptions clearly draw from Freud's account of the primal myth of brothers overthrowing their father in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), albeit with an observable Calvinist coloring.

Dawn specifically deploys language reminiscent of the Calvinist creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, in envisioning a mythological role of America as replacing God as the Father who metes out judgment according to His inscrutable wisdom. Chapter Two of the Westminster Confession states, "[God's] knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to Him contingent, or uncertain." Hear the echo in Dawn's language, "The father is authority, infallibility, ubiquity. He does not persuade, he commands. That which he foretells happens" (21). When Dawn recommends that American military propaganda assume the *father-voice*, he syntactically situates the nation in the position not only of God's special agent, but of God Himself. Amid the many distinctions between twentieth-century America and eighteenth-century South Africa, in *Dusklands* the American military advisor Dawn and the colonial explorer Jacobus Coetzee are repeatedly connected by this impulse to fill the role of He who speaks meaning into existence, through a recognizably Calvinist idiom.

As this Calvinist idiom is interwoven with language reminiscent of Freud's comparison between primitive taboo systems and obsessional neuroses, the combination unsettles any uniform conception of historical progress. Certainly in Coetzee's depiction of Eugene Dawn's developing neurosis there is evidence of a retreat from reality into a narrative of self, which takes the guise of rationality. As Dawn puts it, "My true ideal (I really believe this) is of an endless discourse of character, the self reading the self to the self in all infinity" (38). Consider the connections implicit with Freud's description of neuroses:

> The asocial nature of neuroses has its genetic origin in their most fundamental purpose, which is to take flight from an unsatisfying reality into a more pleasurable world of phantasy. The real world, which is avoided in this way by neurotics, is under the sway of human society and of the institutions collectively created by it. To

> turn away from reality is at the same time to withdraw from the community of man. (131)

As Dawn succumbs increasingly to his delusions, he not only flees his job and marriage, but also stabs his son, which lands him in an institution, physically secluded "from reality" and "the community of man." Whereas Freud would later claim that only in "a single field of our civilization has the omnipotence of thoughts been retained, and that is in the field of art," *Dusklands* seems to suggest that a prioritization of stories and ideas over external necessity is in fact a posture toward life that, in a more diffuse form, has come to pervasively characterize Western modernity (148). The text raises this possibility while generating the parodic awareness that this explanation too might be yet another fiction that rationalizes and perpetuates a turn away from "reality" and from "the community of man." If this now seems a far cry from Freud's discussion of neuroses, that is precisely in line with my claim that Coetzee was working to create a world that resists fully cohering with any single, authoritative narrative.

It nevertheless remains the case that tracing the Calvinist idiom in *Dusklands* persistently draws attention to ways in which the protagonists endeavor to make the world around them conform to a "more pleasurable world of phantasy" (*Totem and Taboo* 131). In "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," the process of European "discovery" of lands and peoples is undermined, not least as Jacobus (as represented through the hands of S.J. and J.M. Coetzee) catalogs the distinctions between himself, a Christian, and the "Hottentots." While Jacobus's assertions of his own distinctiveness evince the assurance of an apparently autonomous and authoritative perspective, the reading experience undermines the reliability of that assurance by repeatedly drawing attention to the vested interests of other characters that shape the transmission of Jacobus's narrative in unacknowledged ways. Indeed, it is impossible to distinguish with certitude between Jacobus's concern for establishing his authority and his descendants' efforts at editing and retelling his narrative.

What is clear, however, is that his narrated claims to distinction are prominently justified through appeals to Christianity: "The one gulf that divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity. We are Christians, a folk with a destiny" (57). A narrowly Weberian conception of Election is resonant here, as this European settler in South Africa provides a narrative confirmation of his privileged position amongst "a folk with a destiny." This resonance contributes an affective charge to the affirmation that Jacobus's authority is by no means a matter of happenchance, but part of an unalterable divine plan. Jacobus re-emphasizes his sense of divinely ordained superiority by locating the Hottentots outside God's covenantal community, even when they undergo conversions, insisting: "They become Christians too, but their Christianity is an empty word" (57). Not only does this claim reflect a concern for establishing his own special significance, as a Christian, but in aspiring to determine who is, and is not, a Christian, Jacobus asserts his godlike capacity to name the significance of various lives.

We have already seen that, in apartheid, the historical orthodoxy upheld by the incumbent National Party (NP) had been decidedly shaped by one provincial strand of Calvinist discourse. Mirroring the biblical account of Israel, this nationalist mythology had depicted the Afrikaners as divinely elected and led by God through great adversity to possess and rule their own Promised Land: South Africa. As Hendrik Verwoerd, the "architect of apartheid," put it, "Afrikaners would prevail if they clung to a single idea: 'It was in accordance with God's will that different races and *volke* exist'" (as quoted by Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* 463). Notably, this "idea" provided theological justifications for the apartheid legislation of conceptual categories onto the public spaces of human life, which likewise aspired to name their social significance.

Although the compulsion to supply the narratives that fix meanings onto life is most pointedly portrayed in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," it also diffusely permeates the

remainder of the book as a defining quality of that spirit, or psychology, which Coetzee claimed connects both sections. Indeed, in "The Vietnam Project," Dawn's decline into neurosis manifests, in part, through fixations in his writings, which surround a compulsion to confirm his own significance "as an individual with a name and a history" (23). An unwieldy anxiety surrounding this theme manifests at the most inopportune times, such as in the official government document where Dawn recommends on propaganda in Vietnam.

As his document provides a vision of the individualized angst that random bombings, accompanied by the right kind of myth, might cause, it also conveys an affective charge suggesting that something personal might additionally be at play. When Dawn claims that his proposed attacks on the Vietnamese will result in the fear, "I am chosen because I am the object of an inscrutable choice. I am chosen because I am marked," the personal pronoun draws attention to the possibilities of transference or projection that might be shaping his assessment. Slipping the American nation into the role of an "inscrutable" divinity, Dawn predicts a wider psychological result from these apparently random attacks: "the subject's psyche is penetrated." Although he claims that the direct effect will be individual, Dawn projects that this psychological impact will also be widespread. Yet as his professional assertions become increasingly inflected with more personal observations, readers may wonder about whom, exactly, these words describe:

> The emotional support of the group falls into irrelevance as he sees that war is being waged on him in his isolation. He has become a victim and begins to behave like one. He is the quarry of an infallible hunter, infallible since wherever he attacks someone dies: Hence the victim's preoccupation with taint: I moved among those marked for death and those unmarked—which am I? The community breaks down […] (23)

The language of "taint," of being "marked for death" or left "unmarked," and an obsessive preoccupation with the individual's role or significance within a narrative whose rationality exceeds one's own is readily recognizable for its Calvinist concerns. Certainly the predicted angst incurred is reminiscent of Weber's claims about the widespread sociological effects of

Calvinist legacies. Complexities abound as Dawn's prediction of the social impact from absorbing myths that rationalize violence and suffering is juxtaposed with his own self-narrativizing attempts to rationalize acts of violence and violation, by emphasizing his own special historical significance.

Dawn locates his own distinctive value in a rather bookish variety of heroism, as an intellectual, a man of books, whose strength lies in his rational capacities. With a heavy-handed allusion to Kafka, he romanticizes the significance of his own existence saying, "New words flow. The frozen sea inside me thaws and cracks. I am the warm, industrious genius of the household weaving my protective fabrications" (14). However, as the story unfolds, Dawn's "industrious […] weaving" of "protective fabrications" increasingly appears to be the obsessive, neurotic narrativizing of an unsteady and paranoid middle-ranking bureaucrat. The disparity between his self-description and reality is signaled in the discord produced by the enormously mundane evidence that Dawn marshals to confirm his heroic significance:

> I am neat and polite, but I am the man of the future paradise […] I am a hero of resistance. I am no less than that, properly understood, in metaphor. Staggering in my bleeding armor, I stand erect, alone on the plain, beset.
>
> My papers are in order. I sit neatly and write. I make fine distinctions. It is on the point of a fine distinction that the world turns. […] I am the embodiment of the patient struggle of the intellect against blood and anarchy. (27)

There is a profound dissonance in this functionary's self-conception as a "hero" of cosmological significance: an eschatological emissary of the "future paradise," producing a variety of "fine distinction" on which "the world turns." Even in asserting that his powers include well-ordered behavior, well-ordered papers, and a well-ordered mind, Dawn's own logic is clearly disordered. His fine distinctions are evidently jumbled as he promises to tell the truth, if "properly understood, in metaphor," only to mix the metaphor of being a "man of the future" with the archaic image of a wounded knight, that might just as readily recall Don Quixote's delusions of grandeur.

Whereas Dawn seems bent on conquering his inner life – and the inner lives of others – through a narrativized pursuit of hidden truths, it becomes increasingly evident that any larger significance to his truth-telling efforts is to be found in what he unthinkingly reveals. In particular, we have seen that through following the contortions of Dawn's narrative, readers are exposed to his habitual grasping for signs of significance in a process that also distorts and harms the very reality he inhabits. This posture toward narrating life, and its meaning, is at the heart of the conquistador psychology *Dusklands* presents, and it is eminently familiar from Coetzee's account of fundamentalism.

Moreover, Dawn's romanticized self-conception reveals observable resonances with the nineteenth-century concept of Manifest Destiny, which had provided a dominant justification for settler conquest in America's more patchwork religious heritage, and which shares broadly in the Reformed Protestant heritage (Stephanson 27). The term Manifest Destiny conventionally describes the notion that "God, and so History and Nature, has evidently singled out the United States as the exemplary sanctuary for the final stage of history and thus opened up the continent for the expansive playing out of that mission of freedom" (26). What is crucial to note, for our purposes, is that Manifest Destiny provided a heroic, Biblicist reading of American history that justified settler conquest as the implementation of God's will that would bring about God's kingdom. The suggestion is made available, in *Dusklands*, that this bears structural similarities to the mode of subjecting life to a nationalist narrative that was endorsed through theological readings of Afrikaner history. Additionally, these connections between the theological justifications that endorsed both national mythologies may illuminate rather more pervasive, more common, habits for relating narratives to life.

Part of *Dusklands'* parodic power comes from its success at presenting similar heroic impulses, in Jacobus's explorer narrative, as no less ridiculous or obscene than Dawn's.

After enduring Dawn's iterative attempts at fixing his personal significance to the secrets he harbors, readers are primed to recognize how Jacobus's narrative plays on similar themes. This serves to heighten the biting humor in descriptions of Jacobus's intestinal ailments, where language of heroism and internal meanings are particularly unsanctified: "Held in position by Klawer I evacuated myself heroically over the tailgate, wondering whether the Hottentot wizards could divine my future from the splashes. A great peace descended upon me […] I carried my secret buried within me" (75). Not only do the rather unsubtle parodies of Jacobus's "heroism" follow on the neurotic self-valorizing narratives of Dawn; they are also followed by an Afterword offering a hollow – and often dissonant – hagiography of Jacobus.

The Afterword follows immediately from an account of Jacobus conducting an unjust execution and burning a village that had shown him hospitality. Juxtaposed with this brutality are the words: "Among the heroes who first ventured into the interior of Southern Africa and brought back news of what we had inherited, Jacobus Coetzee has hitherto occupied an honourable if minor place" (108). Although no alternative story offers a final or authoritative account of "what really happened," the jarring dissonance between elevated claims to heroism and the depicted reality suggests that what has happened cannot be readily harmonized with the successive narratives by which his descendants account for Jacobus Coetzee. These narrative strategies might sound quite familiar, as another modernist attempt at pointing out the failure of narratives, and certainly metanarratives, but my claim is slightly more specific. In turning to more closely examine the gaps and failures foregrounded in *Dusklands,* I will show how these contributed to Coetzee's initial attempt at writing his way into a fresh posture for relating narratives to life.

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While Afrikaner nationalists were affirming a divinely orchestrated fit between the Afrikaans language, the Afrikaner people, and the land of South Africa, Coetzee resisted providing stories of Africa that would "not strain the capacities of the English language" (*White Writing* 164). The skepticism encouraged by *Dusklands* is distinctly illuminated when viewed alongside the historical projects of Professors Hermann Giliomee and André du Toit, South African historians living under apartheid who produced seminal revisionist accounts of the predominant nationalist narrative.[12] Giliomee and Du Toit both produced works contesting the prevailing "Calvinist paradigm," which had come to describe "modern Afrikanerdom and apartheid" as a continuation of a Calvinism preserved from the early Cape settlers ("No Chosen People" 922).[13] They contended that reading South African history through this "Calvinist paradigm" not only concealed a variety of religious beliefs held by Afrikaners across South Africa,[14] but that it also obscured the historical development of this paradigm itself, which was a more recent development (from the twentieth century), applied retroactively to justify contemporary Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid rule.

Giliomee's more recent publication, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (2003), emphasizes that though the Dutch Reformed Church was the sole ecclesial presence at the original Cape settlement "for more than a century," it was not until after the Afrikaners were defeated in the second Anglo-Boer War that the minor *Gereformeerde* (or "Dopper") Church gained disproportionate political influence on the development of apartheid. It was the

[12] There is evidence of at least professional relationships between these three men by some point in the 1980s. Du Toit and Giliomee co-authored *Afrikaner Political Thought: Analysis and Documents 1780-1850* in 1979. J.C. Kannemeyer's *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (2012) describes Coetzee interacting with both Du Toit and Giliomee at unspecified dates, during the 1980s—offering a "reply to a paper by his colleague André du Toit" and cycling from Rondebosch to Stellenbosch "for tea with his colleague" Hermann Giliomee (479, 425). Moreover, by 2003, Giliomee was a close enough friend to send a bantering email of congratulation to Coetzee on receiving the Nobel Prize (557).

[13] For an example of the standardized depiction of this "Calvinist paradigm" see T. Dunbar Moodie's *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (1975).

[14] For more on this see "Christianity in South Africa" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1521, 1522).

Doppers, a provincial ecclesial community that had only started in 1859, who "wove the strands of religion, language and nationhood into a nationalist cloth" (5; 177; 269).

Throughout its narrative, *Dusklands* creates a reading process that highlights how shifting concerns reshape narrations of the self, of the nation, of life. This reading process makes phenomenologically pressing the idea that, "All the facts are too many facts. You choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose" (*Doubling the Point* 18). By the conclusion of "The Vietnam Project," readers are well prepared to notice narrative failures, contradictions, and dissonance within the four subsections that follow. Each subsection is apparently set at an older historical period than the last, and narrated with dramatically divergent points of emphasis: J.M. Coetzee's Translator's note (which is in fact undated), the revised Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee (1951), S.J. Coetzee's Afterword (1934 – 1948), and the original Deposition of Jacobus Coetzee (1760). After reading about the physical symptoms that belie Dawn's denied neurosis, readers are well situated to recognize failures in the successive narratives as symptomatic manifestations of the psyche – the spirit – that holds these differing stories together.

I have claimed that the insights into (what Hayes called) "the era of modernity" that Dawn's character affords are frequently not direct, authoritative, or autonomous, but instead mediated and shaped by wider narratives and experiences that impinge upon him, in ways over which he has very little understanding, and even less control. This point is stylistically emphasized through the situating of Dawn's monologue within a larger book that gives the majority of its pages to "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," a story in which Dawn plays no part. If Dawn's story conveys an attempt to speak on his own terms, it simultaneously fills another role over which he has no control or understanding, by contributing to the shape of the larger set of narratives that comprise *Dusklands* and exceed his conscious awareness. Dawn's decline into violence not only provides a clear figuration of the harms wrought by ill-

fitting narratives, but in so doing, it obliquely illuminates similar themes in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee."

As a result, we more readily recognize the two successive and contradictory accounts of Klawer's death as a (potential) further manifestation of the conquistador's compulsion to force reality into coherence with a narrative confirming one's own significance. In the first account, Jacobus depicts Klawer as the self-sacrificing hero, laboring to preserve Jacobus's life. It is Klawer who leads the perilous river crossing, carrying their goods and feeling out hippopotamus holes, while Jacobus follows behind, dependent and burden-free. From attending to Coetzee's engagement with Calvinism, we readily recognize this depiction of Klawer as shouldering a disproportionate burden of labor as potentially freighted with heightened significance.

So when, without explanation, the narrative cuts off precisely after Klawer is swept away by the river, we might now recognize this textual break as marking a moment that undermines Jacobus's narrative logic: his impulse to instantiate his own distinctiveness as a Christian hero of history, whose superior capacities for rationality are evidenced through his greater efficiency. For here, it is Klawer, the Hottentot, who dies what initially appears to be a heroic death. Yet rather than close down the interpretive options, this break in the text holds open a variety of possibilities, which extend to include the possibility that the narrator (or one of his editors) has amended this story retroactively to conform to his own evolving purposes. This possibility of evolving purposes, which may (or may not) be re-shaping the burden of proof that this narrative is required to bear, and thus re-shaping the story it tells, is never definitely confirmed or denied, but kept alive through juxtaposed colonial justifications for asserting one people's authority over another, and over another's lands.

The second account of Klawer's death, which interrupts the first, portrays our divinely elected hero in a distinctly more appropriate light. In this second version, Jacobus

and Klawer share the burden of labor as they cross the river: "*we* had to probe the bottom before each step for fear of slipping into a hippopotamus hole and being swept off *our* feet" (my emphasis 94). Now, instead of dying courageously in service to the parasitic Jacobus, Klawer's death results from his intellectual and cultural inferiority. Ever the Christian, Jacobus takes the time to lament Klawer's death, albeit through pointing out the disparities in rationality that caused it. After wading through the water, Jacobus explains, reason compelled him to "skip about and keep my joints warm," demonstrating an insight into causality that Klawer simply lacked (94). By this account, it was Jacobus's intelligence that rewarded him with life, whilst Klawer's "simple nature" led to death. Already this accords better with Jacobus's Christian-Hottentot distinction, although if there is a divine source for this election of one to life and the other to death, it seems to look rather strikingly like rationality. Jacobus does not stop there, but after rationalizing his ongoing life in the face of Klawer's death, he sacralizes his conclusions by attributing Klawer's death to a lack of faith: "I was disappointed to see no faith in his eyes. If he had believed in me, or indeed in anything, he would have recovered" (94). Seeping with self-congratulatory sympathy, this version conforms infinitely better with the mythologized distinctions between Afrikaners, as those destined to rule by right of their superior Christian civilization, and the "simple" Hottentots who require that leadership. It thus provides a pointed example of the interpretive anxiety to make life conform to a narrative that explains the sufferings of others by affirming the value of one's self.

It is the execution scene in "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" that most vividly exemplifies the dissonance and harms of enshrouding an exercise of power behind a sacralized narrative rationale. This episode describes the second trip of Jacobus, a trip minimized with only a cursory overview in the Afterword and company records that follow.

What is overlooked in the ensuing records is here made explicit: that Jacobus's aim in this trip is to take revenge against the servants who had deserted him on the last trip.

Jacobus sanctions his act of vengeance with a sermon in Dutch, the language of his own election, "indicat[ing] to the Hottentots that my servants were *set apart from them*" (my emphasis 100). As a self-designated agent of God, Jacobus enacts a god-like electing of people for his own judgment. His sermon begins, "We do not require of God that he be good […] all we ask is that he never forget us" (101). This is followed with a biblical allusion to a popular teaching of Jesus, which is popular precisely because it affirms the value of life, especially human life (Luke 12:6-7). Yet in Jacobus's hands, the biblical narrative is made to describe his own god-like agency. He instructs the Hottentots to "take comfort in Our Lord's observation on the fall of the sparrow: the sparrow is cheap but he is not forgotten" (101). The rhetorical force conveys less about God's concern for these people than it does about Jacobus's own omnipotent remembrance of the acts he interprets as his servants' betrayal.[15] A biblical message of comfort is co-opted to describe and even justify Jacobus's act of vengeance, an execution through which he imposes his own "great system of dividends and penalties." When Jacobus exhorts the Hottentots to, "Have faith, be comforted, like the sparrow you are not forgotten," the countervoice of Jesus retains a dissonant presence. That narrative dissonance is only compounded as the next sentence disconcertingly exegetes this as "a sentence of death" (101). This uncomfortable use of Jesus's words of comfort to proclaim a death sentence becomes even more jarring with the ensuing executions, rapes, and burning of the village it is used to sanction.

[15] An archived copy of what appears to be a draft of the blurb for *Dusklands*, in Coetzee's correspondence with Peter Randall, includes the description: "[…] A megalomaniac frontiersman wreaks vengeance on his Hottentot captors for daring to see him as a man, fallible and absurd, rather than as a white god." The idea of Jacobus positioning himself as a god also recurs in the text itself, such as when Jacobus muses, "Perhaps on my horse and with the sun over my right shoulder I looked like a god, a god of the kind they did not yet have" (71).

When reading for Calvinist allusions, Jacobus's sermon readily recalls the Doppers' provision of biblical justifications for apartheid violence: "All are guilty, without exception. I include the Hottentots. Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died, through me? God's judgment is just, irreprehensible, and incomprehensible. His mercy pays no heed to merit. I am a tool in the hands of history" (106). However, this chapter is claiming that through these self-justifying usages of Christian language *Dusklands* aims to expose a more pervasive habit of mind, which is by no means restricted to the religious or to South Africa.

Across the different stories in this book, a continuity of spirit is presented through the protagonists' assertions of their own authority and value in narratives riddled with suppressed doubts and interpretive failures in the face of suffering others. As Jacobus sanctions acts of violence with biblical allusions, in a gesture that simultaneously violates the tone and spirit of his intertext, the reader is confronted with an affectively charged awareness of gaps in the protagonists' historical awareness of the Christian stories and language he marshals toward his own ends. That is to say, the reader is made aware of the dissonant elements this narrative holds together, but fails to resolve.

The result entails a doubled impact on the reading process, which is evident in attending to Jacobus's denial of Hottentot religion, which also inadvertently suggests the possibility of a more sympathetic, if only tentative and inchoate, conception of religion at play in the second section of *Dusklands*. When Jacobus disparages Hottentot religion, there is a subtly sympathetic counterpoint made available:

> Hottentots admit the existence of a Creator only because the effort of conceiving a universe without one is too strenuous for them. Why the Creation should consist of interspersed plena and vacua is a question which does not exercise them. God has his own life to live, with who knows what sorrows and gratifications, in his own place. (83)

While this description is certainly a far cry from a personal God, it holds open the possibility of a conception of religion – or simply an intellectual space – that exceeds, or points beyond, the provenance of rationality. This conception is notable precisely for the way in which it resists a conflation between God and the individual, or even the individual narrative. Instead, Jacobus's description of Hottentot belief emphasizes a distance and gap that allows for humor as well as detachment: "Insofar as God uses his power foolishly one may joke about him. For the rest, the correct attitude is one of detachment. 'I know, deprived of me, God could not live a wink; he must give up the ghost if into naught I sink', sing the Hottentots" (83). These descriptions are entirely negative, and if they raise a possibility, that possibility may be little more than that these ideas do not seem any more ridiculous than Jacobus's godlike sense of self. There is also an affective potential made available in the idea of respite from a conception of God as dependent, in some way, upon human agents, investing human actions with the demands and pressures of infinite significance. For this description, critical though it be, raises the possibility of a posture toward life in which one can laugh with awareness that other beings exceed one's own capacity for understanding and narrating life.

Indeed, this subtle aspect may illuminate one sensibility driving the literary project that I have claimed is both performed and parodied in *Dusklands*—that project of approaching "the myth [that] predicts counterforce" by a "subtler counter," namely "to subvert and revise" it from within (24, 25). For this description of Hottentot religion may remind readers of potential other modes for apprehending the world, which do not fall within the bounds of the rationalities at our disposal. Coetzee explained in *Doubling the Point*, "I would regard it as morally questionable to write something like the second part of *Dusklands*—a *fiction*, note—from a position that is not historically complicit" (343). I would proffer that demystifying a nationalist myth-making process from a historically complicit position provided Coetzee a distinctive vantage point for drawing out the gaps, contradictions,

and violence inherent to the very myths he grew up amongst, which were elided not only by Afrikaner nationalism but also by a more pervasive attitude that eclipsed the distance between narrative and life. By parodying the very project it conducts, *Dusklands* resists providing a better myth, and instead draws upon religious affections to heighten the skeptical energies with which it approaches the possibility of any certain position for narrating life. By turning to *In the Heart of the Country*, with sustained attention to the ways Coetzee renegotiates Calvinist language and tropes, I will show how he continued expanding the interpretive positions his fictions made available as options for negotiating the relation of these narratives to the lives they represent.

In the Heart of the Country: A Less Immaculate Conception

In 1902 the Afrikaners had emerged defeated from the Second Anglo-Boer War with heightened enmity towards the British. Ensuing reallocations of land to Africans, and waves of Afrikaner migration to cities, combined to fuel the development of Afrikaner national identity. Afrikaners mobilized politically to advocate for the racial segregation of farmlands, and "[b]y the 1920s and 1930s the policy of segregation had come to entail not only political and territorial segregation, but also large state subsidization of white commercial farming, the protection of white urban workers, and the rehabilitation of the poor whites" (*The Afrikaners* 312). Anxiety over land ownership and a developing Afrikaner national identity prominently shaped Afrikaans literature of the period, particularly the *plaasroman* (Olivier 316; Devarenne 628). Decades later, in the 1970s, South African authors would specifically return to this subgenre to offer critiques of nationalism, and it was in this context that Coetzee crafted his own subversive farm novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (Olivier 317).[16]

[16] Henceforth abbreviated as *In the Heart*.

Coetzee's preferred edition of *In the Heart* incorporates both Afrikaans and English (Kannemeyer 288). By engaging both sides of the subgenre's heritage, the *plaasroman* and the farm novel, he also evokes a larger political struggle between the Afrikaners and the British for mastery over South Africa. In the dual-language Ravan Press edition of *In the Heart*, Afrikaans provides the terms for the master-servant dialogue, making it "even more obvious here than in the English-language edition that one of the central subjects of this novel is the struggle against subjection by language" (Macaskill 76). By staging this "struggle against subjection by language" within English and Afrikaans, along a racial divide, Coetzee foregrounds the political complexity of his linguistic heritage. I will show that in an attempt to get beyond the logic and sensibilities of Dopper depictions of Afrikaner national election, which specifically emphasized the Old Testament, Magda invokes countervoices from the New Testament.

Working from within the discursive tradition of "white writing," *In the Heart* performs the failure of available narratives to represent Magda's self and her world. In staging that failure Coetzee probes the bounds of representation and imagination from within a tradition he too has inherited. In a later interview with Attwell, Coetzee would provide an insight into the significance of these failures: "In South Africa," he explained:

> the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation […] 'The only address one can imagine'—an admission of defeat. *Therefore*, the task becomes imagining this unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place. (*Doubling the Point* 67-68)

In the Heart specifically creates a space for "the play of writing" within Magda's (and indeed Coetzee's) inherited narratives by challenging what they can represent and what readers can imagine.

The novel presents a first person narration from the perspective of Magda, not simply of life on the farm, but of her life as mediated by words. The presence of numbers,

cataloguing the narrative into 266 sections, interrupts readers with stylistic reminders that this is a "reality" mediated by language, and that Magda herself is a product of discourse. Yet if the numbers draw attention to the role of language in mediating Magda's reality, they also draw attention to the inadequacy of language before that reality. As Magda claims, "[l]anguage is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it. […] *The frenzy of desire in the medium of words yields the mania of the catalogue*" (my emphasis 26). Indeed, the cataloguing of Magda's words is but one of the means by which this book draws attention to the failure of its narrative to represent her desires, or indeed even to determine the extent to which those desires are themselves primordial or mediated.

Failures in the narrative before the force of Magda's desires persistently require readers to question their presuppositions regarding the relationship between representational narrative and reality. Attridge has concluded that the question of what is really happening thus "becomes unanswerable, and, in a sense, unaskable, since we have been made conscious of what we usually keep out of our minds as we read: that novels, unlike histories, do not tell of what happened" (24). Yet I would suggest that the confrontation with this question – the question of what is really happening – is one of the most important experiences *In the Heart* stages for its readers. Furthermore, this confrontation is so important precisely for its implication that "histories," as narratives, also fail before the realities they claim to represent. As readers are confronted with further difficulties in distinguishing Magda's self-narration (a narration flagrantly constructed from external narrative resources) from her world, the process of reading continues to raise yet more questions about how stories shape one's consciousness and one's ability to make sense of the world—how stories make up one's world.

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I have already noted that this confrontation with questions about how stories shape consciousness is staged within a subgenre that contributed to the dissemination of an Afrikaner nationalist consciousness or identity. In the traditional *plaasroman*, the farmer-protagonist fulfills an Adamic function, bringing order and life to the farm, out of the chaos of the wilderness (*White Writing* 83). This Adamic function confirms the Afrikaner farmer's connection with the land and signals his rightful ownership over it, implicitly confirming the Afrikaner's natural right to national power (85). By contrast, Susan Gallagher has observed, "[t]he meditations of Magda—with their contradictions, fluid quality, and feminine imagery—embody a countermyth, an alternative story to the patriarchal history of Afrikaner nationalism" (84-85). This "countermyth," though, is not altogether *other*: like *Dusklands*, it offers its attack from within, highlighting the anxieties, desires, and people hidden by the traditional *plaasroman* and the nationalism it perpetuated.

The story begins with a subtle subversion of patriarchy as Magda depicts her father's triumphal entry: he is coming home with a new bride. She retells the story twice, including a noteworthy textual slip. In the first iteration, her father and his bride arrive in a cart pulled by two donkeys, but in the second, a sole colt pulls their cart. This alteration subtly evokes a famous textual slip between two Synoptic Gospel descriptions of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem: that episode in which he is publicly heralded as messiah. Whereas the Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus as seated on a donkey *and* its colt, the Gospel of Mark describes a sole colt (Matt 21.1-11; Mark 11.1-10). Magda's subtle allusion suggests a parody of the farmer-father's triumphal entry, as heralding unfulfilled promises. For as she later reports, none of her fears have been realized, her father has actually returned alone, and the patriarchal figure remains undermined, having failed to be either the conqueror (of a wife) or the messiah (for the farm).

Despite her father's failure to fulfill his patriarchal promise, he retains a dominant influence on Magda's narrative. The relief Magda expresses at realizing that her father is in fact alive and without a wife is also relief that her own position in relationship to her father remains secure: "He has not brought home a new wife, I am still his daughter" (16). As Magda jealously guards her privileged relation as heir to her father, the posture is suggestive of Afrikaner anxieties over their covenantal election in South Africa after the second Anglo-Boer War, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Strengthening that connection, Magda later reflects, "God will provide for his own; and if I am not one of his own, it were as well I should perish" (121). The neurosis that the Calvinist influence in apartheid perpetuated, of distinguishing Man from man (with prominently patriarchal language), people from people, seems to betray a terror not unlike Magda's.

Indeed, through its textual "failures," namely repetitions and breaks in the text, *In the Heart* emphasizes the anxieties and suppressed desires lurking behind Magda's assertions of her secure position in relation to her father. These narrative devices evince the influence of Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Magda's floating consciousness bears some similarity to the voice that narrated Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* (1957). In *Jealousy*, the narrating consciousness perpetually returns to certain observations, repeating the same story in different orders with an obsessiveness that seems to enact the title. Magda's narration also stages compulsive returns and a chronology governed more by her desires than by any chronometer or calendar. These episodic repetitions surround three main *topoi*, each of which reveals the enduring influence of the father-farmer on Magda's desires: scenes of her father's intimacy with other women (first his new wife, then the servant Klein-Anna), scenes of patricide, and scenes of Magda's own intimacy with the servant Hendrik. All three of these *topoi* are connected with the enduring influence of Magda's father-farmer, and it is clear that, though undermined, he

remains dominant across the absences his presence creates in her life: not merely the absence of himself, but also of her ability to achieve reciprocity with others.

This theme of the absence created by her father's presence is further illuminated when viewed alongside the absences Magda associates with God, as the Calvinist primal patriarch. In *White Writing*, Coetzee identifies a particular form of divine absence as "one of the topoi of South African literature: the veld as the site of wholesale absence, in this case the absence above all of a personal God" (64). Certainly for Magda this divine absence is thoroughgoing: "As for the absence of God from the stone desert, there is nothing I can be told about this subject that I do not know. […] God has forgotten us and we have forgotten God" (135). Not only does Magda confirm God's absence in the *veld*, she also defies the Afrikaner nationalist claim to being the few remembered by God, amidst the many He rejects.

Notably, Magda's decrial of God's absence follows her depiction of God as impassible, like her non-responsive father. A voice from the sky has just proclaimed, "Those whom God leaves out of his election, he is also reproving, and for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them." This portrayal of God, which Magda rejects, has a violently Calvinist quality: God is the one who, at whim, separates people from himself and each other. The result, for Magda, is a sense both of divine absence and of disconnection from other humans. She connects the two by saying, "We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history. *That* is the origin of our feeling of solitude" (135). Articulated by an Afrikaner character, within the farm novel-*plaasroman* tradition, this connection is particularly evocative: it conveys a feeling that had shaped the development of Afrikaner nationalism, in response to the British colonial power that threatened the burghers' distinctive identity. Had the burghers simply given up their language and become colonial subjects of Britain, would they not have also relinquished their place in history? Yet the reification of an Afrikaner identity, along religious, linguistic, and eventually racial lines served to exacerbate

the problem it attempted to solve. Although appealing to a Calvinist notion of election supported the nationalist myth of Afrikaner uniqueness, it also perpetuated this sense of isolation.

A divine severity that requires "purity" in the form of separation from other peoples is suggested in Magda's question: "Are not all these dicta from above blind to the source of our disease, which is that we have no one to speak with, that our desires stream out of us chaotically, without aim, without response, like our words, whoever *we* may be, perhaps I should speak only for myself?" (135) In challenging the blindness of these "dicta" to human suffering, Magda identifies a glaring gap or absence within the Calvinist-inflected Afrikaner myth: like the God it describes and the apartheid system it justified, this myth refuses to acknowledge the human suffering it perpetuates in any serious, full-bodied way.

The dicta to which Magda refers, however, are by no means the only or most authoritative voice in her story. These dicta come at the book's end, set within a broader mythological context. That context first depicts Magda listening to voices from the sky, and responding, unheard. Initially she describes these voices as sky gods, but then they are supplanted by (or reduced to) a single voice, a single god. Here, the original plurality of voices seems to invoke the polytheistic history of monotheism, while also invoking a variety of registers, including philosophical discourse, which suggests a rather wide understanding of discourse as myth (Attridge 25).

At the same time, the dicta to which Magda responds with accusations of being blind to human suffering are particularly inflected with a Calvinist register. Of course, there is no Calvinist doctrine that quite makes the claim: "*God loves no one* [...] *and hates no one, for God is free from passions and feels no pleasure or pain. Therefore one who loves God cannot endeavour to bring it about that God should love him in return; for, in desiring this, he would desire that God should not be God.*" Yet this assertion recognizably extends from –

and draws upon – the Calvinist doctrine of divine impassibility (affirmed in Chapter Two of the Westminster Confession of Faith), albeit with a more nihilistic emphasis on the futility of pursuing divine love, as already predestined. The subversive voice continues, "*God is hidden, and every religion that does not affirm that God is hidden is not true*" (134). In so doing, it connects these dicta, and their affirmation of divine being, with divine absence. While offering depictions of God that recognizably draw on Calvinist doctrine, this voice presses the logic of those doctrines further and inflects them with Magda's failed desire for an experience of her father's presence.

To put it otherwise, like Magda's father, the presence of these dicta seems to be a source of absence. In Magda's words: "My father creates absence. Wherever he goes he leaves absence behind him. The absence of himself above all" (37). The presence of his absence in her life looms large over her pursuit of reciprocity, and indeed intimacy, with the servants Hendrik and Klein-Anna. His presence inflicts absence even there. Magda claims, "[t]he language that should pass between myself and [Hendrik and Klein-Anna] was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father tongue" (97). Her father's presence lingers in the language Magda speaks, sabotaging her attempts at meaningful dialogue.

Any hope at reciprocity thus requires a manipulation of language: "I am spoken to not in words, which come to me quaint and veiled, but in signs, in conformations of face and hands, in postures of shoulders and feet, in nuances of tune and tone, in gaps and absences whose grammar has never been recorded" (7). In locating her speech in these gaps and absences, Magda differentiates her words from those "words such as men use to men" (8). If Magda's father creates gaps and absences that Magda cannot escape, then she willfully inhabits those absences in the pursuit of a reciprocity inevitably mediated by language.

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That is to say, Magda stages creative attempts at inhabiting the absences within her patriarchal history, that "long tale of dead heroes in a language I have not unlearned" (7). As her narrative bursts with unseemly events and desires, it sullies the nationalist trope of the *Volksmoeder*: the figure of the mother sacralized as the guardian of racial purity.[17] As Susan Gallagher explains, "[i]n her elevation as wife and mother, the Afrikaner woman came to represent the ultimate symbol of purity for the Afrikaner race. Her properly regulated sexuality not only propagated the chosen race, it preserved that race undefiled" (89-90).[18] Magda's unruly desires, and the failures of her narrative to contain them, subvert this depiction of purity to invoke a rather different notion of election.

Revisiting the Calvinist doctrine of original sin, Magda draws out absent feminine voices from her own discursive heritage. For Magda's account of original sin specifically includes the women overlooked in traditional "Calvinist warnings of the visitation of the sins of the fathers upon the heads of the children" (*White Writing* 143). Both parents are now implicated in her ruminations on the transmission of whatever sin has disfigured her:

> Is there something in me that loves the gloomy, the hideous, the doom-ridden […] And if there is, where does it come from? […] From my father […] From my mother […] ? *Perhaps from them, jointly and severally,* and behind them from *my four grandparents* […] and so forth until we come to *Adam and Eve* and finally to the hand of God, by a process whose mathematics has always eluded me. Original sin, degeneracy of the line: there are two fine, bold hypotheses for my ugly face and my dark desires, and my disinclination to leap out of bed this instant and cure myself. (my emphasis 23)

[17] In *Giving Offense* (1996), Coetzee refers to Geoffrey Cronjé's use of the term *Afrikanermoeders* as "protectors of the blood-purity of the *Boerenasie*" and describes the grammatically irregular combination of these two words as, "Unconsciously […] a morphological figure of introversion, exclusion, enclosure, embrace." He claims that this figuration "looks forward to a lexicon in which there will be hundreds of entries for emotionally charged nouns starting with *Afrikaner-* […] *Afrikanermoeder* is thus a morphological metaphor and lexical metonym for *Afrikanereie*, the uniqueness of Afrikanerness" (168).

[18] Gallagher uses the term "*Vrou en Moeder*" which translates to "wife and mother" (91).

By emphasizing the eclipsed female side of this lineage, Magda draws upon the notion of *Volksmoeder* purity to sully it, and in so doing she expands the discursive space available for a peculiar conception of mothering as a source of salvation.

Magda's creative alternative vision of salvation stems from her lament of virginity as her "hole crying to be whole" (41). While this image is of course biological, it also evokes the story of original sin. In that story, the initial divine blessing, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it," is distorted by the curse of being cast out of the Garden of Eden, into lands that have begun to require "Man's" labor for productive growth, and into a process of procreation marred with the pains of childbirth (that distinctively female labor) (Gen 1.28). To the extent that childbirth can be seen as fulfilling the initial divine mandate, or indeed as a correlative to labor as a sign of divine blessing, it may acquire an emotional significance weighted with the hope of a restored relationship with God, a means to becoming whole. Magda, though, does not stop with lament: rather, she responds to this "lack" by filling it with her own meaning—her own conception of an unconventional *election*.

Magda's conception departs from the patriarchal line of election that Dopper covenantal theology had identified as extending from the Old Testament to the Afrikaners as she aligns herself with the figure of Mary, the Blessed Virgin, divinely filled with the Word. As Magda puts it, "I do not have it in me to believe that the mating of farmboy with farmgirl will save me, whatever save may mean […] *Provisionally*, I believe myself reserved for a higher fate" (my emphasis 41). Not only is this sense of election distinctive for its female, virgin lineage; it is also distinctive for the looseness with which Magda holds it: not dogmatically but *provisionally*.

Making use of that Calvinist-inflected concept, Magda specifically distinguishes between her sense of "election" and the farm novel's traditional depiction of "redemption […] from loneness, by marriage." Without marrying – that act of fulfillment for a woman in

the *plaasroman* – Magda claims an election that enables her "not to have to figure in a bucolic comedy [… and] not to be explained away by poverty, degeneracy, torpor, or sloth" (42). Her "election" is an act of resistance to being relegated to one of the absences that the farmer-father leaves in his wake. In asserting her voice, she resists the "baffling and silencing of any countervoice to the voice of the father/farmer" in the *plaasroman* (*White Writing* 135).

Instead of silencing countervoices, the Virgin Mary welcomes the Word into herself, and toward the end of *In the Heart*, Magda describes herself as "waiting for the words to come to me, like a maiden waiting for the holy ghost" (127). Yet if Magda imagines herself as elected to receive words (the Word?) that bring other voices to life, this lofty ideal seems curbed by her own failed interactions.

Her relational failures reflect the discursive limits that continue to impede Magda, even in her subversive deployment of the virgin figure Mary. The allusions to Mary do effectively convey Magda's desire for life-giving words, resonant as they are with the first verses of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word […] all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life […]" (John 1.1, 3, 4). Nevertheless, this all-encompassing reach of the Word to which Mary gives birth also signals the constraints of Magda's enterprise, for it is never clear whether her creative use of received narratives yields anything but monologue. At times Magda's own words seem to suggest this; she complains, "Why is it left to me to give life not only to myself, minute after surly minute, but to everyone else on the farm, and the farm itself, every stick and stone of it? […] I make it all up in order that I shall make me up. I cannot stop now" (72-3). However, the Christological connection does not quite end in this rhetorical cul-de-sac. In contrast to the false start of the father-farmer's triumphal entry, inflected with the

false hope of patriarchy for Afrikaner salvation, by the end of her story Magda deploys Christological language to offer what may be a more promising, more protean way forward.[19]

Magda responds to the restrictive narratives that she inhabits with fluidity, shifting from envisioning herself through the biblical figure of Mary to that of Jesus. Within the Calvinist tradition, the Christ figure is described as mediator between God and "man." The eighth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, "Of Christ the Mediator," describes Jesus not simply as mediating between but also hosting otherwise irreconcilable differences:

> So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. (8.13,14)

This mediation of difference also describes the role Magda desires to fill: a role of intimate interaction between master and servant, holding together her father and their servants, Hendrik and Klein-Anna. Toward the book's end, Magda exclaims, "The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!" (133)

Magda's exclamation mirrors a well-known New Testament account of Jesus as mediator, one that specifically seems to attack culturally established binaries: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free man, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28). As the biblical passage continues, it affirms a notion of divine covenant that is distinctly broader than the National Party's application: "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3.29). Persuasively or not, Magda (and through her, Coetzee) creatively works from within the Calvinist tradition to reorient biblical language, which contributes to the

[19] Indeed, Magda's vision is so protean that at one point she describes her "miracle of the virgin birth" yielding not a Christ figure, but an "Antichrist" (10).

affective force of Magda's longing to mediate between peoples, rather than separating them in pursuit of "purity."

Coetzee's essay "Achterberg's 'Ballade van de Gasfitter': the Mystery of I and You" (1977), which Attwell has identified as a companion piece to *In the Heart*, further supports this Christological reading (Attwell 59). Here Coetzee provides a translation, as well as a commentary, of Achterberg's poem that also expressly draws upon religious, existentialist thought. In the essay, Coetzee investigates a rich wordplay (in Dutch) surrounding the word "hole"—that word which sparked Magda's imagination of her election to conceive words. Here too the wordplay surrounds transcendence and relationality. Coetzee proffers, "The quest for the true primal word of *I-Thou* thus takes us to the hole through which the holy spirit, Logos, enters the world. 'Where is the hole?' the fitter (as holy fool) asks in sonnet 8. 'God is the hole,' he discovers in sonnet 9" (74). The blasphemous connection becomes apparent: Magda's discussion of her self as a "hole" is replete with evocations of countervoices, and in Coetzee's article on Achterberg, the hole is the site where the Logos enters the world; it is indeed the source of God himself.

Furthermore, Coetzee insists, "we should not ignore the similarity between Achterberg's imagery and the imagery of the hole in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness,* in which consciousness is presented as a hole through which nothingness pours into the world." If this sounds superficially contradictory (first the hole was the source of God and now it is the source of nothingness), Coetzee assures the reader:

> These two interpretations of the gas are not incompatible. Taken together, and buttressed with the numerous ironic parallels between Christ and I-as-gasfitter, they make 'Ballad of the Gasfitter' a story (incidentally anticlerical) of the *via dolorosa* of an absurdist Christian knight, the consummation of whose search for the true *Thou* (a consummation experienced by him as humiliating failure) is a moment in the 'presence' (a presence that is an absence) of both his own nothingness and an unapproachable, infinitely remote God. (74)

Here, with the help of Coetzee, we find the second person of the Trinity mediating the reciprocity between a primal *I-Thou*, which is both God and nothing. Yet the reciprocity (and thus the existence of either *I* or *Thou*, and therefore both *I* and *Thou*) is contingent on the unfixed nature of God, of *I-Thou*—not so unlike Magda's *provisional* sense of election.

This notion of God starkly contrasts with Afrikaner nationalist claims to privileged knowledge of God, and of their own election. Coetzee continues:

> The presence of God is an absence; God enters the poem as a hole, because, if we follow Kierkegaard, God remains always 'incognito' and the relation of the eternal Word of God to the existent of man a 'paradox' that never loses its irrationality. The Word cannot be on man's tongue. It will not enter the structures of his discourse. 'If "speaking of God" is understood as "*speaking about God*," then such speaking has no meaning whatever, for its subject, God, is lost at the very moment it takes place,' says Rudolf Bultmann […] (74)

Evocative of Magda's rejection of the dicta that had depicted an impassible God, Coetzee here describes a divine presence that cannot be contained in representation. This notion of God strongly contrasts with the one associated with Magda's father, whose corrosive presence has politicized the Afrikaans language she uses with Hendrik and Anna. Instead, this description of God is put to the secularized task of evoking this narrative's failure to contain the desires of Magda. For here God is that which transcends representation, a presence only available in the absence of "the structures of [man's] discourse."

Yet Magda cannot but live a life mediated by language. Despite her great efforts, Magda's pursuit of a reciprocity that transcends the discourse she inhabits clearly fails. Coetzee offers this relevant and rather rare commentary on his own novel:

> At a certain point [Magda] tries to drop the master/slave relationship in favour of a relationship of equality which I think is entirely sincerely intended on her part. But it fails, and *it fails because a mere effort of the will is not enough to overcome centuries of cultural and spiritual deformation*. (my emphasis, as quoted in Kannemeyer 279)

Although Magda has worked cleverly within a Calvinist-inflected discursive tradition to deploy her literary resources in pursuit of reciprocity, she cannot escape her inherited discursive bounds and their wider social implications.

Despite her repeated assertions of singularity, Magda remains bound up with her heritage. One particular phrase, "I am I," recurs throughout the text as an undermined assertion of Magda's uniqueness (5, 30, 54, 72, 118). In her protest against being raped by Hendrik, Magda cries out, "I am not simply one of the whites, I am *I*! I am I, not a people. Why have *I* to pay for other people's sins?" (118) Yet the very language in which she asserts this uniqueness remains entrenched in her politicized heritage: the refrain "I am I" is a phrase laden in patriarchal, biblical associations. It evokes the third chapter of Exodus, wherein God ordains Moses to lead the people of Israel on a journey through the wilderness—that very narrative through which Afrikaner nationalists read the Great Trek (1835-1846) as a sign of national election. In the Exodus account, God tells Moses: "I AM WHO I AM […] The LORD, the GOD of your *fathers*" (my italics Exodus 3.14, 16). The very language of Magda's repeated assertions of separation from her Afrikaner forefathers betrays the socio-historically implicated literary position she cannot escape, suggesting how deeply entrapped in a particular history of discourse she is.

Dour though this conclusion may seem, the strength with which *In the Heart* foregrounds Magda's relational failures also reveals the novel's success. For it is (amongst other things) a book about the attempt to live, and to write, from within systems that occlude the very things they claim to represent. The Calvinist-inflected Afrikaner myth depended on a mimetic account of language—a claim that Afrikaans is a language that *fits* with Africa and thus demonstrates the *fit* of the Afrikaners, as a divinely elected people, to their Promised Land. Yet Coetzee's farm novel persistently refuses such a fit. As suggested by this novel's engagement with Robbe-Grillet, it instead shares the politicized task of making "the codes of the Novel […] exhibited and decoded" in a pursuit of enabling countervoices to speak ("The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess' *The Strike*" 92).

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We have seen that *Dusklands* and *In the Heart* each "subvert and revise" a Calvinist-inflected depiction of Afrikaner nationalism, from within the colonial travel narrative and the *plaasroman*-farm novel tradition, respectively. In *Dusklands,* this specifically contributes to the affective charge with which the book presents the psyche of the conquistador, as characterized by a compulsion to assert one's own significance through naming and narrating the hidden meanings of life. Having considered this impulse alongside the historical revisionist moment that was emerging in South Africa, we saw that the book's parody of historical works emphasizes that these too are narratives that morph through a transmission history shaped by shifting concerns, in a process that mediates but also obscures the worlds they purport to represent.

Although this chapter has restricted its scope to South African Calvinist and national themes, attention to Coetzee's reliance on Max Weber, in *White Writing*, suggests potentially wider implications from the findings of this restricted scope. For in engaging the prominence of Calvinism within his own discursive heritage, Coetzee was also investigating the larger Protestant legacies that Ian Watt had identified as forming a pervasive individualist consciousness in modern life, and indeed, in the realist novel: a consciousness characterized by a persistent effort to quell pervasive anxieties through claims of privileged access to truth. However, this process of critically excavating discourse is but one half of the double movement I have identified in Coetzee's early engagement with Christianity.

For Coetzee's engagement with Calvinism, in his early works, also involved the illumination of suppressed countervoices. By the end of *Dusklands*, Coetzee had unearthed countervoices of guilt from Eugene Dawn and resonances of the dissonant, gentle voice of Jesus, affirming the value of life, behind the deployment of Scripture to sacralize colonial conquest. We additionally saw how Jacobus's decrial of Hottentot religion simultaneously

suggested a conceptual space exceeding the rationality and self-divinizing impulses in his own approach to Christianity. By the end of *In the Heart*, Coetzee had developed Magda's subversive, revisionist voice from within the narrative resources of the Calvinist-inflected Afrikaner nationalist myth.

We saw that the book concludes with Magda identifying her own religious pursuits as a replacement for lost human relations, in a gesture reminiscent of Freud's account of the neurotic's preference for the imaginary over the real, that is also – nevertheless – tinged with a yearning for something more of the real itself:

> I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world. If the truth be told, I never wanted to fly away with the sky-gods. My hope was always that they would descend and live with me here in paradise, making up with their ambrosial breath for all that I lost when the ghostly brown figures of the last people I knew crept away from me in the night. (139)

In this account of a yearning in which the sacred imagination supplies a vision of embodied life, Magda also points us toward the next chapter. In turning to consider Coetzee's engagement with René Girard, I will trace the progression of a movement in Coetzee's own fictions, away from staunch efforts at demystification and toward writing that would become increasingly aimed at facilitating real and transformative encounters with other perspectives, other lives.

II.

René Girard and the Literature of Conversion:

Waiting for the Barbarians and *Foe*

With the publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)[20] a change in Coetzee's writing was becoming evident. In the final interview for *Doubling the Point* (completed in 1991), Coetzee would refer to the concept of conversion to reflect upon this change in his writing process. First he critiqued the concept of conversion by saying that, despite presenting "the reborn self as having utterly superseded the past self," its narrative structure nevertheless "*thematizes* the discontinuity as something that could not have come about naturally, that could only be the result of divine intervention" (391). That is to say, by looking outside the natural world, and the embodied self, for a source of authoritative intervention, the conversion narrative offers no hope for depicting true change, true difference, that emerges without external influence.

Nonetheless, Coetzee then went on to describe his own essay on the subject of confession in the fiction of Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky as "pivotal" in his writing life, suggesting it was involved with something akin to a conversion narrative of his own (391). In terms distinctly inflected by the genre of conversion, Coetzee described this essay as "a submerged dialogue between two persons. One is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he

[20] Henceforth abbreviated as *Barbarians*.

may be the person I still am" (392). These two "Coetzees" align with divergent perspectives on the possibility of telling the truth about one's self: whereas one advocates for the possibility of "Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness," the other is entrenched in "Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values" (392). While there is a conversion structure to the story Coetzee is telling here, as one self is described as becoming another, it is recognizably unconventional. Instead of adhering to the Christian conception of conversion in which a renewed self results from identification with Christ (e.g., "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor 5.17a)), Coetzee identifies his different selves with characters from Dostoevsky's *Devils*: one is a self he identifies with Stavrogin, and the other with Tikhon. Moreover, in his account, these diverging selves both remain present, unresolved but held together, in his own physical body.

By gathering together Coetzee's complex and enigmatic reflections on the conversion narrative, this chapter illuminates a more pervasive significance to this particular mode of description, which might otherwise seem a passing metaphor. In particular, I will draw on fresh archival evidence to show that Coetzee had developed his conception of conversion in relation to the writings of French literary critic René Girard (1923-2015), while writing *Barbarians* and *Foe*.[21] In Girard, Coetzee found an interlocutor who had specifically theorized the concept of conversion as a formal narrative structure, and had thought about it in relation to literary expression, as a narrative that emerges most profoundly in what Girard called "the great novels." For that reason, engaging with Girard enabled Coetzee to imagine new possibilities for thinking about the kind of self-transformation involved in conversion, which in turn contributed to a shift in Coetzee's own approach to writing.

[21] Although critics have long observed that, in Andy Lamey's words, Girard "has exerted a noticeable influence on Coetzee," this "noticeable influence" has garnered little attention. Lamey's chapter on "Sympathy and Scapegoating in J.M. Coetzee," in *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010), is to my knowledge the most comprehensive published consideration, and while it rightly emphasizes that Coetzee takes from Girard "the outline of a politics of desire," the essay elides Girard's truly pivotal importance early in Coetzee's *oeuvre* by focusing primarily on the later works of *Disgrace* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) (183).

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Coetzee's engagement with Girard emerged during a time when competing demands and perspectives were made violently visible in the world around him. During the early to mid-1970s in South Africa, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) had drawn prominent attention to how narratives shape thought, and in turn shape life. They emphasized the apartheid narrative's distorting effects on the minds of all who inhabited the society it structured. It was as an inhabitant of apartheid South Africa, in the 1970s, that Coetzee crafted *Barbarians*, a fiction that alludes to the murder of BCM leader Steve Biko (1946-1977), in depicting a pursuit of what I will call existential freedom, however equivocal that freedom might be. In so doing, Coetzee specifically engaged with Girard's concept of conversion as a narrative structure—a concept he then further reimagined in the life-story of Susan Barton, in *Foe* (1986), with suggestive implications for the future of the novel as a genre.

Notably, both Biko and Girard shared an intellectual heritage extending back through Sartre. Biko had powerfully urged "blacks" and "whites" alike to unshackle their minds from apartheid's psychological constraints, informed by the revolutionary, anticolonial psychiatrist-philosopher Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), who had been directly influenced by – and creatively revised the thinking of – Sartre. In the essay "Black Souls in White Skins?" (1970), which alludes to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Biko exhorted "blacks" to begin freeing their minds, and urged "white liberals" to focus not on black freedom so much as on redeeming their own minds from "the real evil in our society – white racism" (23). He advocated that white liberals "fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous 'they' with whom they can hardly claim identification" (25). Although Girard wrote from a very different context, his work notably shares this concern for what I am calling existential freedom, albeit with a shift in emphasis that productively contributed to Coetzee's thinking.

This was a shift away from an individualist conception of subjectivity, and the nature of desires; notably, at the heart of Girard's works, is an insight into the nature of desire as imitative, rather than the result of an autonomous, desiring consciousness. From his first book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structures* (1961), Girard began developing an understanding of what he would eventually describe as the "interdividual" nature of desire, and of the self (*Things Hidden* 300). This understanding would later inform his critique of a certain kind of psychiatry's individualist orientation: "Psychiatry regards the sick person as a kind of monad. Even when [the sick person] insists upon the importance of relationships with the other, the psychologist does not attach sufficient weight to their foundational character" (306). Girard's relational conception of what I am calling existential freedom is particularly noteworthy because it developed through his early readings of (what he considers to be) the masterpieces of European fiction.[22]

For Girard, "the great novels" offer an unparalleled insight into human experience through what they reveal about the interpersonal structures of desire, and the possibility of attaining freedom from those structures. This novelistic revelation is specifically facilitated through the narrative structure of conversion, and to understand how Coetzee would later re-imagine Girard's concept, we must first clarify this concept itself. Even before Girard had converted to Catholicism, he identified this recurring narrative structure, saying, "All novelistic conclusions are conversions" (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel* 294). In this claim – which principally referred to the novels of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and Proust – Girard used the Christian term "conversion" to describe any narrative moment in which a hero attains the transformative self-realization that orders his desires and relationships aright.

[22] Although it is reading novels that initially provided Girard with this insight, he would come to read the biblical account of the crucifixion of Jesus as the culmination of that revelation, to which Coetzee responded by saying, "Girard's later writings, particularly what he has to say about Christ, I find absorbing though a bit megalomaniac" (*Doubling the Point* 105).

But Girard's concept of conversion is even more sophisticated than this, comprised of three interrelated aspects, which I will describe by as revelation, grace, and religious language, in order to emphasize the idea's particular intellectual history. I use the term "revelation" to describe Girard's notion of a hero encountering a transformative truth, in a singular moment of clarity, which the hero could not have attained by his own efforts or authority. The unmerited quality of this encounter constitutes an initial "grace," as it could not be attained at will, and each revelation also entails the further grace of "engender[ing] a new relationship to others and to oneself" (295). Moreover, in Girard's account, the visible manifestation of this grace entails the extension of its revelatory potential beyond each hero's conversion, which might be shared by the writer and readers alike. Toward this end, Girard claimed, novelists repeatedly reach for a religious register, because of its distinctive capacities for creating potentially transformative encounters with novelistic revelation and grace for readers (312). However, to Girard's mind, a *romantic* fixation on the hero had caused critics to overlook how each hero fits within, and relates to, his larger society and narrative structure, and thus to overlook the potentially transformative insights that *novelistic* novels offer into the socio-historical evolution of readers' own desires.[23]

In Girard's account, despite our claims to the contrary, humanity has not successfully discarded faith in the divine, but rather reoriented it horizontally, as a belief in our own divinity. And this presents a pervasive problem. According to Girard: "Each individual discovers in the solitude of his consciousness that the promise [of their own divinity] is false but no one is able to universalize his experience." To avoid relinquishing this promise, each person doggedly determines that he is the unique exception: he alone has failed to become self-sufficient and self-fulfilled. The Christian doctrine of "Original sin" is thus reoriented: it "is no longer the truth about all men as in a religious universe but rather each individual's

[23] Girard distinguishes not only the novels in which he is interested, but also the kind of analysis he conducts, through using "the term *romantic* for the works which reflect the presence of a mediator [of individual desire] without ever revealing it and the term *novelistic* for the works which reveal this presence" (17).

secret." In this tortuous way, each person sustains a belief in human divinity by assuring herself, "The promise remains true for Others" (57). It is this, Girard believes, that has resulted in the tragicomedy of modern life, where ubiquitous desires compel blind, frantic attempts to hide the very truth we all share: our creaturely, as opposed to divine, nature. For, in order to sustain the deception that *surely* others have attained the autonomy *I* so desire, Girard claims that each person is compelled toward a divisive pursuit of stealing the secret of her neighbor's divinity through imitating her desires. That is to say, by Girard's account, "the great novels" reveal how a subtle reorientation of belief has caused a pernicious disordering of modern desires.

Amid his largely chronological reading of "the great novels," Girard identifies Dostoevsky's novels (despite being prior to Proust's) as "the final and supreme stage of the development of the modern novel" (44). In Dostoevsky's novels, the failure to attain ontological completion (through imitating others' desires) incites pervasive anger, hatred, and violence. Girard claims that in *Devils* and *The Idiot* mimetic desire taints almost every character, every interaction, every emotion: "there is no longer any love without jealousy, any friendship without envy, any attraction without repulsion" (41). The frenzied, blind imitation that structures social relations in *Devils* and the doubled thoughts and doubling back of thoughts depicted in *The Idiot* are – to Girard's mind – symptomatic of the deep, pervasive dissonance between characters' dogged belief in their own autonomy and their lived experience. In Dostoevsky's novels, a pervasive, and pervasively denied, pursuit of ontological fullness through mimetic desire is thus shown to have become an "ontological sickness" of pandemic proportions (280). Girard makes it emphatically clear that he understands this rampant disordering of desires as resulting from powerful, but denied, religious legacies:

> Men boast of having discarded their old superstitions but […] as the gods are pulled down from heaven the sacred flows over the earth; it separates the individual from all

> earthly goods; it creates a gulf between him and the world of *ici-bas* far greater than that which used to separate him from the *au-delà*. The earth's surface where Others live becomes an inaccessible paradise. (62)

In Girard's account, religious legacies no longer function as they once did, but they nevertheless remain influential. Whereas they once oriented desires vertically, they now orient them horizontally, creating rifts between people who cannot help not being gods.

If Girard's literary readings led him to see reoriented religious affections as perpetuating social harms, his later sociological study, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), illuminates how concepts of the sacred historically functioned as a source of reparation for those harms. He argues that concepts of the sacred developed specifically to limit the mimetic spread of violence throughout societies, the world over. This is, to his mind, connected with why novelists repeatedly reach for religious registers in depicting episodes featuring the transformative reparation of disordered desire: "*Religion* in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence" (23). By Girard's logic, in the novel, the grace that facilitates conversion may fulfill a similar role, mystifying the revelation of a truth about the hero that also enables the hero to overcome mimetic rivalry and attain redemptive reconciliation with others, a redemptive reconciliation that is mysteriously extended to readers and the writer alike.

To put it in Girard's words: "Conversion in death should not seem to us the easy solution but rather an almost miraculous descent of novelistic grace" (310). What makes this a "grace" is that the very depiction of a hero's conversion creates for its readers the impossible possibility that they too might be transformed, in a moment of unity between subject and object, that can only be portrayed by authors who have themselves undergone a similar conversionary reorientation of their own desires. So Girard claims, "When Flaubert cries 'Mme Bovary, c'est moi' […] he means that the Self and the Other have become one in

the miracle of the novel" (300). And in that moment of recognition, the reader too might turn from her deceived state, through an experience of unity with the novel that also effects a change in the relations between her self and others.

Coetzee would later recall "reading Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* in the 1970s with a sense that something important was being said not only about the workings of fiction but about the effect of fiction on the lives of readers" (*Doubling the Point* 104). He had found in Girard's works a theory of how at least some instances of the novel, as a genre, function to provide potentially transformative revelations to their readers about life. However, it must be emphasized that Coetzee looked to Girard less for a template to follow, than for insights and categories to reimagine in his own fictions, aimed at staging transformative encounters in a rather different place and rather different times.

Moreover, we have already seen that Coetzee had begun to engage with desire as a central theme in unconventionally intersubjective ways (ways that bear striking similarity to Girard's mimetic account) in *In the Heart*. This becomes clearer yet in attending to an entry from Coetzee's archived notebook of writing ideas.[24] Having considered Girard's intersubjective conception of desire at some length, we readily recognize similarities in Coetzee's notebook entry:

> At this point in the book (p46) I am suddenly hard up against the ultimate questions. 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 ironized desire, which is a movement of distancing. (21/8/75)

Although Coetzee does not define "desire" here, he clearly emphasizes its importance by connecting it with "the ultimate questions." Notably, these "ultimate questions" also remain unnamed. Instead, Coetzee describes the position from which his writing approaches them: the approach is indirect, a "circling around" the apparently related "question of evocation." What is remarkable about these initial lines, for our purposes, is the way in which they

[24] See "*In the Heart of the Country*: Small notebook, 16 March 1974 – 9 February 1976."

overlap with Girard's thinking through their emphasis on the potential of fiction to bring "the object of desire under the illumination of desire."

As the entry continues, Coetzee reflects upon his writing process in relation to the ways that it illuminates his own patterns of desire, saying:

> A relation of desire toward the object of writing is totally different to all other emotional relations for the reason that desire is not an emotion. In myself I find the following stages: (1) evocation: the listing of adjectives like 'slender', 'clear' attached to the subject; (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. (21/8/75)

What is immediately striking is Coetzee's unconventional distinction between desire and emotion. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, "desire," as a noun, primarily refers to: "The fact or condition of desiring; that *feeling or emotion* which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected; longing, craving; a particular instance of this feeling, a wish" (my emphasis). To Coetzee's mind, however, "desires" are neither emotions, nor attributes of the desiring subject at all. Rather, they are "unrepresentable features" connected with the desired object. Although Coetzee does not go so far as to describe these features in relation to ontological completion or divinity, he does emphasize that, for him, the evocation of desire repeatedly results in disappointed emotional experience ("despair," "disgust," "weariness") and a failure to transcend himself, by uniting with the object of his desire. The similarities with Girard's theory of desire are striking in Coetzee's rather unconventional account, which is notable because the kind of conversion that Girard imagines narrative to facilitate is directly linked with the structures of mimetic desire in which he believes writers, readers, and characters alike are imbricated.

In turning to *Barbarians*, I will show that Coetzee specifically reimagines Girard's concept of conversion to extend Dostoevsky's accomplishments in novelistic revelation. He does so, however, by depicting a narrative world without any external, authoritative perspective from which to assuredly determine the structures of one's own desires. The narrative interweaves religious language across rather murky moments to represent and stage a counter-intuitive variety of redemption, in a process that provides fresh insight into Coetzee's own attempts at bringing about a new stage in the novel.

Waiting for the Barbarians: Is There a Conversion in this Text?

Several entries from Coetzee's notebooks of ideas for *Barbarians* show that, while writing, he had Girard's concept of conversion specifically in mind. In a notebook of writing ideas from 11 July 1977 – 28 August 1978, Coetzee discusses an early iteration of the story, saying:

> Have been reading Girard on Proust. He speaks of the structure of fall and redemption, a metamorphosis attained when the hero is able to see his own idolatrous condition clearly enough to describe it. It might be useful to think of my dilemma in these terms. I certainly have the fall (the present plan is that X rides back as a hostage, gets ignominiously shot, is taken prisoner, and ends his days laboring in the graveyard). So it is a matter of seeing what was wrong with his earlier life.
> If one can answer this question not so much in moral terms (although that is necessary) but in terms of the kind of conception of fiction that leads to a fall like that, one is on the way. (30/1/78)[25]

Although Coetzee was clearly considering his writing of *Barbarians* in relation to Girard's concept of conversion, this entry also reveals his ambivalence surrounding that concept, and what it presupposes about fiction. Which prompts the question: what are the presuppositions that enable a depiction of a hero's privileged access to certain truths, in his fall? In view of this probing into the presuppositions of revelation, it is worth simply noting Coetzee's silence on the role of grace in this revelation.

[25] See "Waiting for the Barbarians: Small Spiral Notebook, 11 July 1977 – 28 August 1978." Additionally, we know that Coetzee's archived "Record of Reading" from the 1970s and 1980s includes an entry on Girard's contribution to *Proust: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962) with the comment, "Outstanding essay by RG."

Coetzee would twice return to the question of whether its protagonist attains redemptive self-revelation in a second notebook of writing ideas for *Barbarians*. On June 12, 1978 he confirmed that the story "ends with peace, self-realization, etc, with the man condemned to death." However, a little over a year later, on May 16, 1979, Coetzee doubled back to ask: "Does X ever reach a stage of seeing what was wrong with his earlier life?"[26] From this we can see that Coetzee continued to keep Girard's concept of conversion in view, albeit with a measure of skepticism and uncertainty.

Over a decade later, Coetzee reemphasized this ambivalence in an interview for *Doubling the Point*, saying, "Whether what I read in Girard worked itself out in *Waiting for the Barbarians* I cannot say […] I suspect that what is going on in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is more complicated (though not necessarily more interesting) than what Girard describes" (105). By turning to examine the plot structure of *Barbarians* alongside Girard's concept of novelistic conversion, convergences between the two will become evident, as will ways that Coetzee departs from Girard.

To begin with, instead of following the teleological progression of conversion that Girard identifies with deception, fall, and redemption, *Barbarians* depicts a more diffuse metamorphosis. The story takes place in an unnamed town, on the border of an unnamed Empire, and is told from the perspective of its protagonist, the Magistrate. It takes place during a State of Emergency and begins with the arrival of one Colonel Joll, whose mission is to extract information about, and ultimately defend against, alleged raids on the Empire by the "barbarians." His unsavory interrogation methods inspire a crisis of conscience for the Magistrate, whose very job title implicates him in the Empire's acts, and who is haunted by the knowledge that "somewhere someone is crying" (5). Not least because the Magistrate does not undergo any clear or uniform progression of deception, fall, and redemption,

[26] See "Waiting for the Barbarians: Small Spiral Notebook, 30 August 1978 – 29 June 1979."

attention to the novel's plot structure helps to illuminate the changes that do occur in his relationship to the Empire.

Whereas the novels that Girard examined were each narrated from a third person or past tense perspective (or both), which affords the reader a sense of privileged insight into the truth about the story, *Barbarians*' first person, present tense narration affords its reader no certain sense of ever attaining reliable access to an objective vantage point for assessing the Magistrate's change. Yet attending to the narrative structure provides insights into changes both in the Magistrate's narrative and in his relations with other characters.

Plotting the movements of the Magistrate's body across this fiction illuminates how Coetzee was working to relocate the site of revelation from the intellect to the body. This exercise of plotting bodies reveals a loosely chiastic structure to the six-part narrative:

Part I: The concupiscent Magistrate resides in a home provided by the Empire whose governance he administers

Part II: The Magistrate brings home a vagrant, who has been handicapped by imperial torture, the barbarian girl

Part III: The Magistrate releases the barbarian girl from the Empire, her prison

Part IV: His ensuing incarceration provides the Magistrate with an unexpected release from his own imperial "prison"

Part V: The Magistrate is now a vagrant, handicapped by imperial torture, begging in the homes of others

Part VI: Increasingly wary of his desires, the Magistrate returns home to administer the town, divested of imperial power

The mirroring of the middle sections (Parts II and V and Parts III and IV) particularly foregrounds changes in the Magistrate's physical location, drawing attention to its

correspondence with changes in his narrating perspective. That the book concludes with the Magistrate back in his initial abode, performing the same administrative role as at its start, specifically casts into relief certain differences in how he narrates and occupies that position.

While the most evident difference between the story's start and end is the Magistrate's loss of his official affiliation with the Empire, there are also subtle changes in the very terms that furnish his narrative. By the story's end, this protagonist is no longer called by his imperial title of Magistrate, which, until Part IV, had been used in place of his name (117). Moreover, his own reliance on bureaucratic categories to refer to others (Colonel, barbarian girl, prisoner, soldier) is finally interrupted in the concluding section, when he uses another character's name: Mai.[27]

The structural similarities between the story's start and end also provide a foil to changes in the Magistrate's approach toward what he had initially describes as his "placid concupiscence" (9). By the book's end, he seems to have developed a more complex perspective on his own "desire," as he attempts to distinguish between that and his "potency," and invests in an herbal suppressant (150). When this suppressant fails to quell his desires, the Magistrate takes up relations with Mai. Yet unlike his initial visits to "the girls [that] entertain men-friends," these exchanges are conversational and culminate in him acceding to her desire to stop meeting (22). Subtly reflective of a change in the Magistrate is the homophonic resonance between "my" and "Mai": despite sounding the same, the final use of this proper name in place of a possessive pronoun hints at a transition from a possessing *I* to a subject oriented toward another subject (150).

Through attending to his interactions with the character known only as the barbarian girl, it becomes particularly evident that each section of the story depicts the Magistrate's

[27] Even his private musings rely upon imperial categories. He imagines the people that might have populated the ancient ruins he has excavated, for leisure, saying: "Perhaps in bygone days criminals, slaves, soldiers trekked the twelve miles to the river, and cut down poplar trees […] so that their masters, their prefects and magistrates and captains could […] scan the world from horizon to horizon for signs of the barbarians" (15).

changing perspective in relation to his physical location. Whereas in Part II the Magistrate had exerted his imperial power to pressure her into his home ("We do not permit vagrants in the town"), in Part V he occupies the position that had been hers, as a vagrant begging door to door (26). Whereas in Part II the barbarian girl was handicapped and blinded by State torture, in Part V it is the Magistrate who is maimed by State torture and (at least briefly) blinded (107). Stripped of State authority, and put out of his house, by Part V the Magistrate has been subjected to the very positions that the barbarian girl originally occupied. The possibility is thereby implicitly conveyed that subjection to another's physical position is integral to changes in the Magistrate, evidenced in his narration.

The climactic points in this process of change are in Parts III and IV, for between these Parts the Magistrate moves from being an agent of imperial power to being its victim. Whereas in Part III the Magistrate embarks on a journey to release the barbarian girl from his possession, in Part IV he returns to town, and is forced into prison. There is a clear inversion in the positions of the Magistrate and the barbarian girl, as she is now free, he imprisoned. Yet the less obvious possibility, which is also made available, is that this might be the metaphorical journey through which the Magistrate is released from the falsehood of imperial narratives that had actually subjected his life to categories that separated human from human, "barbarian" from "civilized", in a rhetorical move that mystified its own barbarous violence. This is suggested by a correlation between the Magistrate's removal from the imperial abode that had physically separated him from others and a shift in his patterns of speech, away from narrative reliance on categories such as "Empire" and "barbarian," toward an increased use of the inclusive personal pronoun that encompasses both: "*We* are the great miracle of creation" (107). If a variety of conversion is evident in the narrative structure of *Barbarians*, tracing its use of religious language and symbols shows these composite revelatory episodes to be counterintuitive indeed.

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An enigmatic biblical resonance within a dream recounted early in the text foreshadows the bodily emphasis in this re-imagining of Girard's concept of conversion. The Magistrate's rather explicit dream features a "body lying spread on its back" with "pubic hair glistening black and gold" that, under his touch, turns out to be "bees clustered densely" (13). Detectable here is a light echo of the Old Testament account of the prophet Samson finding "a swarm of bees and honey" in the body of a lion he has killed, during his own pursuit of the object of his desire: Delilah (Judges 14.8). Samson was of course distinctive amongst the prophets partly because of the prominent role his body played in God's revelation through him, from his sexual desire to his superhuman strength. In the resonant episode, Samson eats honey from a lion's corpse on his way to arranging marriage with a Philistine woman, both acts which presumably deviated from conventions of purity. As with Samson, in this story the Magistrate will find something sweet in a sordid source. Instead of the corpse of a lion, though, the source will be tortured bodies and duplicitous desires. By tracing religious language across this fiction, I will show how it specifically signals a revelatory potential in descriptions of bodily encounters with Joll's initial torture victims, with the barbarian girl, and finally with the Magistrate's own tortured body. However, this variety of novelistic revelation is decidedly not singular or certain, ethereal or pure.

If *Barbarians* ended with Part I, it would be a relatively simple story about a man of conscience who struggles with guilt over his failure to intervene for torture victims. The Magistrate's first person narration initially emphasizes his repulsion at torture (2). Asserting his distance from Joll, he offers the apparently innocuous self-description of being "a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire" (8). If not a good man, the Magistrate seems to assure us, he is at least a dutiful man of modest ambition.

However, the first reimagined revelatory encounter begins a process of undermining this perspective. Having holed up at home while Joll began his "interrogation," the Magistrate sneaks out to investigate the granary-cum-torture chamber and encounters Joll's first victims: a boy and his now deceased "uncle." In a religious register, the Magistrate describes himself as "trespassing […] on what has become holy or unholy ground, if there is any difference, preserve of the mysteries of the State" (6). Upon unwrapping the uncle's enshrouded face, he sees that it has been battered, and in the impersonal idiom of a functionary, attempts to inventory the wounds: "The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole." Yet bloody beards, broken teeth, and empty eye-sockets prove a poor fit for administrative cataloging, as do the signs of fear that the Magistrate then registers in the prisoner boy who, "when I bend to touch his cheek […] flinches and begins to tremble in long ripples that run up and down his body" (7). Despite the Magistrate's prior assertions of distance from Joll, the boy's flinching body attests to a denied continuity between the hand that tortured him and the hand extended in comfort.

That this is revelatory is suggested when the Magistrate's thoughts then double back to reconsider his initial assertion of difference from Joll. As he puts it: "It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive" (7). If this is a revelation, though, it is less an attainment of truth than an undermining of the Magistrate's initial certainty in his own innocuous position. Moreover, the Magistrate's ensuing revelatory encounters with the barbarian girl further undermine the singularity and purity of the conversion experience, as a privileged moment of goodness or truth.

The second "conversion experience" that I will examine is constituted by iterative episodes describing the Magistrate's repeated "ritual of the washing," and "of the oiling and rubbing," in which religious language is again prominently interwoven with the profane (30,

41). As Dick Penner was the first to point out, these episodes evoke two biblical scenes. In the first, Jesus humbly washes his disciples' feet, but in the second, Mary Magdalene anoints the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume (*Countries of the Mind* 38). What Penner overlooks is that this shift in evocation rhetorically repositions the Magistrate from, first, assuming the place of Christ, to then occupying the place of Mary Magdalene before Christ. This shift subtly inflects the narrative with the possibility of a change in the Magistrate's approach to the barbarian girl's wounded body.

That possibility is further suggested through another religious resonance that inflects these episodes, from *Crime and Punishment* (1866), of Raskolnikov "falling on his knees" and kissing Sonia's foot before exclaiming, "I did not bow down to you, I bowed down to all suffering humanity!" (337) Yet if these religious resonances suggest a redemptive turn in the Magistrate's posture before the barbarian girl, it cannot be emphasized enough that they also remain mired in the profane. For in the very same episodes we are told that the Magistrate "prowl[s] around her," aware that the "distance between myself and her torturers […] is negligible," and "shudder[s]" from what may be excitement as much as revulsion at his apparently mimetic desires (27).

Throughout the Magistrate's narrative, a preoccupation with purification contrasts with the intermingling of sacred and profane characterizing these revelatory moments. Despite the Magistrate's obsession with purification (the mere words "purification," "clean," and "wash" – not to mention the mundane variant "see to my laundry" – occur no less than thirty-seven times[28]), the moments of conversion remain morally complex, impure. By contrast to the enviable "fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages" that he associates with the new men of Empire, the Magistrate remains mired in history and his "redemption" is only visible by an alternative standard of responsiveness to embodied life—in a world that is

[28] See, for example: 12, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 35, 60, 64, 67, 74, 78, 79, 82, 85, 89, 91, 105, 116, 126, 129, 143, 145, 146, 149.

expunged neither of lowly desires, nor of their material counterparts dirt, sandstorms, "clutter and dustiness" (24, 82).

Readers may be less than inclined to recognize, or even desire, redemption for the Magistrate after encountering these descriptions of his treatment of the barbarian girl. They may even be relieved that in place of certain or pure revelation, the uncertain possibility of moral progress is represented through a proliferation of doubts and suspicions surrounding his own perspective. Whilst clearly drawn to the barbarian girl's "obstinate, phlegmatic body," his encounters with her leave the Magistrate increasingly uncertain of what it is that draws him: "There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her" (41, 43). This bewildering effect stands in stark contrast to the effects of the other woman he visits at night, with whom "I have not for a moment had to interrogate my desire." As the Magistrate begins to question his own desire, he considers – and denies – the possibility of this shift toward uncertainty as a sign of redemption:

> If a change in my moral being were occurring I would feel it […] I am the same man I always was; but time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere: this body in my bed […] For the time being, perhaps forever, I am simply bewildered. (43)

Despite the Magistrate's denials, however, there is reason to believe that these encounters signal and participate in some variety of redemptive change in this character.

That change becomes evident relationally, even in his approach to animals. When Joll first arrived, it was a discussion of hunting, trapping, and fishing that provided a common ground between him and the Magistrate. Yet later, when the Magistrate purchases a silver-fox cub from a trapper as a gift for the barbarian girl he keeps in his room, he notes sardonically, "People will say I keep two wild animals in my rooms, a fox and a girl" (34). Although this comment may not initially seem to reflect moral progress, it does evince an awareness of potential perspectives from which his actions might seem dubious, or worse.

Later, on a morning hunt, his progression away from presupposing the right to possess other lives intensifies, in what I am describing as the third reimagined revelatory encounter. An encounter with a waterbuck exerts an interruptive force on him, overwhelming his intention to shoot: "I slide the gun up and sight behind his shoulder […] he turns his head and sees me […] we gaze at each other […] I find an obscure sentiment lurking at the edge of my consciousness" (39). Although the sentiment remains unnamed, its effects are "irritating and uncanny," and this encounter too overwhelms the Magistrate's perception of time: "With the buck before me suspended in immobility, there seems to be time for all things" (40, 39). Possessed by the moment of encounter, the Magistrate fails to fire his shot. When he concludes, "evidently it is not important to me that the ram die," there is a light, inverted resonance with the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac, which concludes in the sacrifice of a replacement ram (Genesis 22). Now though, what Kierkegaard described as the "teleological suspension of the ethical," which justified Abraham's willingness to murder his son, is reversed (*Fear and Trembling* 54). Whereas Kierkegaard claimed, "By [Abraham's] act he transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher τέλοζ outside it, in relation to which he suspended it," the Magistrate's intention to kill this ram is overwhelmed by a moment of continuity with the world around him that interrupts the constructed coherence of teleology (59). To put it otherwise, the Magistrate undergoes an ethical suspension of the teleological.

In the final reimagined conversionary encounter, Christological language abounds to describe the Magistrate's most literal fall as he hangs from a tree in a crucifixion that reveals not divinity, but the painful truths of embodied life. After wandering in the wilderness to return the barbarian girl to her people, the Magistrate is charged with misconduct by a Warrant Officer and imprisoned. His refusal to defend himself immediately suggests a resonance with Jesus's silence before the accusations that led to his own crucifixion—a

silence that would be identified as crucial fulfillment of messianic prophecy (Matt 27.13,14; Isa 53.7). When the Magistrate is interrogated, Joll takes on a role reminiscent of Pilate. Making these resonances yet more overt, Joll accuses the Magistrate of having "a new ambition […] to make a name for yourself as the One Just Man, the man who is prepared to sacrifice his freedom to his principles" (113-114). However, the ensuing crucifixion scene reveals the Magistrate as being "prepared to sacrifice his freedom" not for his principles, but simply to survive.

In this crucifixion scene, messianic resonances are coupled with textual evidence that undermines any sense of divine orchestration. It is not even the Pilate-figure of Colonel Joll who metes out the Magistrate's punishment, but Mandel, as he temporarily presides over the town. Moreover, Mandel orders this hanging apparently on a whim, with "liquor on his breath" (117). When the Magistrate is girded in a ladies smock and burlap hood, the image invokes Jesus, before his execution, mockingly clothed in a robe and crown of thorns. Despite the Magistrate's suggestive language of offering himself as a sacrifice for the crowd – "what use is it to blame the crowd? A scapegoat is named, a festival is declared, the laws are suspended" – the crowd appears to gather for less noble reasons: "who would not flock to see the entertainment?" (118) What brings the Magistrate's own lofty thoughts harshly down to earth is finally a fall that results not from external agency, but from the slip of his toe. His life almost literally hangs by a thread, not as the revelation of a cosmic plan, but of his own physical limitations and failure.

In the Magistrate's dangling body there is little revelation of anything but his bodily dependence for life, even a life endorsed by State power. Instead of the stoic "Father, forgive them," ascribed to Jesus on the cross, the Magistrate "bellow[s] again and again" finding "there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright" (Luke 23.34; 121). Instead of elevating him to a

privileged position for identifying and imparting redemptive truths, the Magistrate's fall reduces him to the status of an "old clown who lost his last vestige of authority the day he spent hanging from a tree in a woman's underclothes shouting for help, the filthy creature who for a week licked his food off the flagstones like a dog because he had lost the use of his hands" (124). Instead of affording privileged access to principles of faith as the source of life or truth, this fall foregrounds the Magistrate's dependence on his body to live at all.

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In the Gospel account, divine grace is at the heart of the crucifixion of Jesus. From the Calvinist perspective that remained prominent in South Africa during the late 1970s, this grace is two-fold. Most evidently it describes the divine offer of unmerited reconciliation with God through the sacrificial slaying of Jesus. Yet the very faith by which one attains this reconciliation is itself only enabled by a further grace, a further divine intervention. We have already seen that this two-fold structure persists in a more diffuse form in Girard's early conception of grace as that which enshrouds self-realization and that which enables self-realization to result in a reconciliation between self and other.

By reorienting revelation toward the body, *Barbarians* reimagines grace as something altogether more common: as all are embodied creatures, all have access to bodily encounters, and these are what interrupt, overwhelm, and influence changes in the Magistrate's perspective. The reconciliation afforded by physical encounters, with others but also within his very self, is gradual and protean, facilitated through visceral experiences of a shared nature as embodied creatures. In *Barbarians*, this reimagined grace is most evident in moments of apparent unity between the Magistrate's perspective and the larger world he inhabits: this is grace as elegance, or as coherence between the parts within a material whole.

This reconceptualization of grace is particularly explored in the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl. We can see from an entry in Coetzee's notebook of writing ideas from 11 July 1977 – 28 August 1978 that the problem of relating the protagonist's 'I' to a 'you' in the story posed a stumbling block to his writing of *Barbarians*. Note the recurrence of personal pronouns in this extended quotation as Coetzee considers his problem:

> Abandon everything I have done thus far. There is no interest in the story […] His main problem is with finding a place for *'you'* in his story. The various roles *'you' (she)* can be tried out in are: prisons, camp woman, fellow inmate. The nature of the problem is this: A relationship exists, *'I'-to-'You'*; the *'I'* is known (in the sense that saying *'I'* defines 'know' for my purposes); but a 'home' for *you* (in flesh, in the word) is not known.
>
> In the various habitations in which *'you'* is tried, a developing relationship emerges. What it is I do not yet know.
>
> Until I know this the story is stillborn […] (my emphasis 6/11/77)

To put it in religious terms, his pursuit of a relationship in which the parts *I* and *you* are well fitted to the whole of this story is also a pursuit of the grace that Coetzee believed would give life to this textual body. Attwell elaborates, in "Writing Revolution: the Manuscript Revisions of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" (2014), on the crucial role that developing this I-you relationship played in Coetzee's crafting of *Barbarians*. He compares manuscript developments with the accompanying notebooks of writing ideas to demonstrate:

> The early manuscript is labored […] and Coetzee knew it: 'After 22 pages, no liftoff yet.' […] The missing ingredient, he told himself, was 'the creation of a credible beloved *you*', but he could not see how he was going to do this while writing realism in the third person (10 Oct. 1977). (205)

As Attwell explains, "it was important to the novel's taking off that [Coetzee] should write about desire, or write desire into life" and this "project require[d] an elusive, and female, 'you'" (208). The abundance of personal pronouns *I* and *You* recalls Coetzee's prior engagement with Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1923), in his commentary on "Achterberg's 'Ballade van de Gasfitter': the Mystery of I and You" (1977), and indeed Buber proves a useful guide to central aspects of how *Barbarians* reimagines grace.

For Buber, there are two primary words, which correspond to modes of being in relation to another: *I-It* and *I-Thou*. Although in each mode it is the same *I* inhabiting the world, the position of that *I* changes from *I-It* to *I-Thou*, and that change expressly occurs through grace. According to Buber, "The *Thou* meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking," and this grace carries a transformative force: "I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*" (24-5). Whereas Girard describes the kinds of relationships available between a subject and the object of her desires, in Buber's account grace enables a union between *I* and *Thou* that, though fleeting, itself effects changes in the subject.

As with Girard's account, in Buber's *I-It* relation the desiring subject is oriented by a desire to possess another. To change this posture similarly requires a variety of conversion:

> He who is dominated by the idol that he wishes to win, to hold, and to keep – possessed by a desire for possession – has no way to God but that of turning, which is a change not only of goal but also of the nature of his movement. The man who is possessed is saved by being wakened and educated to solidarity of relation, not by being led in his state of possession towards God. (135)

This conversion ("being wakened and educated to solidarity of relation") does not lead to the possession of a new, superior knowledge, itself another means of possession, but to encounters with an eternal unity, which Buber calls *Thou* (or God), through moments of encounter in which the *I* is united with *Thou* in and through particular others. *Barbarians* never describes an encounter with God, but the Magistrate's encounter with the ram, which overwhelmed his teleological intention to kill it, and with the barbarian girl, who gains a power over him, exhibits this very quality of an overpowering encounter with a transcendent and sublime unity of life, in particular moments. What is distinctively illuminating in Buber's description is the authority he attributes to the encounter itself, as that which might transcend and even reform one's perspective, with potentially enduring changes to the self.

Before returning to *Barbarians*, there are two final points to emphasize from Buber's account. The first is that the change in a subject's position in the world, from *I-It* to *I-Thou*,

is by no means teleological: in Buber's account, the *I* can simultaneously encounter another as *It* and as *Thou*. Secondly, Buber locates the potential for transforming the *I*'s position in the memory and the desires: "memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole […] Desire itself is transformed as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about" (25). Informed by Buber's conception of the grace of encounter, and having attended at length to the murky but essential role of desire in the Magistrate's own change, we now turn to consider how the Magistrate's memory is likewise depicted as hosting this reimagined grace.

It is to his memory of the barbarian girl that the Magistrate turns when tortured in prison. Under the pain of State brutality, the Magistrate sustains his life by feeding on her memory. Across his recurring dreams, the barbarian girl is transformed from the begging, broken person he knew into an ornamented, whole version of that self ("what clear jet-black eyes!"), who offers the Magistrate a sacramentally inflected "loaf of bread" (109). These shifts in memory accompany an increased exposure to the positions the barbarian girl had occupied and the pain she had suffered, yet not without benefits to the Magistrate.

While sacralizing her memory may reflect an increased piety towards the barbarian girl, it also invests the Magistrate's own suffering with greater meaning, making it a little more bearable. When the Magistrate's wounded cheek becomes "crust[ed] like a fat caterpillar," the suggestion is made available that his pain is being subsumed within the greater teleology of a reoriented *imitatio Christi*, marked by this stigmata-like invocation of the "greyish puckering" that he had observed "as though a caterpillar lay […] under [the barbarian girl's] eyelid" (115, 31). As memories of the barbarian girl increasingly afford the Magistrate an experience of a reimagined grace, they also recall to mind that hers was a body decidedly not broken for him.

The apex in this depiction of grace-through-memory, like the pinnacle of his revelatory encounters, is a reimagined crucifixion scene. Coetzee reflected on this scene in his notebook by writing:

> He can stand on the ladder forever (ref to Dostoevsky). What he fears is that he may irritate them enough (by a spectacle of phlegmatics) to make them kill him. He wants to live because he has left nothing behind.
> I → you. (24/8/77)

This reference to Dostoevsky is particularly notable alongside the Magistrate's proclamation, on the ladder, of his willingness to do anything "To live and live and live," for the particular phrasing again evokes Raskolnikov, on a similar theme (119).

In the following quotation from *Crime and Punishment*, we can see how the above allusion emphasizes the grace of conscious continuity between self and other:

> Where was it […] I read about a man sentenced to death who, one hour before his execution, says or thinks that if he had to live on some high rock, on a cliff, on a ledge so narrow that there was only room enough for him to stand there, and if there were bottomless chasms all round […] and if he had to spend all his life on that square yard of space – a thousand years, an eternity – he'd rather live like that than die once! Oh, only to live, live, live! Live under any circumstances – only to live! How true it is! Good Lord, how true it is! Man's a scoundrel! But anyone who calls man a scoundrel is even a bigger scoundrel himself!' he added a moment later. (176-177)

It is while standing on the narrow ledge of a ladder rung – surrounded by the darkness that a hood affords – that the Magistrate makes his own proclamation of the desire "to live and live and live." Moreover, were one to substitute the word "barbarian" for "scoundrel," Raskolnikov's rumination closely approximates the Magistrate's larger experience, as he undergoes torture for being a "barbarian lover": "Man's a barbarian! But anyone who calls man a barbarian is even a bigger barbarian himself!" Only after the Magistrate expresses his most basic, common desire for life is there a transformation of his memory, which conveys the potential, but murky, grace of a conscious sense of unity with the barbarian girl.

This questionable union is partly signaled through the material clothes in which the Magistrate is placed for his hanging. The ladies' smock and the hood on his head recall not

only the crucifixion, but also the hooded female figure that populates his dreams, a figure that both is and is not the barbarian girl. In the first of his recurring dreams the Magistrate identified her as "a child […] in the snow with her hooded back to me […] I try to imagine the face between the petals of her peaked hood but cannot" (10). After learning about Joll's torture of the barbarian girl, "the dream comes back" and her hood no longer obscures her face, but that face is "blank, featureless," reminding him of an organ of desire (37). When the girl in his dreams finally "turns her hooded face towards me," she is a vivacious version of the barbarian girl, "smiling [… with] light sparkling on her teeth and glancing from her jet-black eyes" (53). In the moment of being hanged, however, it is the Magistrate who becomes the figure in the square, from whom "the hood comes off" (121).

While he bellows at the pain of being resurrected for a second hanging, a person in the crowd jokes, "That is barbarian language you hear," drawing attention to the conflations between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl (120). As he swings from the tree, the Magistrate's thoughts are structured by six short paragraphs, each beginning with *I* until this *I* is overwhelmed by a memory of its *You*: "*The girl*, with her black hair braided and hanging over her shoulder in barbarian fashion" (120). Although this reimagined grace is murkier than Girard's, it too depicts that moment when Self and Other merge. Now, though, "*Madame Bovary, c'est Moi!"* is reimagined through an embodied testimony that conveys, "I am the barbarian!"

However this grace, this representation of unity through memory, is neither sacred nor profane—or perhaps it is *both* sacred and profane. After the climactic moment of union, upon being lowered to the ground, the Magistrate narrates, "everything swims before me, I go blank" (121). The description is reminiscent of his experience, while washing the barbarian girl's feet, of "a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present," which he further describes as "fall[ing] into oblivion […] These dreamless spells are like death to me,

or enchantment, blank, outside time" (28, 31). This is not the grace of expunging sins or revealing esoteric truths; it is an awareness of continuity inadvertently attained, evoking the "blissful pleasure" of bodies united in a most basic, shared, humble truth of life (31).

By the end of the novel, the Magistrate repeatedly remembers the barbarian girl as a source of redemption. Suggestive of the potential for personal redemption that he associates with her is his reflection, "if I had believed her, if I had been in a *position to believe her*, I might have saved myself from a year of confused and futile gestures of expiation" (my emphasis 135). Suggestive of his hopes for a historical redemption mediated through her is his imagination of the barbarian girl leading horsemen of judgment in the last days, "when the barbarians come riding in" to put "everything […] on a new footing," which resonates with the biblical account of apocalyptic horsemen led by Christ to "judge and make war" before God the Father "make[s] all things new" (152; Revelations 19.11, 21.5). These messianic resonances in the Magistrate's memories of the barbarian girl become even more pronounced in his self-critical musing:

> And who am I to jeer at life-giving illusions? Is there any better way to pass these last days than in dreaming of a saviour with a sword who will scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us the errors that have been committed by others in our name and grant us a second chance to build our earthly paradise? (143)

By pointing toward these redemptive hopes, however dubious they may be, the narrative draws readers' attention to the question of whether there is any redemption in this text.

Despite his continued denial of redemption, changes in the shape and position of the Magistrate's narrative, which he does not seem to register, nevertheless result from his bodily encounters. During the period of time he spends in prison, the Magistrate's narrative even morphs to include one hitherto unregistered, exceedingly minor character: the cockroach (79, 92, 95, 107). That a change so minor merits attention is suggested by the reappearance of this figure in Coetzee's lecture "The Novel Today" (1987). There, the cockroach appears just after Coetzee has claimed that stories:

> are not made up of one thing plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substructure plus superstructure. On the keyboard on which they are written, the plus key does not work. There is always a difference: and that difference is not a part, the part left behind after the subtraction. The minus key does not work either: the difference is everything. (4)

In the narrative of *Barbarians*, the inclusion of the cockroach is noteworthy precisely for its lack of utilitarian value and significance to grand narratives such as imperial history. It is noteworthy precisely for reflecting an expansion in the Magistrate's perspective on the world he inhabits. How different from the bureaucratic cataloging that marked the story's start, when, near the book's end, the Magistrate lingers over an approaching sandstorm, "thinking of our fellow-creatures out in the open who at times like this have no recourse but to turn their backs to the wind and endure" (153). Whereas his narrative initially elided existential differences to assert bureaucratic ones, its purview has gradually expanded to register a wider range of lived experience.

Although these changes in the narrative are suggestive of changes in the narrator, any redemption is far from certain. *Barbarians* is not a narrative that would support Girard's triumphalist proclamation, "The hero triumphs in defeat; he triumphs because he is at the end of his resources; for the first time he has to look his despair and his nothingness in the face. But this look which he has dreaded, which is the death of pride, is his salvation" (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel* 294). Rather, *Barbarians* concludes with the Magistrate in a very un-heroic position, "feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (156). Counter-intuitively, however, this erosion of certainty might just be what reflects the Magistrate's redemptive movement away from a confident but delusionary belief in his own innocuous power and autonomy, toward an increasing awareness of aspects of life that he has overlooked and even harmed.

This is not, however, an entirely new vision of conversion: it is *Crime and Punishment* without the Epilogue. Prior to the Epilogue, which portrays Raskolnikov's

definite intellectual (and potentially religious) conversion, *Crime and Punishment* too is a six-part novel focused on the anxieties and tortured conscience of its hero. Throughout the novel, Raskolnikov undergoes a gradual, complex, and often undecipherable metamorphosis that enables him to, finally, confess his crime, though without any sure sense of what exactly he has done wrong. Similarly, *Barbarians* portrays the tortured conscience of a protagonist who, in his own gradual, complex, and often ambivalent way, grapples toward an intuition of justice. Raskolnikov's moral change is facilitated by repeated encounters with suffering, and the Magistrate's is facilitated by bodily encounters that exceed and overwhelm his narrative. However, as readers of *Crime and Punishment* will surely be anxious to point out, there are also manifold differences between these fictions, and these too are instructive.

Compared with *Crime and Punishment*, we can see that *Barbarians* imagines a more complex variety of conversion by eliminating any privileged, external source of moral authority from the narrative. Whereas in *Crime and Punishment* Sonia's religiously informed love influences Raskolnikov's repentance, in *Barbarians* no character demonstrates religious faith or anything so pure and idyllic as Sonia's self-sacrificing love. Whereas in *Crime and Punishment* the State served as a reliable, external source of truth by adjudicating Raskolnikov's crime and his punishment, in *Barbarians*, the Magistrate is part of the State and the State is part of his crime. Crime and punishment have become indistinguishably entangled, and the only guide for truth or morality seems to be the testimony of bodies. Not only do the Empire's dubious interrogation practices now undermine its capacity as a moral authority, but unlike the third person narration of *Crime and Punishment*, the Magistrate's "contaminated" first person, present tense narration affords the reader no pure, reliable access to external truths.

We have seen that Girard identified Dostoevsky's works as "the final and supreme stage of the development of the modern novel," and in *Barbarians* Coetzee probes toward the

next stage in this development by reorienting narrative conversion away from the certainty of truths afforded by God or governance or even secular rationality, toward more perspectival, protean, and embodied perceptions. In so doing, Coetzee also reimagined the revelatory role his fictions might fill for readers, and perhaps for himself. Now, in a detailed reading *Foe*, I will show how Coetzee further complicates the conversionary structure of narrative in the fictional life-story of Susan Barton, with further implications for the life-story of the novel as a genre.

Rewriting Conversion in *Foe*

We have seen that *Barbarians* engages with Girard's account of the process that takes place in, and the revelations made by, "the great novels." More particularly, we have seen how it revises and reimagines Girard's account of the conversion structure in what Girard defines as novelistic narrative. In *Foe* Coetzee creates a text that offers itself as an even more direct revision of those "great novels," in this case by combining elements from *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) with a number of other texts by Dostoevsky as well as other writers.

For a novel which is deeply concerned with the dynamics of truth telling, *Foe* is decidedly difficult to summarize truthfully. Aristotle famously established the law of non-contradiction as a fundamental premise to truth-telling, saying: "It will not be possible to be and not be the same thing […]" (*Metaphysics* Γ 3 1005b18).[29] Yet *Foe* lies outside the provenance of this law, as almost every truth one attempts to tell about it is also false. Initially the story appears to be a Robinsonade of a sort, about Susan Barton's time on a deserted island. The majority of the novel, however, is located in the less-deserted island to which she escapes, Britain. Its cast of characters both is and is not familiar: Crusoe and

[29] It is less famous that Aristotle asserted this not as a natural description but as a matter of necessity, saying: "If the meanings are unlimited, no account can be given of the thing. Not to mean one thing is to mean nothing, and if words mean nothing rational intercourse with others is destroyed, and even with oneself, for if we do not think one thing we do not think at all. Let us assume, then, that words have one definite meaning" (*Metaphysics* Γ 3 1006a36 - 1005b11).

Friday from Daniel Defoe's deserted island reappear as Cruso (without the ornamental final "e") and Friday, now apparently tongueless, with darker skin. Defoe himself (re)appears under the de-gentrified surname of Foe, and it turns out that the majority of this novel's pages have less to do with life on a deserted island than with Susan's attempts at eliciting his help to craft a marketable narrative for sustaining her life and Friday's.

The plot itself is comprised of four main parts, each of which can be seen to correspond with a phase of Girardian conversion: deception, fall, self-realization, and redemption. However, these phases have also been recast, so as to be both familiar and unfamiliar, at once true and false. Part I presents the deceptive fiction of autobiographical truth familiar from *Robinson Crusoe* through Susan's first person, past tense narration of her island adventure with Friday and Cruso. However an overabundance of quotation marks, protruding from the corners of every paragraph, indicates that this section may not be quite what it seems. Moreover, instead of beginning with a firm historical and geographical location, this story begins with Susan "slipping overboard" in unidentified seas, leaving the reader also very much out to sea, *mise en abyme* (5). In addition to which, Susan's island story occupies the impossible temporal position of being both an imaginative precursor to its literary predecessor, *Robinson Crusoe,* and part of the actual afterlife of that novel.

Part II stages Susan's fall from her confident belief that returning to England will provide an eschatologically redemptive conclusion to her island tale. Toward the end of Part I, Susan had promised Friday that in England he would be "set free," for "life in England is better than life ever was on the island" (41). By contrast, though, the reality Susan encounters in England is dismal and taxing. While this section continues to be narrated in the voice of Susan Barton, now entirely within quotation marks, that voice has shifted from past to present tense and the narrative takes an epistolary form. It is comprised of Susan's letters to Foe, entreating him to help her revise her island narrative for publication, written as she

wanders in an alleged pursuit of Friday's freedom. As the dates of these letters (also enclosed in quotation marks) gradually cease to be included, the voice of Susan becomes less and less certain of the tale she is telling and increasingly attentive to the economic pressures for telling her island truths.

Susan's self-realization, in Part III of the novel, takes the form of doubts. Questions proliferate around her desire to speak, as the quotation marks dramatically recede, restricted only to dialogue. Speaking now in a first person, past tense voice, Susan recounts to Foe, "now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?" (133) That these proliferating questions surrounding speech itself constitute a self-revelation is emphasized in that Susan truly is a fictional character, "speaking words [Coetzee] made up for her." In addition to which, she is clearly a phantom of Defoe's character Susan (who goes by Roxana) in *Roxana*. Yet in relation to her fictional world, the reader is hard-pressed to identify what is true, what false, about Susan's relation to speech. In staging Susan's self-revelatory doubts, the narrative merges stereotypical features of the Gothic novel (such as being set in an isolated, haunted house) and a more conventional strand of formal realism (attending to otherwise conventional happenings in a conventional bourgeois home).

The conclusion to this unconventional conversionary life-story is told from the first person, present tense voice of an unnamed narrator. If the narrator is Susan then it is also *not* Susan, for this narrator returns to the initial shipwreck and finds the corpses of Susan, Cruso, and Friday. In Part IV, there are no quotation marks, save for one moment in which the narrator reads a line from Susan's island story[30] and another moment in which the narrator attempts to ask Friday a question, under water ("'Friday,' I say, I try to say […]" (157)). In

[30] Which, is also *not* her original island story, if one compares the differences between the beginning of the book, "'At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard,'" and this version, "'Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further.' With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard" (1, 155).

foregrounding the material conclusion to Susan's own life story, her death, the narrative also points toward a new stage for the life story of the novel as a genre, wherein writing might be freed from speech, and the clutches of quotation marks, instead anchored more closely to bodies, as "their own signs" (157). If this is a redemptive conclusion, along the model of Girard, it is a very strange one, for Susan herself is not any longer the main object of interest, and the wordless revelation, akin to moments such as the ending of *Crime and Punishment*, takes place in a fantastical underwater realm.

Whereas in *Barbarians*, Coetzee reimagined the conversionary structure of narrative through the Magistrate, in *Foe* he goes further in destabilizing the presuppositions of this structure, taking a certain inspiration from Defoe himself. Six years prior to the publication of *Foe,* Coetzee published "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device" (1980), in which he described a way of reading *Robinson Crusoe* as "belong[ing] to a tradition of conversion narratives." Coetzee identified the phases of its conversionary structure along the lines of the fall from pride that Girard had described by saying, "Defoe's story is about the growth from a state of heedless pride." More specifically, by Coetzee's account, it is pride which results in Crusoe's fall, manifested in "calamity (the shipwreck) and spiritual crisis (on the island)," before leading to a variety of redemption, namely "a more active sense of the fragility of fortune and of God's unceasing intervention in the life of man" (*Doubling the Point* 171).

Much later, in his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1999), Coetzee returned to his interest in how this novel engages the conversion narrative. "In the case of *Robinson Crusoe*," he claimed, "one can see Defoe trying—with incomplete success—to bend the story of his adventurer hero to fit a scriptural pattern of disobedience, punishment, repentance, and deliverance" (vii). In what follows, I will argue that in *Foe* we can see Coetzee trying to bend what he calls the "scriptural pattern of

disobedience, punishment, repentance, and deliverance" in a different way: toward the authority of bodies and the material world.

One indication of the pressures that were causing him to bend the conversion narrative in this direction is provided by the archive. In a notebook of writing ideas for *Foe*,[31] Coetzee wrote the following about his own emerging concerns:

> He wants to write a novel about Roxana's daughter and her relations to Defoe. But there is the story in the newspaper of a boy beaten to death in SWA, photographed with a chain around his neck. Presumably this was someone's son too. 'Somewhere someone was crying.' (28.iii.83)

The phrase "Somewhere someone was crying" is of course now familiar from its use in *Barbarians.* In that novel, the Magistrate elaborates upon the discomfort that awareness causes him, saying:

> it is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me […] I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge […] there seems to be no recovering. (21)

The latter half of that quotation resonates with Coetzee's autobiographical account, in his essay "How I Learned about America – and Africa – in Texas" (1984), of what it meant to be aware of the scale of human suffering during the Vietnam war. "Complicity was not the problem," Coetzee explained, "the problem was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge" (2). Both quotations speak to a sense of shame inscribed in self-consciousness through the knowledge that while one is alive and well, others are experiencing violence and dying. And the earlier quotation from the archive translates that shame into a sense that the writer's preoccupations, his interest in complex narratives and fictional structures, must in some way confront this voiceless suffering. These are the kinds of pressures – to do with embodiment and suffering – that Coetzee brings to bear upon Girard's account of what it is we learn from "the great novels."

[31] See "*Foe*: Green Casebound Notebook with Gild Edges, 1982-1985."

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One of the most striking things about *Foe* is the way it reopens the question of what might count as a "revelation," from *Barbarians*, most memorably in the episodes that circle around Friday's mysterious spinning dance. Susan first introduces this dance with a measure of disdain. When Friday initially dons Foe's old robes and begins to dance, she struggles to explain its significance, saying: "In the grip of the dancing he is not himself. He is beyond human reach." The impenetrability of Friday's dance also initially evokes a desire in Susan "to take the robe away from him, to bring him to his senses" (92). We can see that watching Friday's dance evokes a desire that leads to anger when Susan recounts, "Watching him whirling in his dance, I had to hold back an urge to strike him and tear the wig and robes away and teach him he was not alone on this earth" (98). Like a story with a hidden meaning that she cannot comprehend, Friday's dance confronts Susan with the failure of her own interpretive (and indeed authorial) capacities, a failure that inspires violent anger. This pattern of desire evoked, which then confronts the desiring subject with his or her failed authority, and thus incites violent emotion, is of course familiar from Girard. If this pattern is a symptom of the violent deception Susan inhabits, we turn to consider what variety of revelation is associated with Friday's dance.

In England, Susan and Friday have taken to the road. Faced with rain, they seek refuge in an inn, only to find themselves turned away by the innkeeper. Like Mary and Joseph from the Gospels, this unconventional couple resorts to sheltering in a barn. Soon, a baby in "wrapping-cloth" enters the story, though not as the living Word, but as a corpse discarded on the side of the road (105). Yet these biblical resonances draw the reader's eyes to a counterintuitive, accompanying "revelation" as Susan recounts, "In some despair, and

not knowing what else to do, I stretched out my arms and, with my head thrown back, began to turn in Friday's dance" (103).

After experimenting with Friday's dance, Susan repeatedly attempts to explain this action to herself. Her first explanation is that performing Friday's dance "is a way of drying my clothes […] I dry them by creating a breeze. It is a way of keeping warm. Otherwise I shall perish of cold." Ever the empiricist, Susan proceeds to offer evidence in support of her claim. As she continues to dance, she notes the feeling of "heat, or the illusion of heat" that begins "to steal through my limbs." Not content merely to justify her own performance of Friday's dance, Susan then triumphantly exclaims: "I have discovered why Friday dances in England; which, if we had remained at Mr Foe's, I should never have learned." The import of her findings soon shifts from simply justifying her own indulgent dance to justifying the whole, miserable journey. The progression concludes as she deduces, "I should never have made this discovery had I not been soaked to the skin and then set down in the dark in an empty barn." As if this were not dramatic enough, the justifications soar as Susan pronounces a revelation into the providential structure of life more generally. She boldly leaps from an apparent insight into what motivates Friday's dance, to claiming insight into the meaning of life itself, saying:

> From which we may infer that there is after all design in our lives, and if we wait long enough we are bound to see that design unfolding; just as, observing a carpet-maker, we may see at first glance only a tangle of threads; yet, if we are patient, flowers begin to emerge under our gaze, and prancing unicorns, and turrets. (103)

The dramatized, bathetic movement in her claims may bring to mind Don Quixote's delusional vesting of meaning into events, which Girard interpreted as early evidence of the modern pursuit of ontological completion. Wandering on back roads has clearly been a grueling ordeal, and this moment of insight shimmers with the hope of redeeming that pain by fitting it within a teleology of progressive understanding.

Susan's deductive leap has a familiar pattern to it: behind the grandiose theological justifications of apartheid was an embattled minority arduously eking out a life in the face of great perceived danger. Their claim for a providential existence at the tip of Africa can be seen as a vehement assertion of a meaningful narrative that might justify the pain and fears accompanying a beleaguered existence. The violence that also accompanied the National Party's imposition of a providential apartheid narrative over embodied life reveals an insidious, but often overlooked, violence within the more pervasive habit of identifying and narrating the hidden "truths" of this embodied life. That habit lingers in literary criticism and autobiographical writing alike: it entails the claim of identifying patterns and hidden meanings across the complexities of a textual body or a life that presumes a higher valuation of certain aspects than others.[32] Through Susan's ridiculous deductive leap, Coetzee confronts the reader – and indeed the critic – with reason to question one's own impulses for identifying the great meanings and hidden truths of this novel (or indeed one's own life).

Susan's thoughts soon redouble to revise her initial explanation for Friday's dance, on which she had based her conclusion about providence. After Susan stops spinning, she reaches a new, improved conclusion about why Friday dances, and triumphantly asserts, "in that same instant I understood why Friday had danced all day in your house: it was to remove himself, or his spirit from Newington and England, and from me too. For was it to be wondered at that Friday found life with me as burdensome as I found it with him?" (104) As the very reflexive move that apparently enables insight also undermines Susan's reliability as an interpreter of Friday's intentions, one cannot say with certainty whether she has in fact reached "the truth" about Friday's dance. However, her new interpretation does reveal something about Susan. It reveals a change in her conceptions about what freedom might entail for Friday. Whereas she previously identified herself as the source of his freedom, she

[32] As Carrol Clarkson observes, "throughout Coetzee's writing (both fiction and nonfiction) there is an appreciation of language as material substance – an appreciation that it is something that is seen and heard, as much as it is understood" (67).

now entertains the possibility that "freedom" might look altogether different for Friday, and may even be devoid of her. If this is a moment of self-realization, it is bound up in the doubling back of thought commanded by Susan's bodily experiences of Friday's dance: it is a manifestation of a "truth" tethered more tightly to the body.

Moreover, Susan's encounters with Friday's dance contribute to a transition from asserting her importance in his life to recognizing his importance in hers. In a later reflection, Susan explains to Foe, "In my letters I have told you the story of Friday's dancing. But I have not told you the whole story." Through a confessional dance of seven veils, she courts Foe's interest in her own story by flaunting the metaphorical fabric (fabrication?) concealing these further secrets. "What I did not tell you," she enticingly begins, "was that for his dancing [Friday] would wear nothing but the robes and wig" (118). Susan extends the promise of further salacious truths by raising the possibility that Friday's "lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious mutilation," as a truth that "had hitherto been veiled from me." The language with which Susan promises to reveal this most shameful secret (of Friday's!) is reminiscent of Coetzee's claim about Rousseau's *Confessions* in "Truth in Autobiography": "In the economy of confession […] everything shameful is valuable: every secret or shameful appetite is confessable currency" (3). Her confession to Foe exhibits the same pattern Coetzee identified in Rousseau's *Confessions*, of first offering "a glimpse" of the secret, and then "retract[ing] it, wrap[ping] it up again" (3). Reading this movement alongside "Truth in Autobiography" draws attention to the ways in which Susan's narrative depends on the perpetual presence of "the last veil," without which one is "left with no mystery, [and] no further confession is necessary" (3). Friday's silence, Cruso's corpse: these are the "last veils," the mysterious silences, sustaining Susan's story. As a fictional character, whose life literally depends on the narrative she inhabits, Susan requires the presence of gaps, secrets, and silences she cannot tell to sustain her life. If humans (at least

in modern, Western societies) are confessing animals, inhabiting the world through a narrative of consciousness and social fictions, then this raises questions about our own dependence upon mysteries and silences for sustaining our own life-stories.

However the dramatic sense with which Susan enshrouds the secrets of Friday's dance, as a source of final truths about the mystery of his (possible) castration, does not resolve in authoritative insight, but instead raises further mysteries—another veil. Positioning herself as a herald of revelation, Susan proclaims to Foe that during Friday's dance, "What had been hidden from me was revealed." The language of revelation is sustained as Susan elaborates, "I saw and believed I had seen, though afterwards I remembered Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he had put his hand in the wound" (119-120). In this context, the allusion to the famous Gospel account of doubting Thomas has a desacralizing effect. The most ready effect of this allusion is to recall that, refusing to rely on the testimony of others, Thomas claimed he could only believe in Christ's resurrection with specific empirical proof: "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and *put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side*, I will not believe" (my emphasis John 20.25). By situating this allusion within the context of Susan's confessional double-movement, of promising to reveal something only to cover it back up again, Coetzee draws attention to the same movement in the Gospel account. For the story does not, finally, depict Thomas plunging fingers into wounds.

Instead, after Jesus invites Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing," Thomas simply responds by proclaiming his faith, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20.27, 28). The full range of empirical evidence is, ultimately, never provided. Instead the episode concludes with Jesus chastising Thomas's initial requirement for bodily testimony by saying, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet

believed" (John 20.29). In an episode which also describes Jesus materializing in a room through closed doors, the plausible doubt surrounding what exactly Thomas is supposed to have seen is resolved through appeals to mystery, to faith. So when Susan appeals to "Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he had put his hand in the wound," there is a subtle and subversive reminder that this culturally dominant myth of Christian revelation too depends on mystery, unmoored from the empirical authority of bodily truths. In this episode, Friday becomes the Christ figure, with mysterious wounds and mysterious habits, whose silence is crucial to providing Susan's life-story with meaning.

Susan never definitively reveals Friday's secret; it is always a revelation of more fabrication, more fabric, more veils. Instead of decisively revealing whether or not Friday has been castrated, she reminds Foe that she has not even verified the "truth" of whether Friday's tongue has been cut out. When Cruso had invited her to look into Friday's mouth, she had instead "averted my eyes from seeing." So Foe, and indeed the reader, relies on Susan's claim, and she – in turn – on Cruso's, that Friday has no tongue. Yet Cruso, one may recall, is a rather dubious source. Or so Susan says. According to Susan, "the stories [Cruso] told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile one with another, that I was more and more driven to conclude that age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and he no longer knew for sure what was truth, what fancy" (11-12). However she too has proven to be a slippery source of revelation, which remains perpetually vague, opaque—ambiguous at best. Like Don Quixote's distortions of reality, from Girard's perspective, these failures of truth-telling may be more emblematic and less a matter of personal failings than readers have tended to admit, raising the possibility of a counter-intuitive mode of novelistic revelation.

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An intriguing series of entries in Coetzee's notebook of writing ideas from 1982-1988 is suggestive of the grace entailed in these murky revelations. The entries are located within a section of the notebook discussing the role of Friday, first by considering whether Susan will engage him in sexual intercourse (descending into "'natural' language for Friday") and then as Coetzee cautions himself against turning "Friday into the white man's stereotype: opaque, threatening, belonging to a world of darkness, magic" (9.i.85, 11.i.85). It is in this context that Coetzee takes inspiration from a very different literary archetype for crafting the role of Friday, the figure of Christ:

> The Crucifixion means nothing as long as we identify with those who knew beforehand that Christ was right, his enemies wrong. Read that way, it is merely a story of vindication, and encourages that self-certainty which is the most repellent side of Christianity. We must identify with his accusers, to the extent that we continue to see him as a heretic, an imposter, a fomenter of trouble, someone to be expelled from the body of society. To be a follower of Christ is to be a hypocrite. In fact most Christians today adhere to the doctrine of society and would undoubtedly crucify Christ if he returned. To that extent they are ~~good Chri~~ in good faith. Where they become hypocrites is in claiming to be followers of Christ. All of this is probably in Dostoevsky somewhere. (28.i.85)[33]

This entry specifically emphasizes the opposition between self-certitude and the unrecognizable nature of the Christ figure, but one may well wonder where the evidence is for connecting it with Friday. That evidence follows two notebook entries later:

> He leaves the house, wanders in the streets
> (robes, wig, flute), attracting amused attention.
>
> —
>
> The Word reaches us in the strangest ways. (30.i.85)

Given the context of this entry, within the notebook of writing ideas, there is reason (albeit subtle) to believe that Coetzee was specifically considering the possibilities of casting Friday in a Christological role. Indeed, this connection between Friday and "the Word," as divine revelation, is lightly suggested within the novel itself. If there is a grace in Friday's revelation, though, it no longer facilitates a movement from the material world to an ethereal

[33] The reference here seems to be to the Grand Inquisitor Tale, a story I will discuss at length in Chapter Four.

apocalyptic conclusion, of the kind affirmed by the Doppers, but rather a movement within the text from writing in "the shadow of speech" to a form of writing that closer conforms to the world itself as inscribed revelation (142).

The provisional position from which Friday's revelatory role is heralded is occupied by Foe, the character whose very name designates him as suspect. His unreliability, however, specifically draws attention to the grace entailed in any insights he offers. It is after Susan laments, "All my efforts to bring Friday to speech, or to bring speech to Friday, have failed," that Foe counters with the insight that perhaps instead of speech, Friday might communicate in writing. He then elaborates on a revised eschatological vision for the life-story of *writing* itself: "We are accustomed to believe that our world was created by God speaking the Word; but I ask, may it not rather be that he wrote it, wrote a Word so long we have yet to come to the end of it? May it not be that God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it?" (142-3) Spoken by Foe, this redemptive vision for writing is divested of the illusion of reliability or merit that might authorize a truth-claim.

And the grace evident in this observation is two-fold. On the one hand, it is the elegance of the fit between this reflection and the larger narrative body of *Foe*, which entails a metamorphosis from writing overshadowed by the quotation marks of speech to writing reoriented toward the material world as the standard for truth, or – in more mythological terms – as the inscribed word of God. On the other hand, such a perspective on writing holds out the possibility of social reconciliation. In a world where writing is directed toward the authority of bodies and bodily experience, speech might no longer be prioritized as the sign that invests certain creatures with greater value than others, nor would abstract ideals of truth provide teleological justifications for acts of violence. In such a world, the political project of apartheid could not exist, which inscribed human bodies into geographic, economic, and political positions under the shadow of the abstracted categories "black," "white," "Indian,"

and "coloured." For, the inscribed testimony of bodies is that regardless of designations, each one still suffers under violence and shares the desire, perhaps above all else, to live.

Instead of vesting certain creatures with the distinctive dignity that accompanies speech, then, all creatures would share the dignity of being material inscriptions, and of inscribing themselves, in world history. To continue quoting from *Foe*, "Friday has no speech, but he has fingers, and those fingers shall be his means […] The waterskater, that is an insect and dumb, traces the name of God on the surfaces of ponds, or so the Arabians say. None is so deprived that he cannot write" (143-4). In this fantasy of de-prioritized speech, meaning would no longer be something hidden and separate, a thing to be plundered from the depths of a soul or determined through claims of an authoritative distance for determining the value of various moments and lives; meaning would instead describe a cohesion of form and content in embodied life.

In another notebook entry Coetzee imagines an early version of Susan's explication to Foe on the freedom that Friday wants, which is noteworthy for the suggestions it raises about the anemic effects of prioritizing speech over embodied life:

> 'What Friday wants is more than freedom. Or what Friday calls freedom is more than the word freedom can ever hold. If Friday had his tongue, if he truly had his tongue, if he had the tongue of an angel, if Friday sat among the angels by the throne of God, he would say what the word <u>freedom</u> truly meant [… However] Friday with his tongue would be no better equipped than Friday without his tongue to tell the truth of Friday's desire.'
>
> (All of this goes in the last conversation with Defoe.) (Therewith, I think, is resolved the problem of the book.)
>
> '[…] A long slide from word to word, as long as the story of Friday itself, in quest of a meaning always beyond our grasp.' (4.x.85)

What these religiously resonant snippets from the notebook entry emphasize is a robustness of embodied life, and that which Susan calls "freedom," which cannot be contained in speech. Coetzee's comment that this "resolved the problem of the book" might also signal this as the apotheosis of Susan's self-realization, marked by the grace of a transformative revelation into the inadequacy of speech before the complexities of life about which it attempts to "tell the

truth." Although this self-realization is more obliquely presented in the published book, it remains a central turning point in the text, mere pages before the dramatic concluding section.

If these conversations about Friday circle around the grace of revelation, it is a revelation that finally undermines Susan's confidence in her own speech, reorienting the written narrative of *Foe* toward the material labyrinth it claims to map. In Part IV, the narrative position takes on the first person, present tense, which had only been used inconsistently throughout the earlier portions of the novel. This stylistic change is one component part of the larger metamorphosis from writing in the shadow of speech to writing that more closely reflects the eternity in each present moment. In this persistent present tense, the final section re-imagines the eschatological ending, toward which the conversionary narrative is traditionally oriented, by inscribing it in matter, in bodies, not merely on earth below, but in the sea. Time has finally become inhabitable in the mode envisioned by the Magistrate, in *Barbarians* when he yearns, "to live in time like fish in water" (133). The concluding imagery of *Foe* reorients its composite narrative voice, imbued with allusions and resonances to a grand literary heritage (that spans to include not only "the great novels," but Shakespeare besides), toward a mode of being in the world that is marked by unity with the eternal complexities of any material moment.

For contrast, recall Defoe's endeavor to depict Crusoe's return to England as a fulfillment of the redemptive phase of conversion. *Robinson Crusoe* begins with Crusoe's proud refusal to heed his father's advice that he stay at home and pursue a middling, moderate, secure way of life. Disobeying his father leads to divine punishment as Crusoe confronts tribulation upon tribulation, beginning with his first shipwreck before even having left England. It is only with the later, famed shipwreck and his ensuing twenty-eight (largely isolated) years on the island that Crusoe experiences the revelatory change which leads to his redemption and the reward of returning to England. Latent in this reward are echoes from the

biblical account of that "new heaven" and "new earth" which await those for whom "the first heaven and the first earth" have "passed away and there is no longer *any* sea" (Revelation 21.1). There is literally "no longer *any* sea" for Crusoe when he (initially) returns to England, that veritable New Jerusalem. Through his return to England, and accompanying rewards of wealth and marriage, it seems the eschatological promise has become a reality—except, of course, that Crusoe's story continues in two more volumes, which include returns to sea and various episodes that muddy this eschatological idyll.

When Susan returns to England, little glory shimmers through her experience. If her life beyond the island offers a vision of eternity, it is an altogether more mundane vision of inns and roads and cobwebbed windowpanes. Arriving in Foe's home, Susan notes that it "is not as I imagined it […] But life is never as we expect it to be" (113). The following sentence suggests just how profound the difference between her expectations and experience might be:

> I recall an author reflecting that after death we may find ourselves not among choirs of angels but in some quite ordinary place, as for instance a bath-house on a hot afternoon, with spiders dozing in the corners; at the time it will seem like any Sunday in the country; only later will it come home to us that we are in eternity. (113-4)

The possibility is raised that Susan has not merely entered Foe's home, but that she has entered eternity itself. In my Father's house there are many rooms, but surely it will not be a bathhouse and surely spiders will not plague those rooms? To put it in Foe's suggestive words, "There are more ways than one of living eternally" (125). Yet if Susan has entered the afterlife, what kind of afterlife is it?

Notably, as Hayes has pointed out, the author alluded to in the above long quotation is Dostoevsky, the book *Crime and Punishment*, the speaker Svidrigaylov. Yet here, the suggestion that Svidrigaylov originally made has been spruced up. He had offered the bleak suggestion of "eternity" not as "an idea that cannot be understood, something immense," but rather as "something like a village bath-house, *grimy*, and spiders in every corner" (my

emphasis 305). Svidrigaylov's description is inflected with the dank and dirty recesses of a cultural backwater, whereas Susan's is more luxurious, connoting the leisure of a "Sunday in the country," and the opulence of bath-houses in which even the spiders are "dozing." If Susan raises the possibility of a more mundane, terrestrial vision of eternity, it is by no means bleak. Alas, if this is eternity, it is also not eternity. A second resonance with Svidrigaylov's comment is evident toward the end of *Foe*, when the unnamed diver who plunges into the shipwreck observes, "It is not a country bath-house" (156). The interpretive possibility is made available that by submerging this section in an abyss of material life, Coetzee subjects *Robinson Crusoe*'s eschatological vision to the more mundane, more likely, testimony of shipwrecked bodies: death, where the inscribed word of the body finally and fully overwhelms speech.

Moreover, textual details such as the presence of the spider suggest that an eternity of narrative threads would be required to fully represent even this fictional world. Susan repeatedly invokes comparisons with spiders when describing the silent presences in her own narrative web. She first appeals to the spider as a comparison for Foe's predatory consumption of her island story saying, "the spider has as much art, that watches and waits" (48). Later, she describes Foe as being "like a patient spider who sits at the heart of his web waiting for his prey to come to him" (120). Then, in an attempt to convey the value of speech to Friday, Susan claims, "to live in silence is to live like the whales, great castles of flesh floating leagues apart one from another, or like spiders, sitting each alone at the heart of his web, which to him is the entire world" (59). Although none of these comparisons with spiders is particularly flattering, the grappling comparisons suggest that each silent presence exceeds Susan's descriptive powers, her powers of speech.

The inclusion of these arachnid references that portray silences exceeding the representational capacities of Susan's speech becomes ever more interesting with an

accompanying question from Foe, to Susan, "Are you on the Azores, gazing out to sea, mourning, like Ariadne?" (116) Notably the mythical Ariadne provided a thread by which Theseus traced his way out of a labyrinth after killing the monster hidden at its center, the Minotaur. In *Foe*, Susan's speech is presented similarly to this labyrinth-tracing thread. Now, however, the labyrinth is the material world and the Minotaur the truth. After Theseus escaped the labyrinth he immediately forgot Ariadne, which left her mournfully "gazing out to sea." Whilst she awaited the one, another (Dionysus) arrived and saved her from despair by that most popular conversionary narrative: marriage, as the intervention of a beloved that leads to eternal bliss.

J. Hillis Miller's article "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line" (1976) specifically reminds us of the literary precedent for combining the mythological Ariadne with Arachne, the Greek mythological figure that accounts for the origin of spiders.[34] Hillis Miller points to Shakespeare's portmanteau "Ariachne," in *Troilus and Cressida*, which conflates the predatory "monster" at the center of the labyrinth (as Arachne) with the heroic spinner of thread, Ariadne, whose self-sacrificial spinning leads to self-loss and her own need for saving. Ariachne's double-edged thread that both saves and entraps is aptly, in Hillis Miller's hands, a symbol for narrative. Although it has been spun to trace the labyrinth of this world, the line has become a labyrinth: narrative has become a maze to be escaped. The endless spiral of self-doubt that Coetzee so heavily emphasized in "Confession and Double Thoughts," and Susan's own descent into doubts about her relation to her own narrative, surely come to mind.

To escape a web of speech that has come to separate speakers from the real labyrinth it was intended to map, Hillis Miller advocates the specific merits of writing. In contrast to the "logocentric, monological" narrative lines of speech, writing can convey the repetitions

[34] In view of Coetzee's ongoing interest in Hillis Miller's writing, it seems likely that Coetzee would have read the article. Not only do the notebooks of writing ideas for *Michael K* show that Coetzee had Hillis Miller's "The Critic as Host" (1977) in mind while writing, but Coetzee's "Record of Reading" from the 1970s and 1980s includes Hillis Miller's *Fiction and Repetition* (1982) and *Aspects of Narrative* (1971).

and thicker labyrinthine webs that better fit reality (69). *Foe*'s fictional repetitions (such as the recurrence of characters from canonical stories) and its unidentifiable concluding narrative voice, not to mention its repeated defiance of the law of non-contradictions, make it a good fit with the kind of writing Hillis Miller lauds. Consider Hillis Miller's account of writing's distinctive merits:

> Such a passage in its undecidability bears the indelible traces of being a written document, not something that could ever be spoken by a single voice and so returned to a single *logos*. There is always, in such passages, something left over or something missing, something too much or something too little. This forbids translating the written text back to a single mind, imagined or real. In one way or another the monological becomes dialogical, the unitary thread a Möbius strip, with two sides and yet only one side. (73)

Foe's growing resistance to the representation initially provided through Susan's "single mind, imagined or real," and the complex coherence of its multifaceted parts, *is* the performative redemption of its narrative. Instead of revealing truth as something that is anemically single-voiced, the story draws Susan's attention to what such truths may leave out. In so doing, it potentially also draws readers' attention to the persistently niggling bits of textual evidence that exceed and resist our own critical truth-telling endeavors.

Hillis Miller describes novels that resist the "monological, logocentric" constraints of speech saying, "These empty corridors are vacant of any Minotaur. The Minotaur, as Ruskin saw, is a spider, Arachne—arachnid who devours her mate, weaver of a web which is herself, and which both hides and reveals an absence, the abyss. Her text is a *mise en abyme*" (73). In *Foe*, the possibility of a hidden monster lurking in the shipwreck is first proposed by Foe as "the *kraken* […] which has arms as thick as a man's thigh and many yards long, and a beak like an eagle's […] lying on the floor of the sea, staring up through tangled fronds of weeds at the sky, its many arms furled about it, waiting" (140). Although various "spiders" lurk in the narrative, there is never any sign of a kraken. In the final pages of this fiction, the diver who passes into the sunken shipwreck suggests, "If the kraken lurks anywhere, it lurks

here" (156). Yet in place of hidden truths or secret monsters, at the heart of the wreck is an eternity of matter: "In the black space of this cabin the water is still and dead, the same water as yesterday, as last year, as three hundred years ago" (156-7). Submerged in this dead water are the corpses of "Susan Barton and her dead captain, fat as pigs in their white nightclothes, their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks, their hands, puckered from long immersion, held out in blessing, float" (157). This benediction does not mark the eternal life of the spirit, but a far less savoury "grace" of distended bodies, slowly decomposing in a process that facilitates material unity with the larger world.

In the interview that would come to introduce "Confession and Double Thoughts," in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee would expressly connect Friday with a variety of reimagined grace. He recalls that, "The last pages of *Foe*" evince "a certain power. They close the text by force, so to speak […] Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body." Susan's speech slips away, and these corpses occupy the final word – the last judgment – in the narrative. They provide a standard for truth – a canon for the story's narrative – as well as a means of closure. Alluding to Aristotle's formulation of truth, Coetzee goes on to explain, in the interview:

> If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (248)

In the autobiographical speech of Susan Barton, and the final written pages that purport to be the place where bodies are their own signs, *Foe* foregrounds the ways in which truth claims always already are not what they claim to be. By contrast, here, Coetzee emphasizes the truth that bodies provide: the grace and truth of bodies is that being and symbol unite.

Moreover, as myths and stories fade, the material world persists, offering its correctives, and asserting its claims through the body, its affections and desires. On one level, the redemptive "grace" staged by this novel may be a movement in Susan's own life-story

away from a confident but deceptive belief in the authority of her speech for revealing the truths of her embodied world. On another level, however, the redemptive movement progresses through stages in the novel's own history (from formal allusions to Defoe's autobiographical style, to the epistolary novel, to the gothic-formal realist) before concluding in a vision for a new phase in fiction writing, one liberated from the shadows of speech, and better approximating the world where "bodies are their own signs" (157).

In this conception of redemption, "grace" is reoriented away from Girard's vertical intervention of truer truths about the material world, with which it might be made to conform. Rather, *Foe*'s narrative is reoriented toward embodied truths, the kind of truths that apartheid had endeavored to subjugate before its legislated narratives. As Coetzee puts it, in the aforementioned *Doubling the Point* interview:

> Not grace, then, but at least the body. Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (248)

By re-orienting the redemptive narrative of *Foe* toward the bodies of its characters, particularly Friday, as a source of insight into a rather different mode of truth and grace, Coetzee orients this narrative, structurally, toward the very bodily power that the apartheid fiction had aimed to obstruct. The redemptive possibilities in this movement specifically pertain to the doubts and hesitations it might inspire surrounding the truth-telling impulse to assert meaning over the world—an impulse whose violence was particularly evident in the narratives that apartheid imposed over the complexities of embodied life.

Repositioning Fiction, Repositioning the Fictioneer

From citations in his critical works, we know that Coetzee continued to think about the social significance of fiction with reference to Girard. Contemporaneous with the publication of *Barbarians*, he published the essay "Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising" (1980), which appeals to Girard's concept of mimetic desire to demystify the advertising industry's manipulation of consumer desire. In "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985), he investigated presuppositions of conversion in confessional narratives, again referencing Girard. He also suggested that *Barbarians* be read alongside "Confession and Double Thoughts," in the final interview for *Doubling the Point* (394). Coetzee then returned to Girard in "Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Rivalry and Madness" (1992), which he republished in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), a monograph that aligns itself with "the spirit of Erasmus" and provides Coetzee's most sustained, most developed, articulation of the role of an author or scholar in relation to a "politics of desire" (ix, 118). Throughout these publications, Coetzee repeatedly returned to the question of how fictions might stage revelatory and redemptive encounters in societies where corporations manipulate structures of desire for the good of some, at the expense of many.

In "Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising," Coetzee relied upon Girard's theory of mimetic desire to provide an account of how advertisements often work. He describes how, after having evidently made use of whatever product is being sold, a model looks out of the magazine page, projecting an image of the ontological completion (the divinity) that viewers so desire, thereby enticing viewers to purchase and consume whatever that model has apparently consumed in order to attain the divinity she radiates. With the hope that imitating the model's desires will also leave the viewer completely happy, free, and perhaps even desirable, consumers readily enslave themselves to jobs not simply to pay the bills, but to fund a pursuit of transcendence—a promise that always lies one possession away.

Emphasizing the real economic, social, and political impact of this manipulation of desire, Coetzee says:

> Nevertheless, it can barely escape our attention that it is to someone's material benefit that people should have models of how to desire, that these models should appear to be without authorship, and that the feelings aroused in their beholders should include an envy and sense of worthlessness that cannot be assuaged, no matter how much the beholder buys, because the desires he is trying to satisfy are transcendent. (38-9)

Harmful though this manipulation may be, Coetzee is emphatic that it is not only viewers of advertisements who are entrapped by these webs of desire, but the advertisers themselves. Offering his own historicizing account of the "networks of mediated desire," Coetzee explains that they have become "most all-inclusive in modern materialist individualist societies where a public ideology of equal opportunity for all reigns and failure is therefore experienced by the individual as unredeemable private ontic shame" (37).

Aligning his critical perspective with Girard, against Fred Inglis's *The Imagery of Power*, Coetzee performs what he prescribes as the role of the critic: he orients his analysis toward exposing "the [advertising] system itself: first the desire that informs it, then the forces that create it" (137). Looking to Inglis as a representative of the "school of F.R. Leavis," Coetzee claims that this tradition of reading perpetuates the anachronistic illusion that advertisers are privileged inhabitants of an "unmediated original" world as opposed to viewers who inhabit a "fallen, mediated modern" world (136, 138). By this account, Inglis evinces the false belief that advertisers retain a privileged position outside of the fictions of desire that they manipulate. Coetzee, who finds it "profoundly to be doubted whether advertisers in fact stand outside the system of fantasy that reigns in society and manipulate it for their own ends," implicitly identifies a central desire perpetuated by both the advertising system and critics of it, such as Inglis, as the desire for an unmediated way of inhabiting the world, what Girard would call "divinity." Moreover, he claims that this observation is also true of the readers and writers of novels.

Coetzee would return to the topic of advertising in *Giving Offense*, in the chapter on Catherine MacKinnon's advocacy of censoring pornography, where he raises the somewhat dubious possibility of redemptive engagements with pornographic tropes aimed at rehabilitating disordered desires. Referring to Sartre, Coetzee uses the term "aesthetic redemption" to describe the possibility of pornographic representations that expose how objectifying processes diminish perceptions of another's subjecthood, and (relatedly) of one's very self (perhaps as being-for-oneself) (71). His imagined remedy specifically includes a mode of fiction aimed at creating conscious awareness of unsavory, and potentially suppressed, desires and perspectives alongside their costs and harms.

In raising this possibility, Coetzee also obliquely suggested a connection with his own fictions, saying, "Nor is Dostoevsky the only writer one can think of who would run into trouble under strictures on pornography like MacKinnon's" (73). The implication is that he too has produced novels with ethically serious aspirations in the particular ways in which they replicate gendered power roles and sexualized objectification. Indeed, when Coetzee suggests that MacKinnon has missed the real import of such works, it may be instructive for our reading of *Barbarians*. For the point, he tells us, is to address disordered desires by exposing them and their harmful effects, rather than adding to their power through suppression. By Coetzee's logic, if people merely go around sweeping unsightly, deformed desires under proverbial carpets, these desires will gain force and continue to be preyed upon for corporate interests. The gendered power roles in the Magistrate's objectifying relations with the barbarian girl might well be an instance of a depiction that also stages a viscerally-charged encounter in an effort at playing upon readers' desires in order to expose them for conscious negotiation.

Perhaps these sideways glances provide reason to understand *Barbarians* as part of a larger turn in Coetzee's *oeuvre* toward writing fictions aimed at countering what Girard

described as the "evil" of mimetic desire: that deep metaphysical impulse "which weaves man's thread in the wrong direction, thus separating what it claims to unite and uniting what it claims to separate" (192). In this possibility of pornographic writing that exposes the "evil" of mimetic desire, we might hear the echo of Girard's claim that, "Sexuality mirrors the whole of existence; fascination is everywhere in our political, social, and private lives but it is never acknowledged; it tries to pass either for detachment or for its opposite, 'engagement'" (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* 161). Of course, the possibility always remains that this is simply another justification for pornographic writing, driven by motivations that an author would hardly admit to themselves, no less to their readers.

Nevertheless, this may, to some extent, illuminate what was at stake in Coetzee's use of terms such as "confession," "grace," and "cynicism" when he identified the writing of "Confession and Double Thoughts" as pivotal in a metamorphosis in own thinking—a metamorphosis from more microscopic considerations to "a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world, his situation and perhaps still mine" (394). I have claimed that Coetzee used these terms not to describe any singular moment of conversion to a new or more authoritative narrative, but a gradual – and at some point, very intentional – shift in his posture toward fictions.

This shift gradually looks more and more like Coetzee's discussion of "Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Rivalry and Madness" (1992), which was itself strongly inflected by his readings of Girard. There, Coetzee probes further into the political positions available to "the scholar, the man of *theoria* who sees behind the masks to the dynamic truly running the play" (13). With Girard's concept of mimetic desire in view, Coetzee examined how lady Folly's voice afforded Erasmus a distinctive "non-position" from which to expose the mad self-certainty shared by the rival political powers of his age, Luther and the Papacy.

He claimed that through the voice of Folly, Erasmus attained a measure of success in getting beyond a discursive economy determined by the religious rationality of his times. He did this, Coetzee tells us, by first asking what it means "*to take a position*":

> Is there a position which is not a position, a position of *ek-stasis* in which one knows without knowing, sees without seeing? *The Praise of Folly* marks out such a 'position,' prudently disarming itself in advance, keeping its phallus the size of a woman's, steering clear of the play of power, clear of politics. (14)

The very assertion of weakness is what provides Erasmus's Folly her distinctive power. Her flagrantly suspect position enables her to speak truths without inspiring rivalry. This kind of folly is distinguished from "truth" only by its position, not by its content. In Coetzee's summary of Erasmus's account, he emphasizes that this position stands opposed to the mad, self-certain adherence to a position of rivalry that results in "bloodlust, greed, illicit passion," and it does so from a position that is available "only to the subject who declares himself outside the discourse commanded by, and commanding, the fray, that is, outside reason, that is, inside a certain kind of folly" (9-10). Coetzee then raises the possibility that fiction might now be an ideal position from which to offer such criticisms.

Whereas in "Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising" Coetzee had advocated the role of the scholar as one of demystifying desires, and the forces that manipulate desires, this essay suggests the possibility that such a role might itself evince a mad pursuit of knowledge—depending on the position from which it is performed. Mitigating his prior position, Coetzee thus notes, "Without social fictions there is no society. It is madness […] to *seriously* try to destroy these fictions." What Erasmus calls a "truly prudent man" is not one who aspires to be wiser than he is, but instead a person that feigns ignorance or permits his deception cheerfully (13). This observation reflects a more moderating view of the merits of demystification, or at least a more cheerful awareness that projects of demystification may also be unhelpfully positioned on foundational affirmations of "truer truths," belaying a madness of certainty in their own rationality.

By contrast, Coetzee would argue that society is built upon fictions, including "foundational fiction[s]," such as human dignity (14). Drawing attention to what he takes to be the fictional status of this concept was by no means to diminish its significance; rather, Coetzee claims that admitting the fictional nature of "truths" like human dignity is what enables the kind of positioning most appropriate for negotiating life. Losing sight of the fictional foundation of human dignity leads to those undignified positions that recall the madness of self-certainty identified by lady Folly.

Coetzee expressly keeps Erasmus in view as he offers a conversionary account of an "actor" who realizes that all narratives are, finally, fictions:

> Life, says Erasmus's Folly, is theater: we each have lines to say and a part to play. One kind of actor, recognizing that he is in a play, will go on playing nevertheless; another kind of actor, shocked to find he is participating in an illusion, will try to step off the stage and out of the play. The second actor is mistaken. For there is nothing outside the theater, no alternative life one can join instead. The show is, so to speak, the only show in town. All one can do is to go on playing one's part, though perhaps with a new awareness, a comic awareness. (15)

If this is a conversion, the "actor" who undergoes a moment of self-realization does not encounter Girard's religious or intellectual truths, as such, but a rather suspect insight into the nature of this world as a stage inhabited and enlivened through stories, fictions. Those who obtain this realization and take the misguided step of refusing to play anymore might even represent Coetzee's vehement early commitment to demystifying the delusions of his historical moment. What Coetzee now advocates, instead, is to play one's role with the "comic awareness" that I too am playing my part in an illusion, inevitably deceived.

As ever, for Coetzee the superiority of this "style" of approach to life is evident in what it enables: "True respect is a variety of love and may be subsumed under love; to respect someone means, inter alia, to forgive that person an innocence that, outside the theater, would be false, a dignity that would be risible" (15). When life is viewed from the position of playing a role in the theater, one can forgive oneself the insidious taint that always

lurks in any thought, any action, and one can forgive another for detectable falsities and failures. We are all playing our parts for the first time; there is no rehearsal. This is a variety of grace that, to Coetzee's mind, enables a depth of honesty into the truly deceived ways in which we live. In this play, the role of the fiction-writer, or at least of Coetzee, seems to entail pointing beyond the now dominant script of reason to potential new storylines, new ways of approaching the play, at the very least to cultivate conscious awareness of the distance between narratives and the embodied life they mediate.

III.

Rudolf Bultmann, Negative Theology, and the Work of Biography in *Life & Times of Michael K*

In the early 1980s Nadine Gordimer gave voice to a developing conviction that the role of "the writer in South Africa [was] as interpreter, both to South Africans and to the world, of a society in struggle".[35] This conviction became dramatically inscribed in critical memory through the controversial initial reception of J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) in South Africa.[36] Yet with the benefits of historical distance and previously inaccessible archival evidence, it is increasingly evident that Coetzee specifically resisted the role of "interpreter," and the assumption such a concept makes about the writer's capacity to see truths about society to which others are blind. Following the tracks of Coetzee's own reading notes on the German existentialist theologian and New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), during the time in which he was writing *Michael K*, sheds new light on how this fiction aims not to represent truths or a moral vision in any direct sense, but to instead cultivate readers' attentiveness to the inadequacy of narrative itself before the fullness of embodied life.

Amongst the archival materials unveiled to the public for the first time in the Coetzee Papers was a notebook of Coetzee's writing ideas from 1972-1982, which includes notes

[35] This essay was based on her James Lecture for the New York Institute for the Humanities (1982). Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', *The New York Review of Books* (1983), 24.
[36] Hereafter abbreviated as *Michael K*.

from his readings of Bultmann that were made while writing *Michael K*. We already knew of Coetzee's familiarity with Bultmann from his translation and commentary, "Achterberg's 'Ballade van de Gasfitter': The Mystery of I and You" (1977), which cites Bultmann's lecture, "What Does It Mean to Speak of God?" (1925). It is not clear how Coetzee had initially come across Bultmann, but it is also not entirely surprising that he had: Bultmann is one of the key figures of liberal theology in the twentieth-century, who gained particular prominence for endeavoring to demythologize the New Testament, in favor of an existential approach to biblical texts. That Coetzee's interest in Bultmann was not a merely passing phenomenon has become evident through the discovery of notes on three of Bultmann's books, on unnumbered pages at the back of the notebook of writing ideas for *Michael K*.[37] These notes focus on *History and Eschatology* (1957), *Theology of the New Testament*, *Vol II* (1955), and *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (1964): especially in the final two of these texts, Bultmann had worked out a dialectical hermeneutic identifying the revelation of the Gospels not with truth claims or historical insights, but with the reading experience it stages, and this is what proves most illuminating for considering Bultmann alongside *Michael K*.[38]

One of Bultmann's most striking claims was that the language of the Gospels had become archaic, and that it thereby inhibited modern readers from experiencing the authentic encounter it was intended to stage. To remedy this problem, he developed a dialectical reading strategy for interpreting, and thus restaging, that encounter. As a cursory overview, his approach to reading the Gospels entailed: (1) identifying what kinds of language are used, and how they function; (2) demonstrating that the Gospels also include negations of the very language upon which they rely, in order to point readers toward encounters with the divine, which exceeds narration; and (3) identifying the synthesis of these first two movements, not as their resolution, but as the creation of a dissonant condition in which readers just might

[37] My attention was initially drawn to these materials by Attwell's lecture, "The Life of Writing in J.M. Coetzee: Autobiography into Fiction," at the Coetzee's Lives Colloquium, 13 June 2014, University of Oxford.
[38] See "Bultmann, Rudolf" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (252).

encounter that which exceeds narration, and in so doing, gain a greater awareness of their own existential condition. These three movements will structure my ensuing reading of the three-part narrative of *Michael K*, which stages a rather more diffuse reading experience with noteworthy similarities, focused not on staging potential encounters with the divine, but on cultivating readers' awareness of what I will provisionally call the inarticulable fullness of life—conscious that this attempt at naming is also inevitably a misnaming.

It is not clear how much biographical knowledge Coetzee might have had about Bultmann himself, but Bultmann's theology (and its identification of the "meaning" of the Gospels as located beyond the remit of language) is closely connected with his staunch resistance to the rise of National Socialism in Germany. James. F. Kay, Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics at Princeton Theological Seminary, describes the relation between Bultmann's approach to theology and his political activities saying, "as early as May of 1933, amid the full flush of Nazi enthusiasm, Bultmann had lectured to his classes that no nation is so 'pure and clean' that its will can be equated with that of God." Rather than producing nationalistic theology, Bultmann had "called for theology to serve the nation by exercising prophetic criticism." Moreover, he had enacted this vision of prophetic criticism as Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Marburg by drafting a declaration on behalf of the faculty of theology in opposition to "any extension of the new Nazi laws that would have excluded non-Aryans from church office" (83).

In 1934, Bultmann joined in establishing the Confessing Church, a movement that condemned the *Reichskirche* and opposed Nazi ecclesial control. That same year he staked his position as an editor for a "prestigious academic series" on the publication of a dissertation by his student Hans Jonas—a dissertation which would become "one of the few [books] by Jews published in Germany during the Nazi period" (Kay 83). Bultmann's political commitment to resisting conflations between the dominant nationalist narrative and

the will of God not only informed his hermeneutics, but it is also suggestive of the political import of the claims I will make about *Michael K,* as being a fiction crafted to resist presuppositions of any narrative's authority over life. Such presuppositions were clearly at play in the Afrikaner nationalist application of the apartheid narrative to structure society; yet they were also, albeit in a different way, shared by prominent oppositional positions in South Africa during the early-1980s, as is reflected in Gordimer's own approach to literature in that period.

Gordimer's review of *Michael K,* "The Idea of Gardening" (1984), famously decried Coetzee's failure to represent the progress made by black South Africans against apartheid, yet we can now recognize three relevant presuppositions that also limited her reading. The first presupposition was that, in the apartheid context, a social imperative bound writers to produce a moral vision for their readers. Gordimer specifically determined that, in *Michael K*, Coetzee had failed that imperative by failing to depict "the energy of the will to resist evil," and thereby taking up a "questionable position for a writer […] in South Africa" (6). In an interview for *Doubling the Point*, published nine years after *Michael K*, Coetzee would tentatively suggest an alternative conception of a writer's responsibility, raising the possibility of responding to a "transcendental imperative," or the "awareness of an idea of justice, somewhere, that transcends laws and lawmaking" (340). Reading *Michael K* alongside Coetzee's engagement with Bultmann enables us to see something that Gordimer could not: namely, that his fiction cultivates readers' attentiveness to just such a transcendental imperative, not through direct representation, but through staging narrative failures before the world it initially appears to "represent."

A second relevant presupposition in Gordimer's review was that writers have a special capacity to see and represent a moral vision, and to recognize its defining qualities, such as justice and freedom. In the aforementioned *Doubling the Point* interview, Coetzee

addressed this presupposition by invoking Plato's cave metaphor. He described his own writing self in unexceptional terms, "as someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations—which are shadows themselves—of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light" (341). I aim to show that *Michael K* specifically resists the presumption of authority – and the risk of cliché or literary staleness – implicit in representing freedom or justice as such, and instead represents characters (inconsistently) straining at "their chains," perhaps even "slipping" them, in brief moments of encounter that exceed not only the purviews of laws and lawmaking, but also of this narrative. Moreover, the story aims to stage that which it represents, by creating the literary conditions in which readers too might, even fleetingly, gain an expanded awareness of these lives, and this world, as exceeding the narrative upon which we rely to make sense of them. In potential moments of expanded awareness, that are not quite articulable, readers might just encounter something like "freedom," which Coetzee, following Kant, has claimed, "is another name for the unimaginable" (341).

However, elevated discussions of "freedom" as "the unimaginable" risk ringing hollow as we return to Gordimer's emphasis on acute political concerns, to identify the third key presupposition in her review: the presupposition that *Michael K* is – or should be – the kind of novel that has a hero. Not only was Gordimer generally distressed that, "Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it," but she specifically lamented, "No one in this novel has any sense of taking part in determining [the course of history]; no one is shown to believe he knows what that course should be" (3, 6). Gordimer was not lamenting the absence of just any kind of hero, but of the kind of hero one would expect from the *Lives of* biographical tradition: a moral exemplar and source of authoritative revelation about one's historical moment.

In her concern over the absence of any heroic representation, what Gordimer was unable to appreciate was that the narrative of *Michael K* is precisely populated with the people, affections, and places eschewed as "excess" by the apartheid narrative. The main character K is a vagrant who encounters thieves, prostitutes, a pimp, and state agents who secretly desire forbidden pleasures and freedoms; he inhabits liminal spaces, from highways and byways to the hidden places of labor camps and a looted building in Cape Town, even spending time squatting on an abandoned farm. Not only did such characters, desires, and places not fit in the nationalist apartheid narrative, but they would also have been minimized through the focused attention on heroic black freedom fighters that Gordimer sought. Yet by turning to read *Michael K* alongside the three movements in Bultmann's dialectical hermeneutics, we can see how, instead of providing moral or historical revelation into South Africa's interregnum period, this story sets out the literary conditions in which readers can cultivate an attentiveness to the liminalities and excesses that not only failed to fit with the apartheid narrative, but also fail to fit with the conceptual configurations we necessarily rely upon to navigate even fictional life.

Invocations of Biographical Expectation

It may be less than coincidental that in the years leading up to the publication of his *Life & Times* narrative Coetzee was reading Bultmann, whose works specifically respond to a nineteenth-century liberal tradition of German theology marked by biographical pursuits. After the publication of David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1835), "lives of Jesus" narratives had proliferated, attempting to distill the *true* life of Jesus from the mythological language of the Gospels. These had provided readers with the very characteristics that Gordimer sought in *Michael K*, depicting Jesus as a moral exemplar, whose life-story offered insights into the progress of history.

Bultmann had become disenchanted with this theological tradition. What he came to realize, according to Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics James F. Kay, was that "the liberal 'lives of Jesus,' biographies written to inspire faith, had been rendered untenable by scholarly research that squarely placed the Gospel into the context of the myths and cult-dramas known to the Graeco-Roman world" (83). Any project of distinguishing historical language from the mythological was, to his mind, wrong-headed: there was no historical language in the Gospels. Instead, as James M. Byrne has pointed out, he believed it remained "necessary to delineate the conceptual framework and categories with which one is working" (376).

Bultmann elaborated on this approach in his commentary on *The Gospel of John* saying, "exegesis has as its first task to discover what *possible forms of expression were open to the author; the possibilities being those he has inherited with the tradition in which he stands*" (20). Whereas the "lives of Jesus" narratives had endeavored to remove mythological language from a historical message, Bultmann claimed the Gospel of John was entirely comprised of mythological language, and that attention to language as a culturally-relative phenomenon was in fact essential to the reading event. Instead of seeking to expunge the mythological from the historical, he attempted to identify the elements of Gnostic mythology in John's account, and how that mythos created a certain idiom through which the representation functioned.

From the earliest paratext that readers encounter, *Michael K* suggests an alignment with biographical tradition. Not only might the title readily evoke the "lives of Jesus" tradition, but also a larger tradition of Great Men biographies extending back to Plutarch's first century *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. On the heels of this title, the epigraph, taken from G. S. Kirk's translation of Heraclitus's *The Cosmic Fragments*, might suggest initial confirmation that this will be a book about a hero, a man of mythic proportions,

verging on the divine. Its words, "*War is the father of all and king of all. / Some he shows as gods, others as men / Some he makes slaves, and others free*," may readily inspire expectations that the ensuing story will portray a life that has taken on a certain social distinction. Readers are thus primed to anticipate a story focusing on a character of significance, whether good or bad, god or man, slave or free. Lest these suggestions seem too grandiose to inspire emulation, however, the narrative immediately signals that K's humanity cuts deep, by beginning with a description of the harelip that marks him from birth.

Throughout Part I, narrative features continue to encourage biographical expectations. A third person, past tense narration of actions, words, and what appears to be the interior life of K encourages expectations of objectivity, perhaps even invoking the assumption that this unnamed narrator is an authoritative biographer. When K carts his mother away from Cape Town (amid rampant violence, chaos, and a strong army presence), it may initially appear that he embarks on a quest of filial piety, not least because they travel toward the Karoo, which could be interpreted as signifying a distant pastoral promise of peace. Journeying toward what may have been the childhood home of his mother, Anna, the plot structure even invokes sensibilities familiar from the Great Trek mythology, in which heroic Afrikaner forefathers were said to have fled urban degradation and the constraints of colonial rule in pursuit of a pastoral idyll.

Allusions to heroic motifs proliferate, inviting a reading of K's journey as a quest of some kind. Formidable challenges proliferate as an opaque bureaucracy hinders his start; police curtail his initial attempts at reaching Prince Albert; K and his mother are accosted by thieves; his mother dies; he is repeatedly incarcerated in labor camps, despite leading an apparently harmless existence. Such plot elements may readily suggest that the world is conspiring against K, invoking a well-established biographical paradigm in which the protagonist attains heroic stature by overcoming formidable obstacles.

In addition to all this, a distinctively religious register is threaded throughout the story, potentially suggesting a providential or cosmological significance to the life of K. Certain phrases specifically invoke the divine: "It is God's earth," "God knows why," "God knows what," and "God knows how" (53, 182, 185, 204). Repeatedly, descriptions of K recall figures from Scripture. On the Visagie farm, K's gardening practices are evocative of Adam, steward of the Garden of Eden, father of humanity, Man before the Fall. K's wanderings, alone and at times in the wilderness, alongside his development of an apparently ascetic habit of vegetarian consumption, may even recall the habits of Old Testament prophets.

Indeed, within the critical reception of *Michael K* much ink has been spilled on these elevated biographical features. A variety of arguments depict this fiction as providing examples of how to live, as well as historical insight.[39] Most prominently, in Gordimer's review, she identified the meaning of *Michael K* with its representation of K as a gardener, saying, "Beyond all creeds and moralities, this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her" (4). Yet by turning to Part II of this story, informed by the second movement of Bultmann's dialectical hermeneutics, I will show that *Michael K* continually undermines the very biographical expectations it raises.

Negating Biographical Expectations

Bultmann described the antithesis of his dialectical hermeneutics in his commentary on *The Gospel of John* by saying that through the use of "Gnostic form[,] a pointed anti-Gnostic

[39] For example: in "Ability in Disability: J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and the Empowerment of the Disabled," Ayobami Kehinde claims that K's "vulnerability," "compensated for by his strong sense of responsibility and virtues," distinguishes him as "the eponymous hero of the story" (64). In "The Poetics of Dwelling: A Consideration of Heidegger, Kafka, and Michael K," Eric Paul Meljac argues for K's exemplary relationship with the land, and in "An Infinite Question: The Paradox of Representation in *Life & Times of Michael K*," Tamlyn Monson proffers that in Part I, "K moves toward an ethical relation to the Other" (91). Shadi Neimneh and Fatima Muhaidat present K as fulfilling a near-prophetic role, saying, "Coetzee voices through K a political statement in the form of a critique of our neglect of nature, which is as bad as instrumentalizing it," in "The Ecological Thought of J.M. Coetzee: The Case of *Life and* [sic] *Times of Michael K* (7).

theology is expressed" (9). He claimed that, alongside its use of a Gnostic lexicon, John specifically included contradictory language and ideas in order to open the possibility for encounters with the divine that exceed the specificity of narration. Drawing attention to ways in which the beginning of John's Gospel negates the very Gnostic language and concepts it deploys, Bultmann went so far as to say, "this is precisely [John's] intention: not to teach anything about the origin of the world, but to designate the Logos in a manner that takes him away from the sphere of the world. This designation is in the first instance wholly *negative*" (32).

In Bultmann's account, this use of negation was vital not for representing a higher order truth *per se*, but for pointing readers beyond the narrative. As Bultmann explains, "The truth to be expressed lies between the alternating and apparently contradictory ways in which the Logos is defined: for [the Logos] cannot be adequately expounded in the language of the myth; it has rather to be grasped from the succession of contradictory propositions" (34). This understanding also illuminates the "alternating and apparently contradictory ways" in which *Michael K* negates the very biographical conventions upon which it relies, to draw readers' attention toward life as that which exceeds narration.

We can see from two excerpts in Coetzee's notebook of writing ideas for *Michael K* that the negative movement in his text is by no means incidental. In the first, Coetzee considers having K overtly identify his own silence as resistance to meaning-making paradigms: "K articulates: It takes cunning and doggedness to work through a whole life-story without a meaning, without laying yourself open to people who could say, 'Yes, you mean such-and-such' […]" (82).

In second excerpt, Coetzee identifies a connection between the meaning-making paradigms of genre and their constraining effects on the lives they mediate. He writes:

> One of K's complaints is in fact against <u>the system</u>: he obsessively feels that a paradigm is being fitted over his life (the paradigm of history and historical

> representativeness in the novel), and rebels against the dominance of this paradigm: other people can live according to 'history' if they wish, but he wants to live according to ? . The crunch is of course that while he appears to concede that we must all live according to paradigms—a relativist position—he in fact wants to live according to none—he wants to live a life of meaning-in-itself or meaning-to-itself. (52)

By specifically juxtaposing "the system" with "the paradigms of history and historical representativeness in the novel," Coetzee imbues this reflection on the narrative paradigms that order life with a politicized aspect, suggesting that they impose and administer bureaucratizing constraints over the very lives they represent.

This politicized relationship between narrative paradigms and life is most directly dramatized in Part II of *Michael K*, which takes the form of a medical officer's diary entries, his recording of thought, confession, life-writing. Moreover, if the 'crunch' is indeed, as Coetzee noted above, that K desires an impossible mode of life, beyond all narrative paradigms, as "meaning-in-itself or meaning-to-itself," we will later consider episodes in which he is represented as (potentially) experiencing fleeting moments of something that just might be authentic existence, perhaps reminiscent of Sartre's being-in-itself. Yet to depict this possibility, *Michael K* specifically incorporates a negative movement that draws attention to the constraints and failures of historical paradigms before the fullness of its world, and of K's life.

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Part II of the book begins with an unexplained change in narration. An abrupt transition to the medical officer's first person, present tense narration sweeps readers' attention from the life-story we have been reading, and onto the very process in which we have been involved: the process of making sense of K's life. Now shorn of the putative objectivity implied by Part I's unidentified third person narration, and the authoritative perspective suggested by its

use of the past tense, Part II confronts readers with one character's naked attempts at creating meaning for himself by identifying it in another.

However, an inclusion of dissonant details, such as the narrator's persistent misappellation of Michael K as "Michaels," undercuts any presupposed confidence in his capacity to identify, no less assess, the meaning of K's life. The very form of diary entries creates a sense of stylistic discord with the medical officer's insistence that the meaning he identifies in K is not merely subjective: "Michaels means something, the meaning he has is not private to me" (226). Tainted by the limitations of the personal, the personality, the medical officer's account of K not only troubles expectations of biographical authority and distance, but potentially also raises questions about how personal motivations might impact the reader's own account of this story's truths.

Indeed, the narrative itself repeatedly draws attention to self-interested motivations behind the medical officer's attempts to identify K's meaning. By the end of Part II, K has escaped from the camp where the medical officer works, and the change in his physical location corresponds with a shift in the medical officer's writing: biographical descriptions of the (present) K, using the third person personal pronoun "he," become confessions directed at the (absent) K, with the second person personal pronoun "you." By the end of Part II, the medical officer is no longer confiding in a diary, but confessing to K himself. Yet shimmering through this increasingly pietistic mode is a distinctively less savory desire to master K through narration, and in so doing, to fix both characters' meaning.

Consider how the following doxological proclamation of K's "truth" gives way to an undercurrent of anxiety surrounding self-identity: "as I watched you day after day I slowly began to understand the truth: that you were crying secretly, unknown to your conscious self (forgive the term), for a different kind of food, food that no camp could supply […] I was the only one who saw that you were more than you seemed to be" (224-5). Prior to the ellipsis,

the phrasing suggests the discovery of a truth of messianic proportions, evoking the words of Jesus, "My meat [i.e. food] is to do the will of Him that sent me" (John 4.34). K is no mere mortal; as his very sustenance is of a different order, so too must be his significance. By the excerpt's end, the truth-claim erodes into blatant self-affirmation: "I was the only one who saw that you were more than you seemed to be." The medical officer's identification of K's meaning is only further undermined by wider textual evidence that K does not refuse food with the consistency this claim suggests. This dissonance between the medical officer's coherent, meaningful narrative of K's refusal of food and the wider textual evidence of the "reality" he claims to represent raises the further question of why the medical officer *requires* K's life to have a meaning at all.

As the medical officer's own thoughts double back to precisely this question of why K's meaning is so significant *to him*, he offers the rather vivid explanation:

> if Michaels himself were no more than what he seems to be […] a skin-and-bones man with a crumpled lip […] then I would have every justification for retiring to the toilets behind the jockeys' changing-rooms and locking myself into the last cubicle and putting a bullet through my head. (226)

Michaels is – and must be – meaningful because the medical officer requires a particular kind of meaning to sustain his own existence, to keep despair at bay. If the medical officer is a character exercising the paradigm of history, of biography, this may prompt readers to wonder whether similar self-preserving motivations might not also lurk behind the third person, past tense narrative of the larger biographical narrative of Parts I and III, or even behind one's own critical endeavors.

The medical officer's confession is further tainted by an apparent anxiety for narrative mastery over K's life. When the military demands that information be elicited from K, the medical officer's words slip easily from the comforting, "we just want you to tell the truth," into the threatening, "tell us what we want to know, then we will leave you alone" (190, 192). This slippage is familiar from an episode in *Barbarians* where the Magistrate offers succor to

one of the first tortured prisoners. After attending to the boy's needs, the Magistrate instructs him, "you must tell the officer the truth," yet his instructions on how to avoid further pain soon slip into the ominous phrase, "you must tell him everything you know." In the Magistrate's confession, his thoughts redouble to note the threatening implications in this slippage, "It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive" (7). These moments of slippage, from comfort to something more threatening, draw attention to an aspect of self-interest in the pursuit of truth, as an attempt perhaps to get a hold of life, which not only transcends narration but also transiently slips toward death.

As the medical officer attempts to identify K's hidden truths, the reader is repeatedly confronted with textual evidence suggesting that his pursuit occludes the real skin-and-bones man before him. When K offers no verbal mediation of his own existence, in moments of intractable silence, the medical officer can hardly refrain from supplying his own interpretations. At the start of Part II, he identifies K's silence as a sign that he is "a person of feeble mind" (179). Yet this explanation soon seems somehow insufficient, as the medical officer tries out alternative explanations, identifying K as "a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man," and even "in touch with things you and I don't understand" (204, 212). Each new attempt to account for K's silence also functions to draw readers' attention to this narrative's failure to encapsulate the life of K.

In crafting K's nonconformity to these narrative categories, we can see that Coetzee had in mind the tradition of holy fools, from two excerpts in Coetzee's notebook of writing ideas. In the first, Coetzee makes the connection between folly and language saying, "K is a fool. […] Like fools ever since, K lacks a language in which to defend himself" (69). In the second, Coetzee simply poses the possibility that K might be: "A holy fool?" (26) In *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (1977), a book we know that Coetzee had read with great interest

from his footnotes in "Confession and Double Thoughts," Michael Holquist identified the "idiot" or "holy fool" as an individual beyond and separated from a system of knowledge, and here we see *Michael K* staging the failure of a biographical system of knowledge before the life of K.[40]

The medical officer's failures in ascribing meanings to K also stage an experience of the absurd: how ridiculous to watch one minor character attempting to authoritatively explain the meaning of another, from within a shared narrative. Just as this awareness tempts the reader to dismiss the medical officer's confession, it may also raise an uncomfortable recognition of the reader's even more limited, contingent relationship to K's life-story. Indeed, the reader might just gain an expanded awareness of the limited and contingent nature of the position from which she too speaks not only about this text, but about the larger narrative she inhabits, which also mediates those existentially charged encounters that, for inexplicable reasons, command her attention and elicit her speech.

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Crucially, the negative movement emphasized in Part II also draws readers' attention to contradictions and gaps occluded in my initial biographical reading of Part I. So why did I begin with a reading that clearly fails to represent the fullness of the text, one may well wonder. My hope is to convey a sense of how the reading experience persistently raises expectations and then erodes them, for this is the process that just might habituate in readers an attentiveness to one's own limited position in relation to the fullness of this text.

Gaps and contradictions overlooked by my initial biographical reading may now become more immediately apparent. Doubling back, we can see that even the title holds

[40] See also "Modernism, Idiocy, and the Work of Culture: J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*" (2015), where John Bolin offers a character study of K in relation to a conception of idiocy distinctly informed by Dostoevsky in order to question whether this fiction provides any positive counter-representation of heroism (346).

open a certain kind of ambivalence. What might the implications be of that omitted definite article before *Life & Times of Michael K*? In 1984, Tony Morphet posed this question to Coetzee, eliciting the response: "To my ear, 'THE LIFE' implies that the life is over, whereas 'LIFE' does not commit itself" (462). By omitting this definite article, the title may at once provoke readers' expectations of an authoritative, complete life-story, while also potentially raising readers' suspicions of those very expectations. Without certain knowledge of how this life-story ends, how can one rely upon the narrative as either authoritative or complete? Moreover, although grammatical convention suggests that both "life" and "times" are possessed by Michael K (that we will read about *his* life and *his* times), might we not alternatively read the title as referring to life and times in a more general sense, and Michael K as the object of possession: a manifestation of life, in particular times?

Another stylistic element, the niggling presence of the ampersand, might also expand awareness of the interpretive possibilities held open by the key terms in this title. A historical awareness of the shifts in convention that elided this symbol from its once common place at the end of the alphabet, as a veritable 27th letter, may infuse its titular presence with the added significance of being a typographical figuration of excess.[41] Not only has the life of the ampersand been shaped by historical occlusions, but its use and meaning have also morphed over time. As a historian of typography and founder of Merrymount Press, Daniel Berkeley Updike explains that this symbol initially developed as "a corruption of '& per se=and,' meaning the character & by itself" (19). If this archaic interpretive possibility was kept alive in the title, our ampersand might function to prioritize the term *life*, more than to clarify the relation between that concept and the *–times of Michael K*. Simply attending to the historical shifts in the interpretive possibilities made available through the ampersand might expand a reader's awareness of her own reliance on historically shaped conventions for

[41] For example, Ronald B. McKerrow includes "&" without explanation after "*z*" in his explication of common Elizabethan handwriting for miniscules in his 1927 publication, *An Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students* (350).

holding together potentially disparate parts of this narrative in a meaningful whole, while also drawing her attention to the persistent presence of the excess occluded in any meaning-making process.

We need only cast our eyes to the source of the epigraph for further evidence contradicting the biographical expectations this fiction raises. The epigraph that might initially inspire expectations of a narrative in which War ("*the father of all and king of all*") will determine the parts of K's life within a meaningful and coherent teleological trajectory is troubled by even brief attention to Heraclitus's *The Cosmic Fragments*. For varied, even contradictory, fragments on life as cosmic flux surround this excerpt. As the Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge G.S. Kirk explains, in his critical study *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (1954), these fragments have often been misconstrued in a reception that worshipfully prioritizes some, without adequately accounting for their relationship to others. Already this might be suggestive of the reading experience staged by *Michael K*, which makes available a variety of interpretive possibilities, some of which have been repeatedly prioritized by critics, with little attention to contradictory others.

For example, although Part I includes a bounty of evidence from which K's journey might be read as a heroic quest; accompanying evidence also contradicts that reading. Instead of the valiant vision one might expect from a hero on a quest, this journey is inspired by K's mother, and her "fear of what might happen to her if she lost her room," after he mentions layoffs at work (9). An inexact conception of their destination further undermines readings of this journey as a directed pursuit of anything, no less truth or ethical action.

Moreover, suggestions of K's life-story as providentially ordered are destabilized in reconsidering previously identified references to the divine. In Afrikaner nationalist mythology, the term "God" referred to that Supreme Being who predetermines the heroes of life (the elect, the Afrikaners) and the course of their history (bringing the Kingdom of God

to South Africa), which makes it especially worth noting how the term is subtly untethered from those referents within this text. Each phrase where the term "God" is used in fact functions as a colloquialism, a dead metaphor, no longer signifying the concept of a singularly powerful divinity, but interchangeable with the words "no one".[42] Replacing the word "God" with "no one" reveals a negation latent in each: Michael K can take fruit from an orchard because it is "*no one's* earth" (53). The medical officer explains that a boy "has taken a dislike to [Michael K], *no one* knows why;" that "[K] passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and *no one* knows what else;" and that K is "like a stick insect that has landed, *no one* knows how, in the middle of a great wide flat bare concrete plain" (182, 185, 204). In these examples, while the use of the term God may initially inspire presuppositions of divine agency and control, closer examination also reveals its subtle negation.

Furthermore, if depictions of K are at times resonant with a significance of biblical proportions, these very depictions too convey their negation. While descriptions of K cultivating pumpkin plants on the deserted Visagie farm certainly invoke that original gardener, Adam, they also contradict this image. In the Torah, Adam's role as steward of the Garden of Eden distinguished him from the other creatures. Signaling this distinction was his task of supplying narrative categories (names) to the animals, whereas of K we are told, "Though he knew no names he could tell one bush from another by the smell of their leaves" (158). No longer is the gardener distinguished from the animals by his capacity to apply narrative categories to life, now K's own animality is emphasized: "he seemed to know the difference between a benign bitterness and a malign one, as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants had not died in his soul" (140). Adamic

[42] Thirty-years after the publication of *Michael K*, Coetzee would attribute a character named Simón with describing "*God knows*" as "an expression […] a way of saying no one knows" in *The Childhood of Jesus* (218).

allusions undermine the very associations they conjure of a distinctive authority, a creature divinely set apart, as evidenced through distinctive narrative capacities.

Whereas the lone man K, wandering in the wilderness and abiding by apparently ascetic eating habits, at times evokes the prophetic tradition, this evocation too includes its negation. That negation is cast into relief by juxtaposing a key episode in *Michael K* with the Old Testament story resonant within it. In the following episode, K attempts to perform a ritual of burying his mother's ashes:

> He fetched the box of ashes from the house, set it in the middle of the rectangle, and sat down to wait. He did not know what he expected; whatever it was, it did not happen. A beetle scurried across the ground. The wind blew. There was a cardboard box standing in the sunlight on a patch of baked mud, nothing more […] He closed his eyes and concentrated, hoping that a voice would speak reassuring him that what he was doing was right […] But no voice came. (79, 80)

As K waits "on the hillside behind the farmhouse" for audible instructions that never arrive, features of the world surrounding him are instead recounted: a beetle, wind, a cardboard box, and sunlight (79). In the biblical account resonant therein, the wandering prophet Elijah also waits in a cave on a hill for a voice to speak to him:

> a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; *but* the LORD *was* not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; *but* the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; *but* the LORD *was* not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (I Kings 19.11b-12)

In this account, each recorded aspect of nature seems overwhelmed by the repeated emphasis on the absence, and then finally presence, of the divine voice. By contrast, for K, no authoritative voice arrives with revelation about how to live or how to make sense of life. The effect is an inversion of emphasis onto the existential features of something that might be named 'bare life': a register of experience that was overwhelmed in the biblical attention to the absence, and then presence, of the divine. If K is positioned with prophetic potential in this story, it is not through special election, but through the unexceptional dependence on bare life, which in its various forms is common to all.

Even the narrative voice of Part I, which may have initially suggested authorial distance and objectivity, is now more readily recognized as obscuring a necessarily perspectival nature. After readers have experienced the unreliability of the medical officer's often apparently well-intentioned narrative, they are more likely to wonder about the unidentified narrator of Parts I and III. Is this narrator *truly* as sympathetic to K as it often seems? What is the narrator's relationship to K? How did she or he obtain the stories we read? By what authority does the narrator disclose these stories? Is it even the same narrator in Part I as in Part III? The unanswerable nature of these questions may in turn confront the reader with a growing awareness of the contingency of her own position. For how can one presume to identify "the truth" about this world when perpetually confronting the limitations and potential unreliability of the narrative on which she relies?

Moreover, the narrative persistently draws attention to the reader's own involvement in ascribing meanings to this world. Moment-by-moment descriptions, without phrases identifying the relationship between them, frequently create logical gaps that readers readily fill. Consider the following rather mundane description of K loading the cart in which he will tote his mother away from Cape Town. In particular, note the lack of connections between sentences:

> The cart was not really big enough, he realized: it bore her weight, but she had to sit hunched under the canopy unable to move her limbs. Over her legs he spread a blanket, then piled on that a packet of food, the paraffin stove and a bottle of fuel packed in a box, odds and ends of clothing. A light winked on in the flats next door. They could hear the waves breaking on the rocks. (27)

The narrator offers no account of the relationship between the loading of the cart, the illumination of neighboring flats, and the sound of waves, but readers readily supply them.

For example, one reading of the passage might look like this: although the cart that K had crafted was too small to comfortably carry his mother, he retained his determination and continued loading their provisions under the cover of night. Despite his attempts at stealth,

the noise woke the neighbors. As a light winked on in the neighboring flats, K began to fear that they had called the police. With senses heightened, he anticipated the sound of sirens, but only heard waves breaking on the rocks.

Yet by filling in the absent connections between these sentences, and the narrative moments they describe, this reading has both ascribed additional meanings to the text and restricted the multivalent potential it holds open. Without a transition phrase, the description of K loading the cart, followed immediately by the sentence, "A light winked on in the flats next door," simultaneously holds open the possibility of a causal relationship between these events as well as the possibility that they might be completely unrelated. In moments of hesitation over the absence of transition phrases, a reader may thus encounter an awareness of her own inadvertent ascriptions of meaning to this text, and a recognition that her ascriptions of meaning limit the interpretive possibilities kept available by the narrative.

Even in this most mundane example, the impact of attributing (and thus also limiting) meaning is notable. By connecting the sentences in this passage, my sample reading also infused the passage with an affective charge. It ascribed to K an anxiety over the potentially causal relationship between the loading of the cart and the winking on of the neighbor's light. That anxiety then infused the next moments with a further affective charge: the sound of waves came to signify the heightening of senses, which was associated with anxiously anticipating the sound of sirens. Yet if one reads the loading of the cart and the winking on of the light without inscribing any causal connection, then the ensuing observation of the sound of waves breaking might remain mere description, mere presence.

This apparently minor stylistic feature subtly, but persistently, confronts readers with the potential for a different mode of awareness in relation to that pervasive existential category, time. We know from Coetzee's essay "Time, Tense, and Aspect in Kafka's 'The Burrow'" (1981) that he was specifically considering the intersection between grammar and

an awareness of time while writing *Michael K*. In this essay, Coetzee highlights a distinction made within Kafka's notebooks between two modes of understanding time: "The first, which we can call historical awareness, imputes reality to a past that it sees as continuous with the present. The second, which we can call eschatological, recognizes no such continuity: there is only the present, which is always present" (*Doubling the Point* 578). By this definition, my first reading of the cart-loading scene, which asserted continuity between disparate moments, would provide an example of a reading marked by historical awareness. By contrast, my ensuing description of a moment-by-moment reading would provide an example of an eschatological awareness of the present moment.

Coetzee went on to identify the stylistic device by which Kafka facilitated an eschatological awareness of time in "The Burrow" saying, "There is one moment and then there is another moment; between them is simply a break. No amount of watchfulness will reveal how one moment becomes another; all we know is that the next moment happens" (574). So too the moment-by-moment narration of *Michael K* can be seen to stage a reading event that exposes and resists presuppositions of continuity. As presuppositions of continuity fail before the fullness of this text, readers may be compelled to pause and possibly, momentarily, experience an eschatological awareness of time.

What is particularly counter-intuitive in Coetzee's account of this eschatological awareness, though, is that in it (to recall Coetzee's essay on Kafka), "[t]here are no 'crucial events' as opposed to other events: there is only what is happening now, and this is always crucial" (578). The voice of Gordimer may ring in our ears with pragmatic political concerns: faced with the corpses of school children murdered by police in the Soweto Uprising, how can one even consider an approach to time that denies the greater importance of certain events over others? Yet, might not the staging of potential experiences of an eschatological awareness of time enable new insights into moments such as the Soweto

Uprising? By cultivating its readers' attentiveness to that which their own logical connections occlude, this fiction aspires to expand awareness of life as always already exceeding the narratives that mediate it. In so doing, it engages experience in a radically different way to the more pervasive presuppositions about narrative authority, with which the National Party justified the killing of some, to prioritize the lives of others.

Inviting Encounters with Excess

In his notebook of writing ideas for *Michael K*, Coetzee recorded and emphatically underlined the following quotation from the second volume of Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*: "Jesus the Revealer 'does not communicate anything, but calls men to himself'" (41). He was clearly interested in the fact that Bultmann did not locate the importance of Jesus with truths taught or ethics modeled, but with the encounters invited in the Gospels. The crucial term for understanding Bultmann's conception of the Gospels is *kerygma*, which describes a proclamation that enacts what it proclaims. So, one common example of *kerygma* is a law that comes into effect through public proclamation by a herald. As I will shortly explain, for Bultmann, the Gospel account is intended to be *kerygmatic,* creating that which it proclaims, in the reading event.

A second quotation in Coetzee's notebook, from *Theology of the New Testament*, emphasizes Bultmann's resistance to identifying the significance of Jesus with his historical identity: "The Revealer is nothing but a definite historical man, Jesus of Nazareth. Why this specific man? That is a question that must not, may not, be answered." Instead of attempting to anchor the significance of the Gospels to a historical account of Jesus, Bultmann prioritizes the Gnostic phrase "The Revealer," locating his significance not in history but in the social function of myth.

In "New Testament and Mythology" (1941), Bultmann claimed, "The real point of myth is not to give an objective world picture; what is expressed in it, rather, is how we human beings understand ourselves in our world" (9). Bultmann believed that though Gnostic language had been historically and culturally available when John was writing his Gospel, that mythological language had lost its viability for conveying how we "understand ourselves in our world." To revivify the Gospel as *kerygma*, Bultmann translated what he identified as its mythological language into existentialist language and concepts from Heidegger.

In the language of the death and resurrection of Jesus, he identified mythological means for staging encounters with specific modes of being. So, in the death of Jesus, he claimed readers are invited to encounter an awareness of their own life as marked by "transience and death" (16). Readers might gain an awareness of their own existential death, the condition of "anxiety in which we each seek to hold on to ourselves and what is ours in the secret feeling that everything, including our own life, is slipping away from us" (17). With consideration to *Michael K*, one might think of the medical officer's compulsion to fix a meaning onto K's life, and indirectly his own. With regards to the apartheid context in which this fiction was first published, one might think of the Afrikaner nationalist "life-story" in which the minority government anxiously attempted to assert its enduring value, in the face of displacement from native European lands, wars with British colonial powers, and the looming threat of a majority population discontented with violent subjugation to peripheral positions. This condition of existential death, however, is only half of what Bultmann claimed that readers might experience in encountering the divine through Jesus the Revealer.

In the language of resurrection, Bultmann identified a potential for experiencing existential resurrection. To his mind, the story of the resurrection of Jesus invited readers to encounter "genuine human life […] one in which we lived out of what is invisible and

nondisposable and, therefore, surrendered all self-contrived security." The experience of existential resurrection, or genuine life, would entail the overcoming of anxiety in the face of transience and death "through trust that precisely what is invisible, unfamiliar, and nondisposable encounters us as love, gives us our future, means life for us and not death" (17).

While Bultmann would explicate this experience, in "What Does it Mean to Speak of God," as inevitably fleeting (neither obtained nor retained at will), he saw it as the job of theology to revitalize the conditions for the possibility of experiencing it: genuine life, to his mind, precisely resulted from faith in the divine as "the reality determining all else" (53). In "New Testament and Mythology," Bultmann described his endeavor to translate the mythological language of the Gospels into existential language as an effort at revivifying the Gospels to cultivate "the attitude of faith, of being delivered from the world," and he explained that this was not without social implications: it "also makes us open for our fellow human beings" (20). In *Michael K*, Coetzee reimagined Bultmann's approach to the Gospel in order to stage and represent encounters with the unnarratable fullness of life itself that hold open the possibility of encountering our fellow human beings in fresh ways.

By Part III of *Michael K*, the reader is primed to notice elements of style and content which continually exceed assertions of comprehensive biographical or historical meanings. By the time the third person narration resumes, immediately after the medical officer's narrative in Part II, readers have accumulated an armory of reasons for hesitating over narrated claims about K as a moral exemplar or source of revelation—although readings such as Gordimer's make clear that this is by no means an assured result. Attentive to gaps and contradictions, a reader might more readily pause over the moment-by-moment passage of narrative time and events. In those pauses, she might experience a measure of anxiety before

this world's resistance to any one narrative, perhaps followed by grateful sense of her own dependence on that narrative, and indeed on much wider narrative resources.

Repeated encounters with textual evidence that invoke, but also undermine, biographical expectations just might prepare the reader to question biographical accounts of K within the text, which now appear from K himself. Although still mediated by an unknown narrator, in Part III, we are made privy to what appear to be K's own autobiographical reflections, that mode of discourse so prized in the biographical tradition as a source of authentic truth. Yet by the time K provides his insight, "the truth is that I have been a gardener […] It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, *the truth, the truth about me. I am a gardener*, he said again aloud," the reader has been primed to temper her own excitement at his self-revelation (247-248).

For accompanying questions now readily arise: Are these *really* K's words (a bizarre question to entertain, perhaps, about a fiction)? And what aspects of the narrative might this self-designation of "gardener" occlude—is K not also a traveler, a son, a burrower, even a hunger artist? Reading with an attentiveness to that which exceeds K's autobiographical claims is soon rewarded as K's thoughts redouble: "On the other hand, was it not strange for a gardener to be sleeping in a closet within sound of the beating of the waves of the sea?" (248) By now, the narrative has created the conditions that just might habituate its readers to look beyond even K's self-classification, toward that which exceeds the categories on which he too necessarily relies.

Moreover, K's ascriptions of autobiographical meaning do not stop here. He continues by raising the heroic possibility, "Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time […] How many people are there left who are neither locked up nor standing guard at the gate?" (248-249) By this point, however, the reader just might be more likely to recognize the dissonance within what seems to be a

compelling, even true claim. Having been submerged in the conditions created by this narrative for hour upon hour, perhaps even days, the reader might just be more likely to see that in asserting this "truth," K also undermines the very claim he makes: in the act of categorically identifying *the truth about himself*, K (metaphorically) imprisons himself in yet another (conceptual) camp.

Nevertheless, the self-ascription of meaning continues, mounting to what readers are primed to realize are rather ridiculous heights when K identifies "the moral of the whole story." This moral is placed within parentheses, perhaps signaling its biographically treasured location in K's interior-life: "(Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? […])" (249). However the reader is now (potentially) well-aware that a single moral lesson deduced from K's life misses the point, namely: the staging of moment-by-moment, often contradictory encounters, which exert different claims at different times over readers and characters alike.

Through observing K's resistance to the medical officer's narrative, the reader has been prepared to readily wonder why K is *now* concerned with identifying a moral for his life-story. After so doggedly resisting the medical officer's assertions of meaning, this seems inconsistent, perhaps even suspect. Yet this very inconsistency contributes vitality to K's resistance, for he now also fails to fit the (heroic?) paradigm of a hermeneutical resistance-figure.

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Although directly describing that which exceeds narration is inherently paradoxical, impossible, *Michael K* does depict how characters respond to encounters that compel speech, but which they cannot quite find the language to describe. The most prominent example of this is the medical officer's encounters with K, and his struggle to account for K's

significance *to him*. Not only does the medical officer's confession evince the urgency of responding to a claim over him, but its iterative failures also suggest the inadequacy of his narrative resources before that claim. This is by no means the only such example.

Indeed, we can read of K himself responding to (what seems to be) an encounter that prompts and exceeds his own narration when roasting the first fruit of his pumpkin patch. A register of religious sacrifice inflects the event of roasting with a potentially sacred significance: "The fragrance of the burning flesh rose into the sky." Although this fragrance rises to the sky, the religious register becomes re-oriented toward the earth in an expression of grateful dependence: "Speaking the words he had been taught, directing them no longer upward but to the earth on which he knelt, he prayed: 'For what we are about to receive make us truly thankful'" (155). If the religious register reflects a sacred aspect to his eating experience, it is notably intertwined with a sensuous register, locating the site of anything sacred in K's bodily senses and the roasted, ripened pumpkin.

Even K's expression of grateful dependence appears rather thin beside the narrative's descriptions of his verbal, physical, and emotional response to the pumpkin. K's rapture in eating is poignantly conveyed: "[he] felt his heart suddenly flow over with thankfulness. It was exactly as they had described it, like a gush of water […] He chewed with tears of joy in his eyes […] The aftertaste of the first slice left his mouth aching with sensual delight" (156). The focus on K's affective and somatic response points readers toward an empathetic delight in the eating experience, which seems to elicit, but also exceed, this description.

Yet as the narrative mood shifts from grateful dependence to assertions of control, it subtly conveys the fleeting, inarticulable nature of this encounter. As K reflects, "All that remains is to live here quietly for the rest of my life, eating the food that *my own labour has made the earth to yield*. […] such pumpkin *I could eat every day of my life and never want for anything else*" (my emphasis 156). Note the sense of self-reliance that has crept into his

reflection: now it is his labor that *made the earth to yield*. Gratitude for his existential dependence gives way to anxiety as K schemes to ensure that he *never wants for anything*. This anxiety in turn yields more yearning – more wanting – which undermines the very sense of control K attempts to assert: "And what perfection it would be with a pinch of salt – with a pinch of salt, and a dab of butter, and a sprinkling of sugar, and a little cinnamon" (156). In representing what it also stages, the shifts in narrative may prompt a reader to hesitate before her own assertions of insight, in the fleeting awareness of her own criticism as a mode of responding to the claims that this fiction exercises over her.

Looking Beyond the Text

In the throes of apartheid, Gordimer had questioned the value of Coetzee's text for not representing pressing political truths about its historical moment. This critique resounded in her description of the character K, after the death of his mother, as seeking "a purpose for his apparently unnecessary continued existence." Yet my reading shows *Michael K* to be a fiction aimed precisely at inviting readers to experience a very different posture toward history, toward life: a posture from which it is untenable to make authoritative claims about any forms of existence as "unnecessary."

While cultivating a reading posture of openness to excess, *Michael K* abounds with representations of people, places, and affections deemed "unnecessary" by the apartheid government. Three years after the publication of *Michael K*, Coetzee would observe:

> The response of South Africa's legislators to what disturbs their white electorate is usually to order it out of sight. If people are starving, let them starve far away in the bush, where their thin bodies will not be a reproach. If they have no work, if they migrate to the cities, let there be roadblocks, let there be curfews, let there be laws against vagrancy, begging, and squatting, and let offenders be locked away so that no one has to hear or see them. If the black townships are in flames, let cameras be banned from them. (At which the great white electorate heaves a sigh of relief: how much more bearable the newscasts have become!) ("Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa")

By contrast, *Michael K* focuses on that which brings discomfort to this "great white electorate." It features a protagonist (if we may call him that) who experiences most of these catalogued conditions: starvation, migration, vagrancy, squatting on an abandoned farm, and who has at least entertained the idea of begging. Written within a context where certain people, places, and desires were habitually and systematically overlooked, *Michael K* subjects its readers' habits of thoughts to those parts of life concealed by the legally and geographically imposed apartheid narrative.

This later political critique delivered by Coetzee is foreshadowed in *Michael K* by the character Robert saying:

> What they would really like – this is my opinion – is for the camp to be miles away in the middle of the Koup out of sight. Then we could come on tiptoe in the middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean. (112)

The character Robert, an inmate of a camp for vagrants and beggars, identifies the very unsavory desire that Coetzee would later criticize in the apartheid government and its white electorate: the desire to avoid encountering those lives, those suffering bodies (like the character's own), which the legislatively imposed national biography of apartheid had deemed "unnecessary." It is this Puritanical impulse that Coetzee works so hard to avoid in crafting fictions that specifically expose unsavory desires and seemingly unnecessary perspectives.

In *Michael K*, the term "parasite" is used to introduce reflections on categories of people and desires that the apartheid state had deemed "unnecessary." K observes, "*Parasite* was the word the police captain had used: the camp at Jakkalsdrif, *a nest of parasites* hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back." He further wonders, "What if the hosts were far outnumbered by the parasites, the parasites of idleness and the other secret parasites in the army and the police force and the schools and factories and offices, *the parasites of the heart?* Could the parasites then still be called parasites?' (my

emphasis 159) These questions echo with those raised by the medical officer's attempts at identifying the meaning of K's life: from what "privileged" position does any character or institution assign value to different moments or characters in this life-story, this story of life?

As Coetzee's notebook of writing ideas for *Michael K* explains, "The host – parasite idea comes from the essay by J. Hillis Miller in *Deconstruction + Criticism*" (47). Miller's essay, "Critic as Host" (1977), depicts the complex interdependence of critic and text, saying that in literature, "the parasite is always already present within the host, the enemy always already within the house" (446). When brought to bear on the politicized discussion of parasites in *Michael K*, the intersubjective logic of this claim suggests that the "unnecessary" people hidden in camps and the "unnecessary" desires hidden in hearts are always already integral to the story, as well as to the "host" lives of the South African white electorate under criticism.

On the one hand, this intersubjective logic suggests that expunging unwanted people and unwanted desires from the national biography under apartheid was impossible: the binary is false, "the [perceived] enemy [is] always already within the house." On the other hand, it suggests that by hiding away certain people and aspects of life as "unnecessary," the apartheid state reduced the life of all its inhabitants. What is crucial to both observations is the integrality of what might easily be elided as "excess" in any attempt at narrating life. By attending to Coetzee's easily overlooked readings of Bultmann, we can better appreciate the weight of moment-by-moment depictions and intertwined lives that shape this reading event, an event which just might contribute to the reformation of reading habits and expand readers' awareness of the fullness of *life* and *times* as always already exceeding any singular possession or comprehensive narrative.

IV.

"Cruciform logic": Fyodor Dostoevsky and the Vocation of a Writer in *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*

From the mid-1980s to the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa saw an active dismantling of the apartheid system's legislation of political and moral frameworks. In 1985, the Immorality Act and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act were overturned.[43] A redrafting of the national Constitution, as the Interim Constitution in 1993 and then as the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996, was one manifestation of a concerted effort at recalibrating national values.[44] Whereas the 1983 Constitution had specifically used Christian language to justify the preservation of differences, the new Constitution emphasized the inclusion of difference through noticeably secular language.[45] Within this context of dismantling apartheid legislation, Coetzee intensified his own engagement with the literary techniques that Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), a Christian

[43] A more detailed description of the Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act of 1985 can be found in the *Government Gazette* (2).

[44] Although the Preamble to the Interim Constitution of 1993 begins, "In humble submission to Almighty God," its focus quickly shifts from any conception of a religiously instantiated national identity to language emphasizing the "need to create a new order in which all South Africans will be entitled to […] enjoy and exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms." The Preamble to the 1996 Constitutions begins, "We, the people of South Africa, Recognise the injustices of our past" and only includes religious language at its end, in a multilingual benediction (see *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 200*, 1993).

[45] The Christian language in the Preamble to *The Republic of South Africa Constitution of 1983* – itself a revised version of the Preamble to *The Republic of South Africa Constitution of 1961*, Act 32 – is dramatic to observe: "In humble submission to Almighty God, who controls the destinies of peoples and nations, Who gathered our forebears together from many lands and gave them this their own, who has guided them from generation to generation, Who has wondrously delivered them from the dangers that beset them, We declare that we are conscious of our responsibility towards God and man; Are convinced of the necessity of standing united and of pursuing the following national goals," the first of which is, "To uphold Christian values and civilized norms, with recognition and protection of freedom of faith and worship."

from a tradition very different from Calvinism, had developed for renegotiating available narrative resources within his own destabilized sociopolitical context.

Dostoevsky's writings repeatedly explore crises provoked by a sense of impending social transition beyond entrenched moral frameworks, particularly the potential overturning of an established Russian Orthodox morality by what Dostoevsky had tended to think of as a revolutionary nihilism. In the novel *Devils* (1871-2), Dostoevsky explores the threat of nihilism as a rejection of any established morality or principles in the name of political revolution; in *The Karamazov Brothers* (1880), he examines the effects of dismantling an established moral framework, with its religious presuppositions, in terms of whether there can be either love or virtue without a belief in the immortality of the soul. This latter examination is notably conducted through characters' various responses to Ivan Karamazov's assertion that without this belief, "there can be no virtue," a claim that is debated, but never conclusively rescinded (88). While Dostoevsky was by no means the only Russian author exploring the threat of nihilism, his religiously inflected literary innovations provided Coetzee with distinctive resources for pressing further beyond the oppositional logic foundational to apartheid morality.

In the previous chapters of this thesis, we have seen evidence of Coetzee's persistent engagement with Dostoevsky, and this chapter draws attention to an intensification and shift in that engagement during the period surrounding *Age of Iron* (1990) and *The Master of Petersburg* (1994).[46] In the process, my style of argumentation also shifts: whereas in my previous chapters I have drawn on direct archival evidence of what Coetzee was reading, during his writing process, to identify clear lines of influence, the connections established in this chapter are more diffuse and thematic.[47] Although at times I draw on direct archival

[46] Henceforth abbreviated as *Master*.

[47] During the period in which Coetzee was writing *Age of Iron* and *Master*, he would produce three publications evincing a particular interest in Dostoevsky—all three note the relation between Dostoevsky's Christianity and his literary innovations. The first, "Confession and Double Thoughts" (1985), was published less than a year

evidence, other times the connections illuminated are more obliquely informed by Coetzee's own interest in commentators on Dostoevsky's work, most notably the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975).

Across Coetzee's *oeuvre* there is an observable tendency in which later works draw overt attention to themes already at play in previous works, which is one reason for my consideration of Coetzee's engagement with Bakhtin's Dostoevsky in *Age of Iron* and *Master*.[48] Not only does *Master* center on a writer-character named Dostoevsky, but the publication of these fictions was followed by a book review of volume four in Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoevsky, "*Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*" (1995) in which Coetzee specifically drew attention to Bakhtin's account of Dostoevsky's dialogism.[49] Amidst his very positive review of Frank's biography, Coetzee criticized the work's limitations in relation to Bakhtin's commentary on Dostoevsky by claiming that Frank:

> los[es] an opportunity to supply what is missing in Bakhtin, namely, a clear statement that dialogism as exemplified in the novels of Dostoevsky is a matter not of ideological position, still less of novelistic technique, but of the most radical intellectual and even spiritual courage. (123)

This comment is notable for reflecting an extended conception of Bakhtin's account of dialogism, wherein the author himself is enmeshed in the dialogical web. As Coetzee elaborates, "implicit in Frank's account is what Bakhtin leaves out: that to the degree that

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prior to Coetzee's first notebook entry for what would become *Age of Iron* (16 June 1986). The second, an interview by correspondence, that would come to preface "Confession and Double Thoughts" in *Doubling the Point* (1990), specifically emphasizes the role of Dostoevsky's Christianity in enabling the philosophical enquiry in his fiction. It was written the same year that *Age of Iron* was published, and less than a year before Coetzee started drafting *Master*. The third was a book review of Joseph Frank's, "*Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years,*" and it was published in 1995, within a year of *Master*.

[48] Current criticism tends to connect Coetzee's engagement with Dostoevsky to *Master*, but not to *Age of Iron*. For example, Monica Popescu's "Waiting for the Russians: Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* and the Logic of Late Postcolonialism" (2007) emphasizes similarities between "the sociopolitical situation in Russia of the 1860s and South Africa of the early 1990s" to illuminate the political moment from which Coetzee was writing *Master* (5). However, while it was indeed "the early 1990s" that "saw a coming together of political forces at the negotation table and the birth of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa," the period in which Coetzee wrote *Age of Iron* could be seen as a long gestation. For, the "newly emerging faction lines and alliances" of the early 1990s, which would "modify the binaries of the apartheid years" in a "reconfiguration of the political field," were already developing in the late-1980s (12).

[49] Moreover, we know that Coetzee had read the first two volumes of Joseph Frank's biography from his archived list of "Reading Materials" from the 1970s and 1980s.

Dostoevskean dialogism grows out of Dostoevsky's own moral character, out of his ideals, and out of his being as a writer, it is only distantly imitable" (124).

Coetzee's expansion of Bakhtin's account of dialogism compels my return to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963). It is well known that Bakhtin described Dostoevsky's dialogism as distinguished by "*the passing of a theme through many and various voices,* [and by] its rigorous and, so to speak, irrevocable *multi-voicedness* and *vari-voicedness*" (265).[50] In "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" (1961), Bakhtin identified dialogism as an attempt at correcting an insidious aspect inherent to "monologism," which "at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another *I* with equal rights (*thou*)" (292). Yet in recalling Bakhtin's formulations, at this point in my thesis, it will be evident that similar concerns surrounding the ways that writing might reinforce or resist self-enclosure also motivated Coetzee's early writings. These overlapping concerns and thematic resonances further inform this chapter's examination of how, in *Age of Iron* and *Master*, Coetzee more directly and more profoundly engages with Bakhtin's way of understanding Dostoevsky's dialogism. I will show that he does so by specifically drawing on the Christian logic and sensibilities that shaped both Dostoevsky and Bakhtin, in order to press further with the stylistic possibilities they had developed, with a consideration of the body that is more thorough than even Dostoevsky had provided.

Coetzee was remarkably cognizant of Dostoevsky's rather unorthodox Russian Orthodox Christianity. In an interview with Attwell that would come to preface the "Confession and Double Thoughts" essay in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee described his own approach to fiction as a means for experimenting with ideas, referencing Dostoevsky and

[50] Although Bakhtin published the first edition of this work in Russian in 1929, with a title that is translated as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Works*, he published a significantly revised and expanded second edition in 1963 (Clark and Holquist 238-9). An English translation of this revised edition was initially published in 1973, but Caryl Emerson's more accurate and robust English translation, which has become the standard translation, was only published in 1984, the same year Coetzee began writing *Age of Iron*.

Tolstoy as noteworthy interlocutors in that endeavor. As Coetzee put it, "I am concerned to write the kind of novel—to work in the kind of novel form—in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas" (246). He identified Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as writers "of real philosophical power," before specifically connecting that power to their Christianity and to their historical situation of writing under censorship (244).

In a later interview for *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee would return to this claim by adding, "I have no doubt that the intensity, the pointedness, the *seriousness* of Russian writing from the time of Nicholas I is in part a reflection of the fact that every word published represented a risk taken" (299). From the previous chapters, we can see how Coetzee's own experience of writing under apartheid censorship throughout the 1970s and, with decreasing pressure, in the 1980s, might have illuminated his appreciation for the impact of both censorship and Christianity on the writings of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. In addition to which, there is reason to believe that these insights were notably inflected by developments in the critical conversation surrounding Bakhtin.

In a 2001 interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Coetzee would describe his "growing suspicion that Bakhtin attached a deep and specifically religious meaning to the notion [of dialogism] which, I suspect escapes many of those who've taken it over."[51] This suspicion was informed by an appreciation for the scholarly discussion on Bakhtin, which had increasingly emphasized the religious sources of his thinking. Holquist was the first to publish in English on the religious aspects of Bakhtin's theory of "dialogism." In his chapter "The Politics of Representation," in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute 1979-80* (1981), Holquist emphasizes that Bakhtin was raised Russian Orthodox and became "notorious in Leningrad intellectual circles as a *cerkovnik*, a devout

[51] Although I only examine those works on Bakhtin's religion published before the writing of *Age of Iron*, by the time of this interview Caryl Emerson had published "Russian Orthodoxy and the Early Bakhtin," in *Religion & Literature* (1990), and Ruth Coates had published *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (1998).

Orthodox Christian (of the unorthodox sort Russian intellectuals become when they give themselves to the Russian Orthodox Church)." As well as tracing other of Bakhtin's religious activities and associations, Holquist explains that from 1918 to 1924 Bakhtin had been working on an intellectual project that was aimed at "completely rethink[ing] Western European metaphysics in the light of religious thought; to show, as it were, that philosophy had in a sense always been anticipated by religion." Although this work did not result in the *opus* Bakhtin had intended, Holquist explains, it morphed into a manuscript on moral philosophy, which "*contains, in embryonic form, every major idea Bakhtin was to have for the rest of his long life*" (171). According to Holquist, this work was "a kind of phenomenological meditation on Christ's injunction to treat others as you would yourself be treated," and by Holquist's account, the question of "how to reconcile modern linguistics with the biblical assurance that the Word became flesh" was "the theoretical epicenter of [Bakhtin's] work" (172, 171-2).

Holquist was claiming nothing less than that Bakhtin's religious commitment was what drove his recognition in Dostoevsky's writings of – what I am tentatively calling – an existential fullness of "meaning" that unfolds through a dialogue that extends to include bodily aspects of encounter. As Holquist put it, a "concern for the materiality of things is nowhere more insistently present in Orthodoxy than in its ancient obsession with the corporeality of Christ, the emptying out of the spirit, *kenosis*, when the Word took on flesh during the life of Jesus." In Holquist's account, Orthodox Christology is distinctive for venerating the incarnation not as the instance in which one man embodied the divine center of power and meaning, but rather as an act by which God relinquished his own power "as a humble man" (175). Holquist's article thus proffers that it was Bakhtin's distinctively Russian Orthodox Christology that enabled him to recognize the dialogical unfolding of meaning in Dostoevsky's novels.

In their biography, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1984), Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist further illuminate the ways in which the Christological commitments that Bakhtin shared with Dostoevsky helped to generate his ideas about dialogism. Although their chapter on Bakhtin's religion tends to temper Holquist's earlier claims, it also provides a noteworthy new connection. Bakhtin's *kenotic* understanding of Christ, as "a humble man" and not the center of authoritative knowledge, appears to inform their observation that, for Bakhtin "all that is living is alive precisely because of its noncorrespondence with others. Cacophonous difference is what he valued most, not the endless silence of a homogenizing harmony" (136). That this valuation of difference, indeed of "cacophonous difference," is Christologically informed becomes more apparent when Clark and Holquist discuss the convergences between Bakhtin and Dostoevsky's thought:

> What is important about Dostoevsky's Christ is the life model he provides, a kind of ideal other; to prefer to err while remaining with Christ is to choose to be without truth in any absolute or even theoretical sense, to give up truth as a formula or truth as a proposition. Dostoevsky, and Bakhtin as well, conceive of Christ as the kind of figure about whom one can ask, 'What would *he* do?' and receive answers that work in everyday experience. As a kind of question, then, Christ is part of an ongoing inner dialogue. It is from such an understanding of Christ that Dostoevsky's innovative novelistic techniques derive. (248)

In this conception of Christ, he is not the paradigmatic hero whose model might be imposed into any context that we saw in Chapter One, most notably in the execution scene conducted by Jacobus; instead, the exemplary qualities of this Christ become evident through the less authoritative and more particular evidence of encounter and dialogue.

Clark and Holquist elaborate that although invoking a religious metaphor for writing is by no means exceptional to the Russian situation, this Christological metaphor functions rather differently than predominant religious metaphors for authorship. As they put it, while "Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky's authorial preserve in similar religious terms," a dramatic difference in belief distinguishes Bakhtin's religious metaphor for Dostoevsky's dialogism from prevailing religious metaphors in the West. Clark and Holquist explain:

> Dostoevsky's activity in the text is the activity of God in relation to man. But this is a God unlike the Old Testament Jehovah, who is the animating force behind most conceptions of the author. Dostoevsky is rather a Christ to his characters, like the Christ in *The Brothers Karamazov*: a loving deity, who is silent so that others may speak and, in speaking, enact their freedom. In the best kenotic tradition, Dostoevsky gives up the privilege of a distinct and higher being to descend into his text, to be among his creatures. Dostoevsky's distinctive image of Christ results in the central role of polyphony in his fiction. (249)

Within this conception, the site of meaning within a literary world, as well as within the wider world, is displaced from the author or any single character and diffused across the exchanges and interactions between characters, texts, and genres. The result is robust precisely because it is polyphonic and cacophonous, resistant to any unifying harmony.

The profound differences held together in dialogism, without harmony, are additionally illuminated by a conception of Christ in whom profound ontological differences – man and God – are held together in one body, without merging. As Clark and Holquist put it, "The living phenomena of carnival and dialogue found their positive significance, Bakhtin argues, in the person of Christ, and their highest textual expression in the Christian Gospels." They are never unclear about the unorthodox application, though, of this Orthodox Christology:

> The otherwise paradoxical relation between the Gospels, on the one hand, and *Gargantua*, on the other, is thus established through the common element of carnival. This interpretation, which Christians may find as offensive as certain Marxists find Bakhtin's equally unorthodox version of Marx, grows directly out of the twin Russian traditions of venerating Christ as a human being and venerating holy fools (*jurodovye*) who perform disgusting and frequently obscene acts as Christlike. (251)

By this account, Bakhtin's heterodox Russian Orthodox Christology distinctively informed his capacity to recognize the oppositional differences that Dostoevsky's dialogism holds together to convey meanings and encounters with (what I am tentatively calling) an existential fullness that is diminished in the monological approach.

There is a political connection to be made: whereas the apartheid narrative had separated people along racial and ethnic lines, in a beleaguered attempt to preserve Afrikaner

identity as set apart for God, Dostoevsky's dialogical aesthetic courageously embraced a vivid array of characters and voices, even attributing some of his most compelling ideas to characters that opposed his own Christian beliefs. By bearing this in mind as we turn to consider how *Age of Iron* thinks dialogism more deeply into the body, I hope to show how the text invites readers to entertain opposing perspectives – simultaneously – on the virtues and salvific pursuits of its protagonist, the writer-character Mrs Curren.

Dialogism and the Pursuit of Salvation in *Age of Iron*

From entries in an archived notebook of writing ideas for *Age of Iron,* we can see that Coetzee initially approached this book with certain autobiographical impulses.[52] Relevant entries include the apparent self-instructions: "Write the story of my life for Gisela, and the story of my mother's life. Because we are all going to die in Africa […]" and "It must be about innocence. Historical innocence. How my mother, belonging to her generation in SA, was nevertheless innocent. Which means tackling the abstract question, and taking a 'difficult' position on it […]" (24 November 1986; 30 November 1986). These reflections would take on another, more future-oriented aspect when Coetzee identified, "The question: How is one to live? The only answer must be: With decency. The complication: that decency implies living as the ancestors lived, and in this case the ancestors did not live well. So one must invent decency" (28 September 1987).

These dual aspects of evaluating the past to invent a more constructive way of engaging the future merged into a politicized project as South Africa negotiated the dismantling of the apartheid framework and the task of imagining a good or ethical national future. As the apartheid framework was subjected to greater and greater social pressure, Coetzee created a fictional space, in *Age of Iron*, where presuppositions about private

[52] See "*Age of Iron*: Small Red Notebook, June 1986-June 1988."

morality (what counts as 'decency') could be subjected to dialogical exploration of a kind that bears the distinctive imprint of Bakhtin's account of Dostoevsky.

In the process, Coetzee pressurized an account of Mrs Curren's pursuit of salvific truths in such a way that it also raises concerns that resonate with the precise anxieties that had led Ivan Karamazov to offer his Grand Inquisitor Tale, in *The Karamazov Brothers*. Although we will later return to consider the Grand Inquisitor Tale itself, for now I wish to restrict my focus to Ivan's expression of rebellion against God, just prior to telling that tale. The problem, for Ivan, is that he cannot reconcile the knowledge of human suffering, and particularly the suffering of children, with an affirmation of God's goodness. In theological circles, this is traditionally described as the problem of theodicy, and Ivan makes clear in conversation with Alyosha that to him this is an ultimate problem:

> I am a believer. But then, what about the children, what shall I do about them? That's the question I cannot answer. […] I want an end to suffering. And if the suffering of children is required to make up the total suffering necessary to attain the truth, then I say here and now that no truth is worth such a price. (307)

Here what is put to the dialogical test is the idea of the goodness of God as creator and sustainer of life, before the costs such a claim entails: namely a rationalization, minimization, or dismissal of the suffering of children, which is, for Ivan, insupportable. Yet to reject the claim also terrifies him, in no small part because his very salvation is at stake.

With this pointed example of Dostoevsky's dialogical testing of ideas in view, we return to the narrative of *Age of Iron*, which is, in typical Dostoevskian fashion, a story prompted by a crisis – Mrs Curren has been diagnosed with cancer – which also unfolds as one woman's pursuit of salvation. This pursuit of salvation takes the form of a confession made not to a priest or to God, but written from Cape Town as a letter to her daughter in America. Like the epistolary genre in which it loosely participates, this "letter" often suggests that it is providing privileged access to hidden truths, and insight into moral virtue, yet in the very language used to extend these confidences, the story also invokes competing

perspectives. If this claim relies on a rather simplified conception of the epistolary novel, that is itself significant because of the ways this more simplified conception and its related sensibilities seem to have shaped the history of the novel as a genre. We saw in Chapter Two that *Foe* specifically includes formal allusions to the epistolary novel in its reorientation of fiction writing – historically shaped as it is – toward a posture less focused on abstracted feelings or ideas (the provenance of speech) in order to cohere more closely with a conception of the world in which "bodies are their own signs".[53]

Frequent fluctuations in the mode of narration constitute one way in which readers are invited to consider possibilities that are not readily harmonized with Mrs Curren's claims about herself. Although she, as the narrator, tells us that we are reading a letter, sometimes this story reads like an adventure account and other times it slips toward moral allegory, in a vacillation that raises the possibility that Mrs Curren might not be an entirely authoritative source on the kind of story she inhabits, or is indeed telling. This possibility is further extended in moments when Mrs Curren describes slipping between states of consciousness, in recurring dreams and her suspicion that she has been experiencing delusions brought on by her cancer medicine, Diaconal. Moreover, there is little explanation as Mrs Curren's perspective fluctuates between a writing self and experiencing self, and her direction of address shifts between being oriented toward the *you* of her distant daughter and the various other *yous* around her, in South Africa. To put this in more Bakhtinian terms, a carnivalistic combination of genre features and perspectives saturate Mrs Curren's apparently "personal" confession, encouraging doubts, questions, and an awareness of a multiplicity of perspectives in the very rhetorical gestures through which she confides.

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[53] While my cursory description of the epistolary novel is of an accord with works such as Ruth Perry's *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (1980), for a more complex account of the epistolary novel's capacities, and its role in shaping both the novel as a genre and wider conceptions of consciousness, see Joe Bray's *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (2003). Bray's argument is notable not least because it repeatedly references Bakhtin, and specifically builds on his insight that "the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistolary novel 'has great stylistic significance for the subsequent novel'" (2).

The polyphonic nature of this text is additionally signaled through Mrs Curren's repeated returns to conceptualizing her confession as a pursuit of salvation. In a way that parallels the handling of redemption in *Barbarians* and *Foe,* this fiction steadily undermines the stability and clarity of Mrs Curren's initial claims about what, precisely, she desires to be saved from, or indeed what that salvation would entail. As she writes to her daughter, "You want to know what is going on with me and I am trying to tell you. I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but am full of confusion about how to do it" (107). Particularly in relation to the subject of salvation, this text subtly and slowly expands interpretive possibilities rather than closing them down.

Mrs Curren herself is attributed with multiple assessments of her quandary, perhaps the most poignant of which is that she seeks redemption from her historically shaped identity as a white South African, writing under the State of Emergency, between 1986-89. As Mrs Curren puts it, "A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it" (149). If 1916 indicates the year of Mrs Curren's birth, then she has the dishonor of sharing it with the historical South African President from the time in which she writes, P.W. Botha (1916-2006). This convergence of fictional and historical timelines invites wider reflections on this protagonist's (even inadvertent) complicity in a history of colonialism, in which her own (presumably English) ancestors may have played a more prominent role "longer ago than 1916," and from which she has benefited regardless of how virtuous or liberal her intentions might be.

Alongside this more elevated political possibility, the text persistently draws attention to the alternative possibility that Mrs Curren's pursuit of salvation may be rather less historic in nature, as a personal response to the diagnosis of cancer that triggered the story. The story is often interrupted by complaints about physical pain, references to painkillers, and

expressions of Mrs Curren's desire to avoid the thought of her own approaching death. These references keep alive the more prosaic interpretive possibility that the salvation Mrs Curren seeks is from her pain and looming life-sentence, a possibility she tends to diminish through attention to the more historical theme of political complicity.

This dissonance in the interpretive possibilities raised by Mrs Curren's own account of her pursuit of salvation is magnified through the Christian idiom that she herself reorients in this story. In a move reminiscent of Coetzee's own depiction of the redemptive bodily encounters, in *Barbarians* and *Foe*, Mrs Curren is now attributed with reorienting Christological language toward embodied encounters to describe potential sources of salvation. Through words directed toward her daughter, Mrs Curren revisits her problem: "I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved?" Immediately she offers a new solution: "By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child [John]." This logic is now familiar from Coetzee's archived notes on *Foe*, and it is recognizably Dostoevskian, almost kenotic, in its determination to love "the unlovable" (124).

The logic becomes yet more recognizably Dostoevskian as Mrs Curren elaborates by the heightening of stakes attached to this imperative and by directly alluding to the crucifixion. Mrs Curren hastens to stake her very capacity to love her daughter upon this illogical logic, saying: "Not wanting to love him [the unlovable child John], how true can I say my love is for you?" (124) When she then decries this as "Cruciform logic, that takes me where I do not want to go!" several interpretive possibilities emerge. Perhaps this is a self-prescription for kenotic openness to otherness, uttered in terror at the potential costs. Yet might it not also be the deft rhetorical gesture by which Mrs Curren sacralizes another means for attaining a sense of wholeness in the face of death? For by carefully attending to the logic of this utterance, one might recognize that (inadvertently or not) this conceptual move

displaces Mrs Curren's own responsibility onto a new moral imperative, now freighted and mystified with very sacredness of her love for her daughter.

No sooner has she appealed to this "cruciform logic" than the narrative flags a more insidious possibility through Mrs Curren's own doubling back of thought. For upon appealing to the crucifixion, Mrs Curren subtly slips herself into the role of Christ: "But would I let myself be nailed upon it if I truly were not willing?" (125) By positioning herself as the one undergoing a metaphorical crucifixion, she raises the doubled possibilities that while this might be a logic of kenosis, it might equally be one of self-divinization. Sympathetic though Mrs Curren's impulse to love the unlovable may be, what she describes as "cruciform logic" is also a tentative prescription for her own salvation. The syntax of that prescription situates her not only as the one to be saved, but also as the one doing the saving. The very grammar of her utterance thus holds open two competing interpretive possibilities, without reconciling them: in the very rhetorical gesture by which she expresses a desire for self-giving, she grammatically situates herself as the divinized agent of her own salvation. Inadvertent though it may be, her very logic makes the daughter to whom she writes – as well as the boy John – into the means by which she might attain her own salvific ends. In what might initially appear to be a unified claim, her very language holds open profoundly contradictory possibilities.

The dissonance between these available interpretive possibilities only grows more apparent with attention to the biblical episode resonant in Mrs Curren's idea that the quality of her love for her daughter depends upon her success at loving the unlovable. The resonant story is an account of judgment day. In this story, Christ identifies the basis for his determination of who is righteous by their acts of hospitality, saying:

> For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me. (Matt 25.35-36)

Those who have been deemed righteous respond by questioning the very judgment of Jesus: they have no recollection of extending this hospitality to him. From his divine vantage point, Jesus supplies an otherwise unreasonable explanation (an explanation inaccessible even to the righteous) through the words that become resonant in Mrs Curren's "cruciform logic": "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25.40). It is the higher order divine knowledge that holds together this paradoxical logic, without harmonizing it into a more reasonable narrative, and though no divine knowledge is represented in Mrs Curren's account, that lack may be precisely what makes her acts of hospitality something more akin to faith.

If Mrs Curren's account is devoid of the divine rationality of the Christ at the crux of this cruciform logic, the possibility remains available that the resulting lack of certitude might be exactly what creates the space for a religious affection we might call faith. In the biblical account the righteous were so profoundly ignorant of their own moral virtue that they contest the very claims of Jesus himself, and the possibility made available in Mrs Curren's resistance to the unreasonable quality of her paradoxical logic may raise the possibility that this illogical phrase is precisely her linguistic means of grasping toward a position devoid of the sanction of secular rationality. Yet even this possibility is uncertain, for by removing the figure of Christ from her cruciform logic, Mrs Curren's account may equally be situating her in his place, as the judge and the judged of what constitutes love, what constitutes virtue.

Without a figuration of the mysterious agency of God, Mrs Curren's liberal version of this "cruciform logic" risks being rather more solipsistic than she might recognize, and as such, open to ethical critique. For in determining to "love" those around her as a means to her own personal salvation, and as a means for loving her own daughter better, Mrs Curren's conception of "love" may begin to seem rather more like "use." Yet in holding open these dissonant interpretive possibilities, *Age of Iron* clearly remains a far more generous-spirited

dialogical text than certain aspects of the foregoing discussion might imply.

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Through the destabilization of Mrs Curren's often monological and subject-centered rhetoric of salvation, her very experience of what counts as redemption undergoes a transformation. She repeatedly reconsiders the problematically private nature of her initial approach to salvation. In what seems to be a "conversion" moment in her thinking, Mrs Curren realizes, "I had miscalculated. […] I strove always for honour, for a private honour, using shame as my guide […] I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!" (149-150) As she grapples toward something other than the individualistic presuppositions surrounding the personal virtues of honour and goodness, virtues that distinguish self from other, this writer-character increasingly evinces a sense of being constrained by the logic and language on which she relies. Whereas in *Devils* Dostoevsky had supplied Stavrogin with the interlocutor Tikhon as a hope for dialogically encountering that which might bring about his redemption, his self-forgiveness, Coetzee supplies Mrs Curren with a host of characters that trample through her home, and take her out of that home—most notably the vagabond Vercueil, who enters her life just after her cancer diagnosis.

Christological language from the New Testament specifically draws attention to an episode in which Mrs Curren describes Vercueil rummaging through her possessions at night, as religious language is put in dialogue with – what I belie by calling – the excess of her own embodied experience. In his first epistle to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul exhorts the church to remain alert for the resurrected Christ, who will return "like a thief in the night" (I Thess 5.2). In *Age of Iron*, it is the vagabond Vercueil who steals into Mrs Curren's house, "in the middle of the night." The intensity with which Mrs Curren records her experience of

waking to an awareness of Vercueil's presence in her home conveys a sense of encountering not the abstracted idea of a "thief in the night," but its threatening embodiment:

> Now he is entering the study, I thought; now he is switching on the light. […] Now he sees the books, shelf upon shelf […] Now, quietly, he slides out the drawers of the desk […] in the bottom drawer there is a cigar-box full of coins: pennies, drachmas, centimes, schillings. The hand with the curled fingers dips into it, takes out two five-pesata pieces big enough to pass for rands, pockets them.

Her moment-by-moment reportage conveys that heightened intensity evident in the bodies of animals attentive to an encroaching threat. At the same time, her rapt attentiveness may belie an element of fascination, even pleasure.[54] It is followed by the bathos we have learned to expect from Coetzee: just as the tensions and intrigue surrounding this violation reach supernatural heights ("Not an angel, certainly"), the focus plummets to an exceedingly mundane comparison with, "An insect, rather, emerging from behind the skirting-boards when the house is in darkness to forage for crumbs" (12). The movement from Christological resonances in this "thief in the night" to a mundane comparison with insects emphasizes that if this intruder is a source of salvation, it is not because of any distinctive ontological quality, but rather because he is proximate—he is someone available to be welcomed, in the full-blooded way that also carries the taint of threat.

That this story ends with Vercueil apparently killing Mrs Curren reemphasizes the force of the threat evoked in the episode. From the following entry in a second notebook of writing ideas for *Age of Iron*, we can see that Coetzee had Dostoevsky in mind when crafting Vercueil (originally called Pratt, perhaps this story's holy fool?):[55]

> Have been reading Bruce K Ward's remarkable book on Dostoevsky.
>
> Pratt a tempter-figure like the Grand Inquisitor, but revealing his identity only gradually and towards the end? The silence of Pratt (as against the silence of Christ in Dostoevsky)?
>
> The temptation is to do violence—to others, to herself. While acknowledging that she has no answers to the reasons for either (revolutionary violence, non-violent

[54] John Bolin offers an apposite reading of *Master*, in "The Sinister Mirror," that explores "how the novel's affective power might be driven by (even as it explores the cost of following) that desire—even desire that thrills at the intensities of transgressive violence and perversion" (516).
[55] See "*Age of Iron*: Small Black-and-Red Notebook, 2 July 1988-5 May 1989."

> moral protest) she refuses to bring herself to both. Therefore, dying, refuses to die. 'Let death come, I will not go to it.' (21 Dec 88)

Whereas it seems imprudent to read these early musings into the final character, Coetzee's express consideration of Dostoevsky while crafting this narrative is useful to note. Furthermore, this quotation raises the possibility of embodied excess whereby Vercueil is not only a holy fool or an insidious tempter, or even a vagabond on the street, but rather an embodied presence that holds together all three apparently cacophonous possibilities, in a way that is not comprehensively represented by Mrs Curren's more monological descriptions of him as a source of salvation.

If Vercueil offers some hope for salvation, this is salvation of a very different order than the restoration of private virtue. This notion of "salvation" is increasingly represented as tied to the writer-character's pursuit of a voice, as the "soul" that will live on through her letter and its readers. For by the book's end, Mrs Curren is not, finally, a moral hero, but a writer-character whose hope that her voice might live on in her daughter prompts her to host other voices, other lives, in her writing.

Even the insight that occupies an apparently autonomous, unique place, as the book's title, is itself developed in conversation with Mrs Curren's house worker Florence. The idea that South Africa of the late 1980s is in an Age of Iron is developed through a conversation emphatically situated in a domestic sphere where mundane moments are nevertheless inflected and shaped by racialized power structures. Florence praises the strength of her children as being "like iron," while she is doing "the ironing," Mrs Curren's ironing. As their conversation escalates in intensity, it is signaled bodily: "[Florence] breathed deeply, passionately," Mrs Curren recounts, "We were in the kitchen. The hand that held the iron pressed down hard. She glared at me. Lightly I touched her hand. She raised the iron. On the sheet was the beginning of a brown scorch-mark" (45). In a politically freighted bad pun, the brown scorch-mark left by this impassioned application of an iron draws attention to the

material and political web from which these words are woven. As is often the case in Coetzee's writings, a moment of bathos accompanies a most serious dialogue: in this instance, a dialogue on the relations between oppressive White power structures and the retributive scorch-marks made by brown children in South Africa during the late 1980s.

The embodied dialogue between Mrs Curren and Florence is just one example of the ways in which this story draws attention to Mrs Curren's position within larger structures of power and violence, as she attempts to write a letter that not only asserts her spiritual distance, but which she hopes will carry the remnants of her spirit far from South Africa after she dies. Through juxtapositions between moral claims and socio-political descriptions, the text makes available interpretive possibilities that this very effort to separate herself from the evil around her, might, to some extent, be a manifestation of the spirit of her times.

As the critical discourse on this book has been quick to point out, the phrase "Age of Iron" is from Hesiod's (c.750-650 BC) *Works and Days*, and it is notable how Mrs Curren appeals to Hesiod to describe her times as distinguished by a failure of virtue and of familial relations. To begin with, Mrs Curren's appeals to Hesiod clearly pick up on the theme of family disintegration recognizable from *The Karamazov Brothers*:

> What kind of parents will they become who were taught that the time of parents is over? […] They kick and beat a man because he drinks. They set people on fire and laugh while they burn to death. How will they treat their own children? What love will they be capable of? Their hearts are turning to stone before our eyes […] (46)

In Hesiod's account the Age of Iron is one in which:

> Father will not be like-minded with sons, nor sons at all, nor guest with host, nor comrade with comrade, nor will the brother be dear as he once was. They will dishonor their aging parents […] cruel men, who do not know of the gods' retribution!—nor would they repay their aged parents for their rearing. [...] Justice will be in their hands, and reverence will not exist. (103)

Of course, *Works and Days* not only provides a mythologizing of history but also a farmer's almanac, in which Hesiod prescribes labor as the means for recreating the social harmony mythologized in earlier ages. He draws on pre-existing Orphic hymns to Zeus for his

mythologized historical depiction of five increasingly degraded ages, the apotheosis of which is the Age of Iron, his own age. By turning their hands back to softer materials, Hesiod suggests that his people might also change their hearts. In alluding to this Classical source to decry the depravity of the times to come, Mrs Curren at once evinces the desire for a better way of life, while also situating herself in the age-old tradition of making reference to existing authoritative sources in order to glorify the past and diagnose the present as the worst of times, which may itself be a sign that she too shares in the hardness of her age.

As we saw in Chapter One, the *plaasroman* and Afrikaner nationalist mythologies specifically emphasized the morally reparative value of labor and the sanctity of the *volksmoeder*. As thematic intersections between history and fiction proliferate in this story, the text makes available a doubled interpretive possibility that in the very endeavor to assert her distance from the present Age of Iron, through intimate longings for "the softer ages" to "return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth," Mrs Curren also (inadvertently?) manifests sensibilities that motivated the rural idyll of the *plaasroman*. Despite the very Englishness of her name, Mrs Curren's attempts to assert her personal virtue may belie similarities with the Nationalist sensibilities that informed legislated attempts at preserving the purity of Afrikaner women and the blood of the *volk* through the Immorality Acts of 1927 and 1957 and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949. The possibility is made available that Mrs Curren's attempt to assert her distinct personal virtue, as a liberal woman of letters and a mother, might not be as distant from the sensibility to mythologize mothers in Afrikaner nationalism as she would like to believe; yet the paradoxical counterpoint is that she might, nevertheless, also be good: both possibilities are sustained, and it is to the reader to negotiate the tension between them.[56]

[56] This connection between Mrs Curren and the iron-heartedness she decries in the times she inhabits is picked up in her shifting approach to a story that her own mother handed down to her. It is not long into the book before Mrs Curren takes aim at this story of innocence as a mythologized past. It is a story in which the family embarks on their annual ox wagon journey to the intersection of the coast and a river. As she recounts, "Always

Mrs Curren's dialogical engagements with Florence and with Hesiod's *Works and Days*, two bodies existing outside her narrative, draw attention to political valences in these interpretive possibilities. In the process, the competing resonances serve to destabilize the *pathos* of this woman pontificating in her kitchen and seeking salvation on the page while people die in the streets. By drawing out these dissonant interpretive valences, the critic is able to illuminate tensions in this text's compellingly sympathetic portrayal of a quest for salvation that offers very little apparent benefits to the wider body politic.

This tension is perhaps most finely wrought when Mrs Curren doubles back to reflect on the less-than-heroic prior generation of white South Africans, whose Puritanism she condemns in an impulse that may also betray her own (Puritanical?) desire for distance from those who so repulse her. Now deploying religious allusions to connect the hardening of hearts with a misplaced sanctity of labor, she reflects: "Are there not still white zealots preaching the old regime of discipline, work, obedience, self-sacrifice, a regime of death, to children some too young to tie their own shoelaces?" A Weberian logic infuses her judgment, which soon reaches the tenor of exorcism as she decries: "The spirit of Geneva triumphant in Africa. Calvin, black-robed, thin-blooded, forever cold, rubbing his hands in the afterworld, smiling his wintry smile. Calvin victorious, reborn in the dogmatists and witch-hunters of both armies." Mere moments after drawing on the legacies that mediate this vision, she conjures Calvin's specter and transfers moral responsibility onto it, as a single, authoritative source of apartheid violence. Juxtaposed with this familiar rhetorical move of displacing wider responsibility onto an elevated and distant source is Mrs Curren's own cold-hearted

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they were on their way to the Piesangs River. Such a lovely golden name!" A golden name from an impossibly golden era, the demystifying allusion to Hesiod seems to suggest. Indeed, the mythologized past is tinted with Edenic overtones: "I was sure it must be the most beautiful place on earth." Yet in the act of recollecting this story, Mrs Curren refuses to participate in a retroactive construction of innocence, a mythologizing of family history, in a narrative about one particular ox wagon journey—that trope which looms so large in Afrikaner mythology: "Years after my mother's death I visited Plettenberg Bay and saw the Piesangs River for the first time. Not a river at all, just a trickle of water choked with reeds, and mosquitoes in the evenings, and a caravan park full of screaming children and fat barefoot men in shorts braaiing sausages over gas cookers. Not Paradise at all" (16).

affirmation of her daughter's choice to cut ties with the messiness of life in South Africa: "How fortunate you are to have put all this behind you!" (47) Sympathetic though her comment may be, the implicit idea of a clean start, of separating one's self from tainted others is, in Coetzee's *oeuvre*, the true manifestation of the Spirit of Puritanism.

Around ten pages later, this unsettling presentiment is expressly confronted through an embodied interaction between Vercueil and Mrs Curren. Prompted by her bodily experience ("the pain in my back was wearing me down. It was past the time for my pills"), Mrs Curren bemoans the absence of her daughter at some length to Vercueil (66). She expresses a longing for something akin to hospice care, for "letting myself be undressed and put to bed and ministered to by [the nurses'] hands" (67). To which Vercueil responds by urging her to confide in her daughter that the cancer is in fact not "getting better," and to invite her daughter to come see her, to care for her (66). In an elevated register, Mrs Curren responds by appealing to a concept of heroism, subjecting her bodily needs before the idea of her daughter's virtue: "My daughter will not come back till things have changed here. She has made a vow. She will not come back to South Africa as you and she and I know it […] She is like iron. I am not going to ask her to go back on her vows." The pride she demonstrates in her daughter's moral resolution is as evident as when Florence defended the black children who skip school and refuse to show mercy to those they torment: if there is a revelatory aspect to this moment of encounter, it thus seems to pertain to the recognition that is invited when Vercueil notes, "You are like iron too" (68). More than an interesting character description, this comment functions in the plot by undermining assertions of distinctiveness or privileged importance.

That revelatory potential is further emphasized through the physical context in which this conversation unfolds, which is noteworthy for its deflationary power. For the moment of revelatory encounter with a profound insight is sandwiched between the bathetic physical

descriptions: "Vercueil showed his teeth in a broad grin. Yellow horse-teeth. An old horse" and "The four women we had met in the lift crossed the lot, escorted by a little man in a blue suit and white skullcap" (68-9). Whereas the first description emphasizes Vercueil's humanity, not as ethereal and spiritual, but as a more animalistic mode of being, the second description undermines the intensity of a moment of insight by recalling attention to the excess and contingency of the physical context from which it emerges.

These encounters with the contingency and excesses of life are crucial to the dialogism of this text and they proliferate when Mrs Curren visits the township Guguletu with Florence, where she confronts the body of Florence's dead son. After Mrs Curren returns home, with Bheki's corpse still impressed upon her mind, she appeals to an oddly ideological register to voice her own lament: "Such a good thing, life! Such a wonderful idea for God to have had! The best idea there had ever been […] And now Bheki, robbed of it, gone, torn away!" (100) This elegy stands out for its discordant language about life as an "idea for God to have had." The possibility of life, of people, being "ideas" in the mind of God recalls the philosophical system developed by the prominent early modern philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753), Bishop of Cloyne, and the intellectual climate in which such language seemed reasonable. In the face of a child's death, this language sounds especially preposterous. The resonance with Bishop Berkeley emphasizes that, in the face of death, by the standard of Bheki's murdered body, an intellectual culture in which life can be reduced to an idea (in the mind of God or otherwise) betrays a failure to reflect the more full-blooded truths of embodied life.

The immensity of this gap between – what I have been tentatively calling – the fullness of life and the thinness of narratives, however useful or well-intentioned they might be, also contributes to the dialogical complexities of this text. Mrs Curren's encounter with the boy Bheki's corpse, and with the flow of blood after the boy John is hit by a police

vehicle outside her home, prompt uncertainties in her conception of her own narrative's value, which are never resolved. These encounters correspond with Mrs Curren's development of greater and greater suspicion that her own maternal love letter is not as powerful or significant as she had hoped: "I thought, when I began this long letter, that its pull would be as strong as the tide's […] But with every day I add to it the letter seems to grow more abstract, more abstracted, the kind of letter one writes from the stars, from the farther void, disembodied, crystalline, bloodless" (125). The bodily encounters described in this letter serve to undermine the seriousness and significance of her personal pursuit of salvation through writing. A dissonant possibility becomes evident: to the extent that it remains an idea preserved purely in the realm of words, Mrs Curren's esteemed virtue of motherly love may itself be rather thin by comparison with the full-blooded encounters between bodies.

The limitations of Mrs Curren's position for relating her own narrative to life are further emphasized through the Christian idiom that points toward a complexity of meaning that surpasses the confines of her text. Mrs Curren blasphemously laments, "This letter has become a maze, and I a dog in the maze […] Why do I not call for help, call to God? Because God cannot help me. God is looking for me but he cannot reach me. God is another dog in another maze" (125). The wording is enigmatic. On the one hand, it suggests that "God," as another term, occupying another discourse, is irretrievable in this writing project. On the other, it suggests that there may be a fullness of meaning that surpasses the term "God" which discursive mazes (such as this letter) cannot attain, no less contain, just as they cannot finally provide the truths or consolations she seeks.

If a revelatory potential may remain within this narrative for providing the salvation that Mrs Curren seeks, it would also seem to exceed her perspective: indeed, it would seem to be located in writing's capacity to point beyond a reified maze of ideas toward (what I have been tentatively describing as) the inarticulable excess of life. This revelatory potential

would seem to flicker through moments in which her writing is reoriented from subjecting and organizing life before static ideas (such as salvation, virtue, truth), by drawing upon evocations of etymological and cultural histories that expand the writer's (and perhaps also the reader's) capacities for conscious awareness of polyphonic complexities behind each interpretive decision.

This approach to writing, as that which points beyond the maze of its own discourse, is further suggested when Mrs Curren continues to describe the impossibility of pursuing "God" in the maze of her letter. Now her religious language is entwined with a base, even bestial, register: "I smell God and God smells me. I am the bitch in her time, God the male. God smells me, he can think of nothing else but finding me and taking me. Up and down the branches he bounds, scratching at the mesh. But he is lost as I am lost" (125-6). This combination of registers signals that that which is most valuable, which in Christian traditions is God, has been lost in the maze of narrative, and if it is to be found, this may entail an approach to writing that points beyond the text.

In this text the pointing beyond is depicted as taking place through embodied encounters that dialogically intertwine the sacred and the profane in a mode that recalls Coetzee's comments on D.H. Lawrence in, "The Taint of the Pornographic: Defending (against) *Lady Chatterley*" (1988).[57] Here Coetzee describes Lawrence's defense of his pornographic writing by explaining his logic: "Introverted, self-enclosed desire expresses itself in an art of pure subjectivity […] What is the remedy? 'The way to treat the disease is to come out into the open.'" Drawing on Freud's writings in *Totem and Taboo*, he elaborates on Lawrence's position, saying:

> Specifically, we must restore the fallen Word, the Word that has become 'unclean.' 'To-day, if you suggest that the word arse was in the beginning, and was God and was with God, you will […] be put in prison. […] The word arse is as much God as the

[57] Coetzee republished this essay in *Doubling the Point* and again in *Giving Offense*; I quote from *Giving Offense*.

> word face.' The villain is the mind. The mind, hating the body, has turned the old body-words into scapegoats and driven them from consciousness. Now they haunt the margins of consciousness like jackals or hyenas, undying. They must be readmitted. The taboo must be lifted. If not, we will remain at the level of savages. (53)

To the extent that *Age of Iron* draws readers' attention beyond body words to a fuller gamut of bodily interactions, it may be understood as engaged in a similarly redemptive project — yet never without flagging the possibilities of violence, undesirable desires, and self-interest lurking behind this guise.

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To illuminate the variety of redemption that (potentially) develops in this text, we return briefly to Ivan Karamazov's discussion with Alyosha about his own rebellion against God. With recognizably dialogical language, Ivan articulates the problem that suffering children poses to his faith:

> Besides, the price of *harmony* has been set too high, we can't afford the entrance fee. And that's why I hasten to return my entry ticket. If I ever want to call myself an honest man, I have to hand it back as soon as possible. And that's exactly what I'm doing. It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha; I'm just, with the utmost respect, handing Him back my ticket. (my emphasis 307-8)

The problem of theodicy as Ivan introduces it is never resolved in the story, but instead held open disharmoniously. Moreover, though the claim that he wishes to "return [his] entry ticket" suggests a turn away from life, the tension between Ivan's sympathy for children who suffer seems a much stronger affirmation of his valuation of life, not least when coupled with his scorn for the Grand Inquisitor (which I will discuss in the second half of this chapter). By exposing two dissonant aspects of Ivan's position, *The Karamazov Brothers* raises the possibility of an approach to salvation in which correct affirmations of truth and goodness might be but one means of recognizing faith. Indeed, it specifically does so in religious terms that are profoundly freighted.

A very subtle possibility is made available that this act, of dialogically holding open unharmonized differences, might itself be an act of faith. What draws attention to this possibility is the action Ivan attributes to the figure of Jesus, in Ivan's Grand Inquisitor Tale, who, after giving the last word to the Grand Inquisitor, "suddenly approaches the old man in silence and calmly kisses him on his bloodless ninety-year-old lips," before walking away. In the Grand Inquisitor Tale, the figure of Christ embodies such a radical commitment to freedom that his response to a man that violently imposes "his Idea" at the expense of other lives is the refusal to foreclose even this life, this idea, and to respond instead by extending his own self in a dialogical act of embodied fraternity (329).[58]

The connection with *Age of Iron* is found in the way this story incorporates evidence of Mrs Curren's increasing (if often fleeting) awareness that her writing does not allow for the confidence in private intentions or personal virtues that she had initially sought. For that expansion of awareness is facilitated by what Girard would call grace: the potentially transformative encounter with other perspectives. But even Mrs Curren recognizes that this is no purely pleasant grace to receive. Alluding to Ivan's rebellion against God, she signals her own rebellion against the rules that might govern a "time after death" marked by the intervention of external perspectives, a time in which distinctions between private and personal breakdown. She laments to her daughter:

> There may be no way of keeping a space in the heart private for you or anyone else. […] It is a terrible thought. Enough to make one rebel, to make one say: If that is how things are to be, I withdraw: *here is my ticket, I am handing it back.* But I doubt very much that the handing back of tickets will be allowed, for whatever reason.
> (my emphasis 172-3)

Within the context of the epistolary form that conventionally signaled a privileged, private space, Mrs Curren foresees a literary afterlife, in place of the immortality of the soul, which

[58] Whereas other critics have illuminated connections between the Grand Inquisitor Tale and *Master* (notably Angelika Reichmann in "Possessed by the 'Exhilarating Monster': J.M. Coetzee's reading of Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*" (2016) and John Bolin in "The Sinister Mirror: Desire and Intensity in J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*" (2013)), I aim to show how these connections also extend to inform *Age of Iron*.

will enable – and depend upon – a rather different conception of morality and salvation. By this account, for her spirit to live on, it must shape and be mediated by the perspectives and lives of others, which will in turn imprint themselves on her privately coded comments.

If there is a salvation that leads to life after death in this text, her letter is only one way in which it is conveyed, and there is no clear means for evaluating the other forms of encounter that might enable her "spirit" to live on. While the import of her observation may be uncertain, it nevertheless raises the significant insight that this fictionalized narrative itself is one (textual) body through which those spirits and voices that had imprinted themselves on Coetzee – in writing or life more widely (such as his mother) – also live on, albeit perhaps not on their own terms. For like Mrs Curren, these voices and perspectives are only parts of the larger story that they might have liked to describe as "my story." If this is a variety of salvation, it entails the kenotic movement of self-overcoming and finally death, which leads not to immortality, but to a variety of infinite hospitality, over which one does not finally have control.

More than halfway through the book Mrs Curren reflects, "Death may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death" (106). She expounds on this diagnosis of the opposition between writing and death explaining that as long as she is writing, she is alive. Yet that does not seem to adequately account for the dialogism of her discursive life. In words addressed to her daughter, Mrs Curren explains how her writing is the evidence of her life: "For as long as the trail of words continues, you know with certainty that I have not gone through with it" (106). By the story's enigmatic ending, however, Mrs Curren's writing impossibly extends to include a description of her death.

Whereas Mrs Curren equates the continuation of her "trail of words" with the continuation of her life, the question of whether or not a trail "continues," can be answered from at least two perspectives. From one perspective, the "trail of words" may "continue"

because a writer continues laying down words, but from another perspective it continues because readers continue to follow the words that have been laid down. As Mrs Curren puts it elsewhere: "These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on" (120). This continuation of the trail of words takes on not a metaphysical meaning, detached from bodies, but a meaning inscribed in bodies.

Mrs Curren expounds on this view of writing, to her daughter, with reoriented Christological language: "If Vercueil does not send these writings on, you will never read them […] A certain *body of truth* will never *take on flesh*: my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place" (my emphasis 119). The incarnational language recalls Bakhtin's account of Dostoevsky's Christological approach to writing dialogically, and Mrs Curren's words sustain this emphasis as she writes, "Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow towards her, may I live in you" (120). The resonance here is again with the words of Christ, taken from John's Gospel, as he exhorts his disciples: "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me […] Just as my Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love" (John 15.3a, 9). Although it is not quite cruciform logic, the allusion provides a vision of writing in which Mrs Curren situates her hope for a more material afterlife in the interactions and connections between herself and others.

If Mrs Curren's pursuit of salvation remains marked by an almost solipsistic concern for her own soul, the significance of the Christological resonance in her language draws attention to the significance of *Age of Iron* itself: written from within a society where windows are barred and doors bolted from fear, the story makes use of the safety that the apparent frivolity of fiction can afford for confronting ultimate matters, for imagining an

interconnected, embodied variety of "salvation" as one way to get beyond solipsism. It is a way to expose, and thereby exorcise, what Mrs Curren has called the Spirit of Calvin from apparently unrelated conceptions of morality.

As with Bakhtin's account of dialogism in Dostoevsky, the power of this fiction is precisely located in its kenotic movement, its choice to occupy the space of story-telling in the hopes that this might enable a more honest investigation of matters that are deathly serious. Contrary to the blurb John Banville offers, on the back cover of the Penguin 1991 edition, this is not finally a story "about one person's life, and death," but rather about the greater embodied dialogue of frequently cacophonous perspectives that permeate the text.

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In a story that revisits themes from *In the Heart* (whether through the *volksmoeder* trope or the lone female narrator asserting her distinctive identity as an individual), *Age of Iron* represents Mrs Curren as repeatedly describing herself in a destabilized prophetic role, with dreams if not visions. She repeatedly wakes "out of the Borodino sleep" in which she visits the site of Napoleon's pyrrhic victory, whereby he won Moscow, but lost Russia (126, 128, 137, 170, 171). For Mrs Curren the Borodino dream seems to suggest the drawing near of an end of an era of subjecting bodies to death and violence in the name of nationalistic ideas. Through sensory language evocative of hell ("sulphurous," "smoke," and "burning"), the Battle of Borodino and Dante's *Inferno* converge in Mrs Curren's imagination:

> When I fall asleep there commences a restless movement of shapes behind my eyelids, shapes without body or form, covered in a haze, grey or brown, sulphurous. *Borodino* is the word that comes to me in my sleep: a hot summer afternoon on the Russian plain, smoke everywhere, the grass dry and burning, two hosts that have lost all cohesion plodding about, parched, in terror of their lives. Hundreds of thousands of men, faceless, voiceless, dry as bones, trapped on a field of slaughter, repeating night after night their back-and-forth march across that scorched plain in the stench of sulphur and blood: a hell into which I plummet when I close my eyes. (126)

Allusions to the Battle of Borodino seem to suggest that whereas apartheid ideas such as the purity of a *volk* may have ascended to power, their victory was pyrrhic. Her private letter of confession, her private pursuit of purity, seems fraught with the same risks. The Borodino warning may apply to both: Mrs Curren's pursuit of "salvation" or personal purity, even through writing, would be a pyrrhic victory if it elides the messy, threatening fullness of embodied life. These victories come at too great a cost: the cost both of real lives and of the thicker meanings revealed through their complex interactions, their embodied dialogism.

A prophetic potential is further suggested in the religious language Mrs Curren uses to describe waking from this Borodino dream. Her language recalls the story of Jonah, the Old Testament prophet who heartily resisted the divine command to warn the people of Nineveh to relinquish their sins and avoid judgment, and whose resistance famously lands him in the belly of a whale. So Mrs Curren describes emerging from the Borodino dream, saying, "I am back: again and again I am back, from the belly of the whale disgorged" (126). Like the many embodied encounters she describes across her narrative, this dream takes Mrs Curren out of a position of narrative authority to one of humility to mark her prophetic potential.

Soon thereafter, Mrs Curren is attributed with language familiar from Coetzee's own "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" (1987). Amidst a flow of continual affirmations of her motherly love, Mrs Curren's language shifts to exercise the responsibility of confronting her daughter with the potentially soul-stunting results of a commitment to personal virtue. She recalls, "At the airport, the day you left, you gripped me and stared into my eyes. 'Do not call me back, Mother,' you said, 'because I will not come.' Then you shook the dust of this country from your feet." This phrase "you shook the dust of this country from your feet" invokes the words of Jesus, encouraging his disciples to exercise a mode of judgment: "Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of

Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (Matthew 10.14-15). Once again, the significance of this religious allusion is complicated by attending to the larger context from which it was drawn: several verses earlier Jesus has commanded his disciples, "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give" (Matthew 10.8). So when Mrs Curren concludes, "you were right," the suggestion is made available that being "right" might be a pyrrhic victory, in comparison with exercising the spiritual or moral courage to confront that which is less savory, less desirable – the sick, the dead, the lepers, the demons – in the hopes of restoring life, which is finally, interconnected.

This interpretive possibility is kept alive by an ensuing convergence in Mrs Curren's language and the language directed at Coetzee's audience, and readers, in his "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech." Mrs Curren elaborates to her daughter, "There is something as terrible as it is admirable in that will of yours, in the letters you write in which – let me be candid – there is not enough love, or at least not enough of the loving-yielding that brings love to life." The key phrase here is "not enough love," which recurs in a slightly altered form in Coetzee's speech, when he claims: "At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of love" (*Doubling the Point* 97). It is apt that these sentiments converge in a moment when Mrs Curren has broken free of the epistolary impulse to affirm the secret truth of her motherly love, and entered the realm of a less palatable form of care through dialogical confrontation, for Coetzee's speech goes on to specifically connect this failure of love with, "The vain and essentially sentimental yearning that expresses itself in the reform movement in South Africa today [as] a yearning to have fraternity without paying for it" (97). No prescription is offered for how one goes about paying for this fraternity, but a repositioning of literature is suggested as one potential means for obtaining insight into what those costs might be.

Coetzee claims, "South African literature […] is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from the elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them" (98). The final paragraph in Coetzee's speech emphasizes, once again, the power of the body as an interruptive force against this privileging of narratives over life. Now, though, the narrative form under discussion is the novel, specifically in relation to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, as Coetzee asks:

> What prevents the South African writer […] from writing his way out of a situation in which his art, no matter how well-intentioned, is […] too slow, too old-fashioned, too indirect to have any but the slightest and most belated effect on the life of the community or the course of history?
>
> What prevents him is what prevents Don Quixote himself: the *power* of the world his body lives in to impose itself on him and ultimately on his imagination, which, whether he likes it or not, has its residence in his body. (99)

No prescription is given, but the possibility is sounded of a pursuit of freedom (minor though the impact might be) through a literature, through an art, that refuses to subject its world to romantic illusions, and instead attempts to orient the imagination, through narrative, toward the dialogical complexities of embodied life.

No Saint in this Petersburg: Dialogism at the Limits

What may seem to be a rather innocuous, even idealistic, approach to writing in *Age of Iron*, is reconsidered in a heightened way in *Master*. This process of reconsideration also complicates the double-movement that this thesis has traced in Coetzee's engagement with religious language. In the earliest works we saw Coetzee demystifying Christian presuppositions and language that obscure exercises of power and violation. In *Barbarians, Foe*, and *Michael K* we saw that he increasingly reorients religious language and concepts to make alternative interpretive positions available to readers, for navigating the relations between narrative and life. These doubled impulses were then attributed to the writer-

character Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron*, which creates a measure of ironizing distance. In *Master*, however, another impulse in Coetzee's writing emerges. For, in its radical attempts to disturb foundational distinctions between good and evil, mind and body, self and other, fiction and history, this narrative preserves no separate sacred space for writing in the lives it depicts. Instead, we will see that this text makes emphatically clear just what is at stake in the kenotic impulse of dialogism, in the undoing of hierarchies and boundaries, when pushed to the limit.

As Attridge has put it, compared with Coetzee's previous fictions, this one "offers no such firm political or moral footholds" (116). Rather, in a sharply intensified dialogical mode, this narrative erodes the metaphysical oppositions foundational to such moral footholds, confronting readers with a heightened awareness of their own interpretive responsibility for evaluating the tensions and paradoxes of this text. The story is pervaded by a profoundly destabilizing emphasis, which John Bolin described, in "The Sinister Mirror: Desire and Intensity in J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*" (2013), as the "moral and philosophical question" that surrounds naming: "how does one write about" – or name – "the unknowable?" (5) Indeed, by depicting Dostoevsky, the writer, as he walks around reading (and thus supplying names to) his physical world, Coetzee puts the very ideas that I have been outlining about the value of dialogical openness to the test.

This test is usefully illuminated by a closer examination of Ivan Karamazov's Grand Inquisitor Tale, in which the figure of Christ is distinguished by a radical affirmation of human freedom, which the Grand Inquisitor rejects for coming at too high a price. If *Age of Iron* puts forward a generous spirited fictional test that may bear some relation to Coetzee's own mother, *Master* draws attention to the profound costs that might be incurred through pursuing radical freedom in fictional representation. In Ivan's Tale, the Grand Inquisitor and his cronies are people of power who have determined to protect people from the discomfort

of radical freedom through their own oppressive governance. Although this is done in the name of Christ, the Grand Inquisitor is distinctly unable (or unwilling) to recognize the man whose name he uses to sanction this legislation. While the multitudes flock to Jesus, the Grand Inquisitor arrests him. Taking on a Pilate-like role, he accuses Jesus, saying that he "could have provided all that man seeks on earth—that is to say, *someone to worship, someone to take charge of his conscience, and finally, a way to be united unequivocally in a communal and harmonious antheap*," but instead offered freedom (my emphasis 322-323). When Jesus responds with a kiss on the cheek, before walking away, he enacts that radical freedom that the Grand Inquisitor rejects for coming at too high a cost—and in doing so he permits the oppressive legislation and burning pyres to persist.

In *Master*, there is no clear Christ figure, but instead a writer-character whose literary insights seem connected to real impositions and even harms in his personal relations with other characters, most notably a child. As such, the Dostoevsky character seems to evince qualities of the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus alike, and readers are put in the position of cultivating their own judgments on what is good in this text, and what the value of this variety of literature might be, which refuses to silence (and instead blatantly exposes) pernicious thoughts and desires.

Master confronts its readers with a world in which good and evil are not easily parsed one from the other—as the title's elision may suggest, there is no saint in this Petersburg. Indeed, the dominant religious metaphors in this depiction of Dostoevsky's approach to writing are demon possession and the Fall. However, neither quite provides a master metaphor for the text, comprehensively revealing a harmonized meaning; rather, this is a text that figures the wanderings of one man as he gropes (often misguidedly) through the process of mourning his son's death. This Dostoevsky often seems less the master than the one

mastered, and there is good reason to wonder about who or what is the master of this Petersburg.

As with *Age of Iron* (not to mention *Barbarians* and *Foe*), this story commences in the Dosteovskian manner of starting with a crisis: Dostoevsky arrives in St Petersburg, from Dresden, in the wake of his step-son, Pavel's, recent death. Although the facts become disputed in the story, it is purported that Pavel "fell to his death from the shot tower on Stolyarny Quoy" on October 12, 1869 (202). Not only does Pavel's fall trigger the start of the story, but the theme of falling recurs frequently throughout.[59] In tracing the theme of "falling" across this text, I will show that any metaphorical, mythological, or symbolic significance to this theme is firmly connected to Dostoevsky's repeated falls into epileptic seizures, as he lives in perpetual terror of their recurrence: "To no one has he ever confessed how much of his time he spends listening for premonitions of [these attacks], trying to read the signs" (69). Moreover, the Christian idiom in this story frequently plunges to the profane, and from compelling *pathos* to disturbing perversion. Additionally, the events themselves are conveyed with reference to the Christian Fall narrative, in depictions of Dostoevsky's iterative movements from innocuous self-description to conscious awareness of murkier desires in a narrative that leaves him defrocked of the prophet's mantle, as it desacralizes his writing project.

If there is any redemptive potential in this story, it is certainly not found in the strength of Dostoevsky's moral character. The story takes place from mid-October to November 1869 and recounts a fictional Dostoevsky's time in Petersburg, mourning his son but also absorbing experiences and materials for his next novels, *Devils* (also translated

[59] The theme of falling is further emphasized through at least eighty-eight uses of the variants "fall," "falling," "sink," "tumble," "tumbling," "plunge," "plunging," and "fit" (2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 26, 28, 30, 31, 32, 40, 46, 54, 56, 63, 68, 69, 70, 71, 77, 83, 84, 90, 96, 97, 105, 110, 111, 114, 121, 138, 140, 158, 161, 163, 164, 170, 174, 176, 177, 183, 186, 193, 201, 204, 206, 214, 226, 228, 232, 234, 235, 237, 241, 243, 246, 249). As Bolin has it, "The dominant motif *The Master* deploys to describe the experience of giving oneself over to the disorientation of intensity is that of a violent fall, of plunging" (14).

Demons and *The Possessed*) and *The Karamazov Brothers*. The chapters are named for the places Dostoevsky visits ("Petersburg," "The cemetery"), the people he engages ("Maximov," "Anna Sergeyevna"), and the material objects he encounters ("The printing press," "The diary"). Attending to the religious language that describes his encounters with these various places and material bodies suggests two potentially redemptive aspects in this fiction.

First, it draws attention to the inextricable and complex connections between Dostoevsky's approach to writing and his person, which might illuminate the nature of desire itself. Second, the dialogical structure of this story draws recurring attention to the perspectives of others, who shape Dostoevsky's writing and are impacted by that writing as well as by his person, and by each other. This second potentially redemptive aspect of the story also entails a demand on readers to consider the social implications of a literary project, which has a real impact on real lives—an impact that extends through our own lives as readers.

This Petersburg is a notably composite space that combines elements of Dostoevsky's biography and fiction, as well as Coetzee's autobiography and fiction. As Dostoevsky's assiduous biographer Joseph Frank puts it in his book review, "The Rebel," Coetzee "plays fast and loose with the historical record by killing off Pavel Isaev in 1869" and by including "other events that are simply recorded in Coetzee's novel, such as Dostoevsky's adulterous affair in St. Petersburg, or his supposedly catching a glimpse of Nechaev and Bakunin together at a meeting of the League for Peace and Freedom in Geneva, have no basis in fact" (53). These manipulations of the historical record, combined with allusions to the fictions produced by both authors, result in a disorienting literary space called Petersburg, which removes the handrails of genre to put readers in the difficult position of navigating disturbing content relatively unaided.

Not only does this text interweave "fact" and "fiction," but it also draws upon the afterlives of Dostoevsky's fictions to write an imagined prequel, extending certain paradoxical aspects of *Foe*'s chronology (as a literary afterlife, but also 'prequel' to *Robinson Crusoe*) to convey a "fictional Dostoevsky" who "is emphatically and paradoxically a creator and a creature of his own creations at the same time" (Reichmann 145). Moreover, I will show that Dostoevsky simultaneously is and is not the subject of this story, which takes its power from the juxtapositions and encounters between different formal features, idioms, and characters.

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In *Master*, the use of religious language is perpetually undermined and destabilized through narrative connections with the character Dostoevsky's impulses toward violence and violation. The free indirect narration not only muddies differences between the various perspectives of characters, but it also muddies distinctions between Dostoevsky's personal impulses and his self-interpretation. To appropriate a conclusion drawn by Reichmann, this "leads to the simultaneous presence and endless dialogue of multiple voices in one consciousness" a consciousness, though, that is not merely (as Reichmann claims) "trapped in an infinite and heterogeneous intertextual space," but contributing to it and comprised of it (145). This muddying of oppositions is particularly evident in the religious language used to describe Dostoevsky's encounters with the young revolutionary Nechaev.

From the first introduction of the Nechaev character, this story destabilizes the historical Dostoevsky's diagnosis of the historical Nechaev as "possessed" by a distinctively harmful spirit, the spirit of nihilism. Dostoevsky's own dubious moral authority and his denied likeness to Nechaev are emphasized in a scene at the police station where he attempts to collect his deceased son's papers. Councillor Maximov first introduces the possibility that

Dostoevsky and his deceased son, Pavel, might be more like Nechaev than Dostoevsky admits. And Girard's insight into the anger that results from confronting pervasive – and pervasively denied – structures of imitative desire my seem apt when Dostoevsky responds by heightening his denial: "Nechaev is a conspirator and an insurrectionist whose designs I repudiate with the utmost force […] I reject everything he stands for" (35). The terms of this distancing take on a religious register familiar from *Devils* as this Dostoevsky elaborates, "Nechaevism […] is a spirit, and Nechaev himself is not its embodiment but its host; or rather, he is under possession by it" (43-4).

As Dostoevsky proclaims his judgment on Nechaev, he slips into the recognizable role of an Old Testament prophet, giving this spirit the name of "Baal," enemy of Israel and horned god of the Philistines, now imagined with "an ox's head" (44). Yet by the book's end, Dostoevsky's own writing process is depicted as inspired by a presence that may have "the ox-face of Baal," a head "slightly too large, larger than a human head ought to be" (238). If *Devils* was a novel aimed at prophetically warning against the unchecked violence and madness that moral nihilism might release in Russia, then as an imaginary prequel, *Master* confronts readers with the possibility that Dostoevsky's spiritual insights might in fact come from and mystify a similar "possession" to the one he diagnoses.

The erosion of this opposition between Dostoevsky and Nechaev does not simply come at the book's end, but is ongoing throughout. Emphasizing the dubious nature of Dostoevsky's self-positioning as prophet, the narrative proceeds to follow a dialogue in which Maximov offers alternative interpretations of Nechaev. Through asking "whether the Nechaev phenomenon is quite as much of an aberration of the spirit as you seem to say," Maximov raises the more banal possibility, "Perhaps it is just the old matter of fathers and sons after all, such as we have always had, only deadlier in this particular generation, more unforgiving" (45). By juxtaposing Dostoevsky's assertion of spiritual insight with this

desacralizing counter-interpretation, the text confronts its readers both with the possibility that Dostoevsky might be wrong and with reason to wonder what else might be at stake in his appeal to religious language. This dialogical intersection of perspectives exposes the possibility that Dostoevsky's religious diagnosis of Nechaev might obscure his own self-interest in denying "the old matter of fathers and sons," a matter in which he is both is and is not implicated as a stepfather.

This dialogue with Maximov continues to destabilize Dostoevsky's assertion of distance from Nechaev when a semantic shift specifically opens up the possibility that the same spirit motivating Nechaev's revolutionary commitments also inspires Dostoevsky's writing. The shift in terms is offered by Maximov: "You say we should not lock Nechaev up because he is possessed by a demon (shall we call it a demon? – *spirit* strikes a false note, I would say)" (44). By raising the corrective term "demon," Maximov extends the semantic range at play to include the varied valences of evil spirits and of those daemons that inspire authors to literary creation.

Both valences remain alive in the discussion as it focuses in on reading and writing. The discussion turns to a story Pavel has written about the murder of a landowner named "Karamzin," which is clearly the seed for *The Karamazov Brothers*,[60] when, with characteristic appeal to *pathos*, Dostoevsky provides the following synthesis of his approach to reading:

> What is it that frightens you, Councillor Maximov? When you read about Karamzin or Karamzov or whatever his name is, when Karamzin's skull is cracked open like an egg, what is the truth: do you suffer with him, or do you secretly exult behind the arm that swings the axe? You don't answer? Let me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering.

[60] Hayes was the first to point this out, in *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* (186). However, from Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: Seeds of Revolt,* we can see that "Karamzin" is also an intertextual reference to a historian who had exercised great influence over the young Dostoevsky. By Frank's account, Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveller* specifically describe a conversation with Kant on questions of morality that bears notable thematic connections with *The Karamazov Brothers*, which suggests that what initially appears to be a slippage in the text could itself be laden with a web of associated meanings (56-7).

This description of reading as yielding to the perspectives of others, victims and murderers alike, notably corresponds with his dialogical approach to writing, in which ideas are explored through imaginative participation in any voice, however disturbing. An intervention from Maximov makes available the possibility that what Dostoevsky proffers as a literary virtue may be connected to the very spiritual vices he diagnosed in Nechaev. At the conclusion of his explanation, Dostoevsky "sits back, flushed," and Maximov candidly observes, "you speak of reading as though it were demon-possession" (47).[61] While the text holds open these varied interpretive possibilities, Dostoevsky is slow in reaching agreement that the "spirit" motivating him might be the same "spirit" motivating Nechaev.

Notably, it is through a conversation with his landlady, Anna, fraught with rogue desires, that Dostoevsky approaches his own recognition that Nechaev's "spirit" may be something more familiar than he initially claimed. In this episode, Dostoevsky's perspective fluctuates between the assumption of moral authority requisite for spiritual diagnosis and a rather less morally authoritative indulgence in his own desires for his landlady. In this context, Dostoevsky attains the insight that whatever spirit possesses Nechaev may in fact have its appeal for being shared—after which point he then explicitly downgrades that spirit from a "demon" of the order of Baal to a "demon" of the order of Greek mythology (111, 112). Now "demon" expressly describes a source of inspiration as Dostoevsky remarks, "The truth is, [Nechaev] has what the Greeks called a demon. It speaks to him. It is the source of his energy" (112-3). When Dostoevsky reflects that, "The same demon must have been in Pavel, otherwise why would Pavel have responded to his call?" it destabilizes the very

[61] It may also recall T.S. Eliot's 1935 essay "Religion and Literature," which describes the "inundation" and "invasion of the undeveloped personality by the stronger personality of the poet" in which "One author takes complete possession of us for a time; then another." Eliot, though, goes on to advocate reading widely and discriminately in order to "weigh one [author] against another" and to develop a "growing critical power which protects us from excessive possession by any one literary personality" (*Essays Ancient and Modern* 102).

distance between Nechaev and Pavel that he had previously asserted in connection with his own claims of distinction from Nechaev (113).

We can see that Coetzee had this destabilization of roles specifically in mind from an entry in the archived notes for *Master*, describing a confrontation between Dostoevsky and Nechaev that ensues at the top of the tower from which Pavel died. The entry reads, "One night Nechaev takes him up to the shot tower. Christ and Satan in the wilderness. But which is Christ, which is Satan?" (1) If this scene stages the temptation to foreclose life through a second murder, it is unclear who is the potential murderer, and who the potential victim. At the top of the tower, third person pronouns comingle in a singular spirit of vengeance as the narrative reads, "At any moment he could grasp him about the waist and tip him over the edge into the void. But who is *he* on this platform, who is *him*?" (119) This conflation of the religiously resonant roles of Christ and Satan, in a scene developed with a view toward the second temptation of Christ, confronts readers with their own responsibility for evaluating two characters that each fail to fit the divinized paradigms of a sacred redeemer or evil deceiver.

Allusions to the ill-fitting religious roles of Jesus and Satan recur across this narrative, contributing to its presentation of Dostoevsky, the man and writer, as uneasily fitting within the moral categories each figures: good or evil. Toward the story's end, in the chapter entitled "The printing press," Dostoevsky once again accuses Nechaev of wanting to be Jesus ("You want to steal Easter from Jesus"), before immediately slipping himself into the very same messianic role: "This is the second time you tempt me, and I am not tempted" (187). Although Dostoevsky's allocations of religious roles fluctuate, he seems to come closest to the truth when, toward the end of the book, he allocates himself the role of "a Judas, not a Jesus." His rationale for the claim reflects the dialogical awareness that through his writing he sells his own life and "the lives of those around [him]." Yet what particularly

distinguishes this religiously inflected diagnosis is the way it places him in the murky realm of the human, as reprehensible but neither exclusively good nor evil, when he reflects on his "life without honour," marked by "treachery without limit; confession without end" (222).

Unlike Satan or Christ, the role of Judas is marked by its profound limitations: motivated by greed, this villain betrays that which is most precious, the incarnate God himself, and in doing so unwittingly plays a vital part in the redemptive tale of the Gospels. By muddying Dostoevsky's role in this book in relation to these poles of moral opposition, the story presents moral complexities and vicissitudes that heighten and complicate the reader's own responsibility for responding to a writer in whom vile desires coexist alongside more sympathetic qualities. The chapter entitled "Matryona" demonstrates this best, and for that reason warrants extended attention.

In the chapter "Matryona," extreme shifts in the narrative – from religious ecstasy to impulses of violation to fatherly mourning – are connected, it seems, through Dostoevsky's embodied moods and desires. The chapter starts with recounting apparently unrelated thoughts that seem held together less by logical coherence than by Dostoevsky's glum mood. He recounts a "twinge of longing, not unpleasant in itself, for Dresden and […] a wife," followed by discomfortingly competitive comparisons between himself and the memory of his dead son ("he has supplanted a being of godlike strength and beauty"), and a recollection of his landlady's explanation that she had felt compelled to involve herself with him as an "object of pity" (66, 67). These varied thoughts seem connected by a sense of lack, of failure.

After a short sleep, however, that mood shifts dramatically. It surges to ecstatic heights, conveyed with reference to a religious register: "He can barely contain himself. He is like a child at Easter, on fire for the household to wake up so that he can share his joy with them." This religious register takes on an added charge as the mourning father expressly invokes the resurrected Son: "'Christ is risen!' he wants to call out, and hear [the landlady,

Anna] respond 'Christ is risen!'" (67) Only a page later, the narrative plunges from religious ecstasy to an epileptic seizure, "the shame of the fit" (68). A more sensory register describes the "cry that echoes down the stairwell, so loud and so frightful that sleepers are woken by it" before Dostoevsky feels his body falling "vertically through space inside him" and notes the "bad smell" and "soiled clothes" that follow (68, 69, 79). This shift in registers not only draws attention to the body, but it juxtaposes Dostoevsky's bodily and religious experience, as if to confront readers with their indeterminate relation. It is unclear what role the nap might have had in Dostoevsky's shift in mood, and one can hardly rule out the possibility that his religious experience is the manifestation of a rise in mood before the fall of a fit.

After the fit, Dostoevsky takes another nap, from which he "awakes in an angry and irritable mood," which is the context for his own acts of transgression and debasement (70). In one moment Dostoevsky's agency is transgressed by the failure of his own body, in the next he becomes the transgressor. He trawls through the private spaces in Anna's home. First, he explains this act of violation as a manifestation of a personal quality that sounds rather like a literary virtue in his censored society: namely, "a refusal to accept limits to what he is permitted to know, with the reading of forbidden books, and thus with his vocation." He then doubles back, determining that he is actually "in thrall to a spirit of petty evil," before finally acknowledging the pleasure he derives from this transgression. While rummaging through drawers may be fairly innocuous, the narrative soon portrays Dostoevsky in a more glaring light, after he dons his deceased son's white suit: "looking in the mirror, he sees only a seedy imposture and, beyond that, something surreptitious and obscene." These less savory hidden impulses are increasingly exposed after Dostoevsky has another fit: two paragraphs after reading that "Everything spins" and "When he comes back he has again lost all sense of who he is," the girl Matryona enters the room (71).

It is after this second fit that Dostoevsky's mood and desires take an even nastier turn, now subjecting Matryona to stories, imaginings, and a force of presence that seem aimed at inducing the feelings of powerlessness and degradation reminiscent of a fit. What unfolds is a repeated assault on the girl's belief in goodness. After eliciting her attention with the promise of a story about how Pavel had acquired his white suit, Dostoevsky instead elaborates on the world as a place where innocent creatures think they are "here to be beaten." His impulses are vicious, "*This is Russia!* he wants to say, forcing the words upon her, rubbing her face in them" (73). Dostoevsky again reaches for a religious register when he responds to Matryona's question, "Why did [Pavel] kill himself?" (74) By now we recognize these appeals to religious language tend to coincide with moments of strong affective experience: it is not difficult to imagine the unharnessed pain and anger of this father – who is also an epileptic – bluntly reminded of his powerlessness before his son's fatal fall.

The danger of examining the influence of bodily experience on unsavory desires is that it can start to sound like an explanation, an excuse. Yet these factors do not mitigate the brutality and violation tainting Dostoevsky's thoughts, in part because of how staunchly the text resists harmonizing interpretations.[62] This dissonance is emphasized further as he offers an explanation of Pavel's suicide to Matryona, with the transgressive blasphemy that is an act of profound violation for a Christian: "He asked God a question – Will you save me? – and God gave him an answer. God said: No. God said: Die. […] He said to God: if you love me, save me. If you are there, save me. But there was only silence. […] God did not appear. God did not intervene" (75). If this is a Dostoevsky who treasures his faith, then attention to the body, with its moods and desires, does little to diminish the cruelty and anger of these

[62] In "Dostoevsky and Parricide" (1927), Freud offers what might be understood as a harmonizing account of the relation between Dostoevsky's physical ailments and his writing by connecting "the extraordinary intensity of his emotional life, his perverse innate instinctual disposition […] and his unanalysable artistic gift" with his "so-called epilepsy," which was "only a symptom of his neurosis" (179).

words. In the religious violation of these words rings the anger and pain of a man demanding a divine appearance, with the defiance that may itself be an attempt at handing back his ticket.

As a yet more violating scene unfolds, it complicates any easy moral judgments through the depiction of physical interactions that might seem affectionate and fatherly, were they not mired in Dostoevsky's disturbing thoughts. Aspects of the physical interaction seem caring, even good: "He folds her within the circle of his arm; he can feel her trembling. He strokes her hair, her temples," and then the little girl breaks down crying (75). In addition to which, the actual dialogue in this episode is, at times, tender: "'I don't understand,' she sobs, 'Why did [Pavel] have to die?'" To which Dostoevsky responds, "I know you love him […] He knows that too. You have a good heart" (76). Yet, simultaneously, the reading experience is overwhelmingly disturbing: both aspects coexist – to different degrees – as the more sympathetic verbal and physical expressions are increasingly unsettled within the narrative's focalization through Dostoevsky's vile imaginings.

As the narrative turns to pornographic themes and the "child-prostitutes he has known," it is as though Coetzee is saying "*This is Dostoevsky!"* and "forcing the words upon [us], rubbing [our] faces in them" (76, 73). The complex staging of this disturbing episode unsettles any easy recourse to a mind-body dualism, or to paradigmatic moral distinctions, with a dissonance that is sustained with intensity. Indeed, this may shed a glaring light on a comment in Coetzee's archived notes for *Master*, wherein an unidentified "He" "sees with new eyes the limitations of the Dostoevskian novel, passionate but sexless" (3).

There is no harmonization between the violation that is undeniable, despite being apparently relegated to the mind of Dostoevsky, and the apparently innocent experience had by Matryona. Thematic dissonance is maintained not only through direct description, but also through the relative positioning of those descriptions: "This is as far as the violation goes: the girl in the crook of his arm, the five fingers of his hand, white and dumb, gripping

her shoulder. But she might as well be sprawled out naked" (76). Alongside this chilling claim, Matryona is represented as oblivious, lighting a candle for Pavel, "with a trustingness that takes him by surprise," before "she returns to the bed and rests her head on his arm. Together they regard the steady candle flame" (78). Regardless of whether, from Matryona's perspective, this has been a safe, even friendly encounter, the narrative sustains the degrading force of Dostoevsky's perspective: it offers no answer for how the violations of his mind might relate to the embodied encounter, but hold contradictory perspectives together, in a refusal to relieve readers' responsibility for negotiating these complexities. In a portrayal that desacralizes the memory of Dostoevsky, the book also forcefully presses readers to consider the realm of stories and imagination not as a sacrosanct space, but as inextricably (if mysteriously) connected to our lives and the lives of those around us, in ways that might carry the threat of harm.

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I have claimed that in *Master* elements of biography and fiction are combined to imaginatively convey the complex connections between Dostoevsky's embodied life and his writing. We have seen that ideas for *The Karamazov Brothers* and for *Devils* are here attributed to encounters with Pavel's writings and with other characters, in a process that appears more aleatoric than intentional. To put it otherwise, this narrative destabilizes attributions of agency, making it impossible to reliably identify 'intention' amidst the complex web of Dostoevsky's moods (from irritability to elation) and his desires (to possess Anna, Matryona, and even Nechaev, dressed as a girl, and to compete with or even to resurrect his dead son). Turning to examine the desacralization of Dostoevsky's writing project staged by this book will show how the story emphasizes further potential connections between Dostoevsky and his particular literary accomplishments.

The "cruciform" approach to writing identified in *Age of Iron* is now presented in relation to Dostoevsky's gambling habits. In an episode from *Master* that has received critical attention for presenting an ethical imperative, Dostoevsky wakes from his sleep to a dog howling in the night and decides to answer the call. Going outside, he first attends to the dog, and then to Ivanov, a man sleeping in the street. He is motivated by a mantra that conforms to the now familiar "cruciform logic": "*Expect the one you do not expect*." His paradoxical logic unfolds as follows, with familiar references to the Christological "thief in the night":

> *Because* it is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call. If he expects his son to come as a *thief in the night*, and listens only for the call *of the thief*, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore—paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness—he must answer to what he does not expect. (my emphasis, except on 'Because', 80)

As Attridge has noted, the immediate logic of Dostoevsky's words emphasizes the redemptive potential latent in an "open[ness] to the arrival of the other, the wholly new" (122). However, a reading attending to the various voices resonant in Dostoevsky's words may also suggest another, less admirable interpretation.

Soon, the Dostoevsky character's apparently ethical language is entwined with a logic of gambling in which people become pawns. As the language of gambling enters the text, Dostoevsky thinks: "must every beggar then be treated as a prodigal son, embraced, welcomed into the home, feasted? Yes, that is what Pascal would say: *bet* on everyone, every beggar, every mangy dog; only thus will you be sure that the *One*, *the true son, the thief in the night,* will not slip through the net" (my emphasis 84). The language of hedging one's bets creates a dissonance with the Christological language of welcoming "the thief in the night," which had been sacralized in Mrs Curren's cruciform approach to writing. That dissonance, and the potential violence it masks, is emphasized further by a biblical allusion in

the next sentence: “Herod would agree: make sure – slay all the children without exception” (84). The religious references now extend from Christ to the mass murderer who first attempted to kill Christ. That religious idiom is then also applied to the wife “who, when even the wedding-ring is pawned and lost, goes out a second time into the night and comes back with the money for another stake!” as an example of one “touched with the divine,” which seems more to bespeak a justification for exploitation than an ethical imperative (85). In this connection between the religious language that sacralized Mrs Curren’s cruciform approach to writing and the biographical aspects of exploitation surrounding Dostoevsky’s gambling habit, the suggestion is raised that the same motivations might compel appeals to the sacred in each. For who is to say whether the religious language signals faith or the reckless abandon that seems anything but ethical?

What Mrs Curren described as “cruciform logic,” this narrative describes in even more Dostoevskian terms saying, “reverse the thought and reverse the reversal too: by such Jesuitical tricks must one think nowadays!” (83) Attridge sympathizes with Dostoevsky claiming, “The question is whether the howl in the night, as it affects Dostoevsky, has the potential to free up the jammed components of his world, to lead to the wholly new that fitfully beckons him—or whether it is merely a banal irritation.” By contrast, my reading suggests that this is not *the question*, so much as *one question* brought into the dialogue between various embodied lives, lives that also have a stake in these abnegations of responsibility (123). Not only does the gambling allusion recall to mind the wife who waits at home, but when Dostoevsky welcomes a stranger from the street into his bed, the room itself recalls to mind that he is has exercised “hospitality” in a home that is not his own. He has invited a potentially dangerous stranger into the home of a single mother, possibly putting both her and her daughter at risk. Surely any ethical prescription derived from this text, advocating an openness to alterity and a responsiveness to “the obligations of hospitality,”

must be kept in dialogue with the responsibility owed to the "others" already in that house (124).

This same gambler's logic is evident in various forms throughout the book and finally shapes Dostoevsky's act of writing in the last chapter, "Stavrogin." Once again this logic is hidden behind several layers of religious language. Dostoevsky approaches his writing process through the language of "falling," which is now resonant with the epileptic's fit as well as the biblical idea of demon possession:

> There is a choice before him. He can cry out in the midst of this shameful fall […] call upon God or his wife to save him. Or he can give himself to it […] watch and listen instead for the moment which may or may not arrive – it is not in his power to force it – when from being a body plunging into darkness he shall become a body within whose core a plunge into darkness is taking place, a body which contains its own falling and its own darkness. (234)

Rather than calling for help, he opts for self-dispossession. The result apparently overwhelms his rational agency: "The madness is in him and he is in the madness; they think each other; what they call each other, whether madness or epilepsy or vengeance or the spirit of the age, is of no consequence" (235). From a focus on possession, the religious language then shifts to assert a more "cruciform logic" as Dostoevsky again reflects on his writing process as waiting for "the thief in the night." He asserts, "If he is to be saved, it will be by the thief in the night, *for whom he must unwaveringly be on watch*," before claiming the opposite, "Yet the thief will not come till the householder has forgotten him and fallen asleep. *The householder may not watch and wake without cease, otherwise the parable will not be fulfilled*" (my emphasis 236). This is the paradoxical logic by which Coetzee's Dostoevsky justifies the obscenities he will write as an inverted, even perverted, route to "God."

As Dostoevsky puts it, mere paragraphs before, "I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places. I follow the dance of the pen" (236). It is as Dostoevsky continues to reflect on his approach to writing that he recognizes in this justification the gambler's logic: "He is in the old labyrinth. It is the story of his

gambling in another guise. He *gambles* because God does not speak. He *gambles* to make God speak. But to make God speak *in the turn of a card* is blasphemy" (237). As religious language gives way to a description of writing as yet another expression of his compulsion for gambling, the approach to writing introduced by Mrs Curren looks a lot less sacred, a lot more reprehensible, and a lot more common. Yet the counter-intuitive possibly also remains available that gambling itself provides another idiom for expressing a certain kind of spiritual aspiration, a leap of faith.

The illogic of Dostoevsky's inverted path to truth is emphasized when he finally conjures the presence of Pavel, in a form identifiable as Stavrogin and specifically contrasted to Christ. As Dostoevsky welcomes a presence and voice that seem to represent evil itself, the narrative draws attention to the abnegation of responsibility sanctioned by his openness to any and all voices as the potential "thief in the night." While the religious register in this episode draws attention to how un-Christ-like the conjured presence is, we are aware that this distinction offers no means for responsible moral evaluation within Dostoevsky's "cruciform" approach to writing. "Christ on Calvary overwhelms him too. But the figure before him is not that of Christ. In it he detects no love, only the cold and massive indifference of stone": If any presence can be Christ in disguise, then what means is there for asserting or being held morally responsible over the writing process? (240)

In the face of his own uncertainties, the gambler once again goes all in: Dostoevsky yields all moral responsibility before this "presence" and determines to "put aside all that he himself is, all he has become, down to his very features, and become as a babe again" (240). In language resonant with Jesus's redemptive prescription to Nicodemus, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God," Dostoevsky relinquishes his claims to self-possession, to moral responsibility, before the presence that is distinctively unlike Christ

(John 3.3b). It is only then that he produces writing, specifically obscenities, aimed at further violating the innocence of the child, Matryona.

As the religious language justifying Dostoevsky's obscenities is specifically connected with impulses toward violence and moral cowardice, its value seems provisional at best. It is thus the word "if" that becomes most compelling when Dostoevsky asserts: "*If* […] that is the truth and the way to the resurrection, he will do it. He will put aside everything. Following this shade he will go naked as a babe into the jaws of hell." In the very agentless grammar of the following observation, "Thus at last the time arrives and the hand that holds the pen begins to move," the reader is confronted with another figuration of possession in Dostoevsky's sacralized description of writing. When the very next sentence declares, "But the words it forms are not words of salvation," and obscenities proliferate, the reader must consider how she will evaluate the literary value of a narrative where religiously informed maxims such as "expect the unexpected" seem to also veil habits of exploitation, compulsive gambling, and an obscured desire to throw off the discipline of moral responsibility (241).

The stories that emerge are acts of violation on multiple levels. As imaginative prequels to the account of Stavrogin's crime initially censored in *Devils*, they further highlight the tensions at play between literary responsibility and freedom. Dostoevsky writes obscenities so that the child Matryona will read them, with the expressed intention of carrying his violation of her innocence further. As if to rub his readers' faces in the truly vile nature of this project, he depicts his own son as the one methodically attacking Matryona's innocence: "He thinks of all of this as *creating a taste* in the child" (244). In the process, the reader is confronted with the possibility that reading *Master* might have a similar effect—a possibility I will return to at length in the chapter's conclusion.

Twisting the very memory of his son into the chilling character of Stavrogin, this Dostoevsky attributes to him a nihilistic justification for his acts, a justification that

foreshadows Ivan Karamazov's words, and echoes those already attributed to Nechaev: "History is coming to an end; the old account-books will soon be thrown in the fire; in this dead time between old and new, *all things are permitted*" (my emphasis 244). Yet the presence of Matryona lingering at the door as Dostoevsky writes also confronts the reader with a compelling reason to take responsibility for evaluating what, in literature (not to mention post-apartheid or even post-secular life) will be permissible.

Attridge has read the concluding chapter on "Stavrogin" as one in which Coetzee gets beyond Dostoevsky's Christianity. He claims that here, Coetzee "does not reduce the ending to an acknowledgement of the divine, as the historical Dostoevsky might have done." Rather, Attridge elaborates, Coetzee makes clear that "what is important about Dostoevsky's works is that they go further than their own explicit doctrines; Dostoevsky's Christianity is not sufficient to account for the power of a character like Stavrogin" (130). While Dostoevsky's works may well go "further than their own explicit doctrines," I would suggest that "Dostoevsky's Christianity" is ill-measured by the sole presence of "Stavrogin"; rather than tethered to a single domineering presence, the power of the Christological tradition informing Dostoevsky's own dialogism is revealed through interactions, in which each presence matters.

The dialogical emphasis in my reading of *Master* may even supplement Attridge's insights into the affective force of the final chapter, as less located in a single character than derived from the dialogical and connected presences of Dostoevsky, Stavrogin, and Matryona at the door. Although it is Dostoevsky who is in the thrall of dialogue with Stavrogin, in the final episode, it is the silent presence of Matryona that makes the reading so deeply disturbing. Attridge insightfully claims, "'Stavrogin' names the absolute otherness that has taken [Dostoevsky] over, obliterating every human and social responsibility, everything that is normally called ethical" (132). For my reading, this observation raises the question of

what value then remains in the Dostoevskian project of writing that Coetzee at once extends and subjects to trial in this book.

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One way to answer that question would be to return to "The Harms of Pornography" in *Giving Offense*, where Coetzee describes an aesthetically redemptive mode of representing pornographic themes. In describing MacKinnon's opposition to pornography, Coetzee identifies a similarity between her argument and Sartre's description of the objectifying effects of the acts of violation subjected to the gaze of the camera. He notes that Sartre, however, entertains "the possibility of aesthetic redemption from the objecthood of being filmed naked, even in explicit sex-scenes" (71). Such a view of aesthetic redemption, as Coetzee describes it, entails the handling of pornographic themes by drawing the reader or viewer's attention to (what can only be falteringly named as) the existential fullness it elides, and the harms it imposes.

Coetzee's argument presupposes that by adding to the shameful, transgressive nature of pornography, censorship contributes to the very desires it aims to suppress. To get beyond the oppositional positions on pornography, in the practiced movements of a fiction-writer, Coetzee offers his unconventional suggestion through "imagining a male writer-pornographer" whose work "does not close the book on desire (by defining its genesis and its ends), but on the contrary sees (but also does not see), in its own desire to know its desire, that which it can never know about itself" (72). Coetzee expressly connects this rather dubious proposal, which as we saw in Chapter Two clearly seems to describe at least some of his own writing, to Dostoevsky. As he put it:

> The kind of project I outline is not fanciful. To a reader sensitive to their implications, the twists and turns of erotic abasement in the novels of Dostoevsky are far more disturbing than anything likely to be encountered in commercial pornography, no matter what the latter's excesses. (73)

There is a – perhaps equally dubious – way of reading *Master* that suggests Dostoevsky's habit of writing, a habit of exploring unsavory desires dialogically, might enable him to cultivate a mode of consciousness that contributes a tempering influence in his daily life.

The evidence for such a reading is slight, but deserving of attention. Although Dostoevsky is unable to write until the final chapter, he spends regular time each morning at his writing desk. This echoes a common Protestant ritual of daily devotion to God, although now the author-character orients himself, through his writing, toward the perspectives of others. If the Christian discipline habituates believers into thinking about God throughout the day, in portraying Dostoevsky's daily writing ritual, Coetzee perhaps re-envisions that discipline toward cultivating a habit of imaginatively participating in the lives of others.

There is some evidence to support this interpretation in Dostoevsky's encounters with other characters. For example, Dostoevsky reflects, in conversation with Anna, "He believes he knows the words she is going to speak […] *You call yourself Pavel's father, but I do not believe you love him* – that is what he expects. But he is wrong" (113). Not only does this describe a reflexive habit of imagining – and then critiquing his imagination of – another's perspective, but Dostoevsky's writings can also be seen to inflect and inform his present perceptions. The first encounter with Councillor Maximov is described in terms distinctly resonant with the encounter between Porfiry and Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. When Dostoevsky reflects, "surely he has been here before, in this very ante-room or one like it, and had an attack or a fainting fit!" the suggestion is lightly extended that his writing of past fictions continues to mediate his experience of the present (31). At another point, Dostoevsky specifically wonders, "If he were a character in a book, what would he say, at a moment like this when either the heart speaks or the page remains blank?" (97) In these

subtle ways, the possibility is made available that Dostoevsky's writing habit contributes to his conscious attentiveness to the perspectives of others.

Yet it is not only the writer-character's perspective at stake, but also the perspectives of readers. At that level, the possibilities for aesthetic redemption may be connected to the consciousness-raising textual connections between, for example, the Dostoevsky-character's representations of the women (and girl) around him, and his interactions with them. The possibility is raised that Coetzee's unsettling depictions of unsettling harms against women and of elisions of their existential fullness might be (admittedly dubious) pursuits of redemption.

In explicit accounts of Dostoevsky's affair with the landlady Anna, readers can hardly but recall the other Anna, the wife awaiting Dostoevsky's return in Dresden, who cares for his child and suffers through his reckless betrayals with other women and in gambling. Moreover, his use of the landlady Anna ("you use me as a route to my child") is portrayed alongside the strain it adds to her life and to her relations with her daughter (231). The reader is persistently confronted with ways that representations in Dostoevsky's writings are connected with real acts of exploitation and objectification. The possibility is made prominently available that not only writing, but also reading, shapes habits for seeing the interconnected parts of life. So when Dostoevsky is attributed with thinking "I have lost my place in my soul," the faint redemptive potential may be that this "I" has become othered and subordinated to competing perspectives, in such a way that it might be less tenable to naively justify behaviors that come at the expense of others (249).

Who is to say that the final conjuring of Stavrogin is not itself an encounter with a more monstrous aspect of Dostoevsky's self, one which the Dostoevsky character would

prefer to deny, but through that denial has perhaps become mastered?[63] In exposing the madness of the writer character, in a process that familiarizes the other and others the self, might not this writing expose aspects of a more pervasive madness or disordering of desires that possesses not only individuals but their shared social moment?

This is how *Master* heightens the stakes of Mrs Curren's own literary pursuit of redemption, by bringing to bear the potential impact of the distorted desires depicted in this story, which very well might come to possess readers as well, over which the author has no final control. By looking to Mrs Curren's engagement with Hesiod, we saw that despite her attempts to seek private salvation, the greatest redemptive potential of her letter seemed rather to be in what it exposed about a more pervasive spirit – of Calvin, of Iron – that manifested itself in the habitual separation of self from others, whether along the lines of race or moral virtue. For this redemptive potential was also presented in counterpoint, creating a reading process that requires the holding together of paradoxical perspectives.

The contradictions are intensified in *Master* as it signals one potential impact of imaginatively inhabiting this narrative through the religious metaphor of possession. If in *Master* Dostoevsky's writing enables him to expel his "demons," then might not his writing also spread them? When Dostoevsky sits down to write his final onslaught on Matryona's innocence, I have emphasized that he attributes the offending character with thinking "of all of this as *creating a taste* in the child" (244). The story could hardly be clearer in raising the possibility that reading this book, with its representations of disturbing desires for violence and violation, might also create a taste in us, its readers. Each layer of redemptive language might finally be just another layer of aesthetic fabrication to be unveiled in a pornographic

[63] One may recall Ivan Karamazov's description, "Of course, in every person there lurks a beast, a demon of fury, whose passions are inflamed by the cries of the victim, an unrestrained wild beast loosed from his chains, a beast riddled with disease contracted through debauchery—gout, liver, disorder, and so on" (303).

pursuit, whether of transgressive physical or confessional exposure—perhaps contributing to the very pleasures it might also redeem.[64]

This possibility is never foreclosed in the story, but drawing upon the Grand Inquisitor Tale is sustained to intensify the question of whether radical literary freedom is worth its potential harms. And this is a question that demands a measure of calculative thinking and moral responsibility on the part of the reader, who must determine if the gains it affords are worth its potential costs. Attridge pursues a similar line of thought in his own reading of *Master* when he asks:

> If I am enjoined to be open to the other's coming, without any attempt at preprogramming it or limiting its possible violence, accepting the risk of the unknown, asking for no guarantees, might the cost not be my own humanity, and the human other or others that I sacrifice with it? (134)

Yet after raising several further questions, he reaches a rather different conclusion to mine by deferring to Derrida's logic of the *arrivant*, "These questions are, strictly speaking, inadmissible; they imply a calculus, a weighing of profit and loss, which is precisely what openness to the other, the event, the *arrivant* exceeds" (135). Surely that judgment presupposes its own calculation of profit and loss, wherein the ethical good of encounter with the *arrivant* is more valuable than anything else, anyone else, any other ethical good. In the deeply embodied dialogism of *Master*, the stakes for such a claim are high: they entail the innocence of a child, and the implication that no imaginative act is without relations to the wider web of embodied lives.[65]

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[64] In Bolin's discussion of writing as a means of fulfilling an addiction to intensity, he traces a similar logic saying, "If it is self-consciousness that the intensity addict seeks to escape, this means that the experiences in which this power [is] most acute are also capable of generating the most concentrated forms of sensation. That is, the most voluptuous, the most subtle forms of intense experience can only be accessed through *perversion*" (13).

[65] Coetzee would return to this concern, attributing it to Elizabeth Costello, in the eponymous fiction, with an invocation of the language of a "malign spell," "the devil," and "Absolute evil" as she raises the possibility that, "if what we write has the power to make us better people then surely it has the power to make us worse" (156, 167, 176, 171).

I am claiming that the morally destabilizing worlds of *Age of Iron* and especially *Master* confront readers with heightened demands on our own literary valuations, by drawing attention to writing and reading as processes that are dialogically connected with apparently discrete aspects of life. Readers are thereby positioned to ask questions such as: if responsibility is only something that the reader can supply, and not something that the author of a fiction can ensure, then at what risk is a radical freedom of fictional inquiry pursued and released before an indeterminate reading audience?

The potential costs of this freedom are also signaled by the other dominant religious metaphor in this text: the Christian Fall narrative. Like the story of the Fall, this one holds open two apparently contradictory aspects. First is the potential of expanding an awareness of "good" and "evil," through the transgression of boundaries separating one from the other. The second aspect is separation from that which is most valuable and good, which in the Fall story is God. Through attributing a pornographic imagination to Dostoevsky, *Master* may sully his memory as well as the reader's own imagination; at the same time, the counterpoint is sustained that this process may cultivate an expansion of moral thinking that positions readers to assume greater responsibility for their relation to this story, and to the reading of life more generally.

By staging this "fall" in a narrative world that destabilizes the divisions between public and private, mind and body, self and other, *Master* resists the possibility of any genuine innocence: "evil" exists, and if life is interconnected, then there is no sacrosanct space of "innocence." It thus heightens the perspectival tensions that *Age of Iron* held open, and intensifies the dialogical test, of a more deeply embodied conception of dialogism itself. This fiction presses its readers into a position that Mrs Curren herself came to increasingly occupy, of having relinquished a sense of personal innocence, by confronting truly vile and tragic possibilities, in a process that will never leave one absolved or purified, but that might

enable a different mode of virtue, of honesty, in navigating a world where the promise of innocence has been proven false. For the literary critic this might also intensify the stakes for revaluing fiction, by rubbing our faces in the violence (the evil?) with which literature itself is already dialogically connected.

If this is a variety of redemption, it is redemption by the "crooked path," confronting perspectives that might be undesirable, with the potential (but never certain) outcome of gaining greater self-possession. As a vocation, this kind of writing is questionable at best: one can never finally be certain whether a depiction of dubious desires actually contributes to a capacity for self-mastery, or whether it is not simply more servitude. The paradoxical possibility that readers are thus pressed to negotiate is that if this writing offers a measure of redemption it also entails a measure of harm: the author whose trail of words we follow may finally be a lot less like Jesus and a lot more like Judas, selling that which is most precious for his own gain. *Age of Iron* and *Master* succeed by keeping alive a powerful range of competing possibilities, refusing to authorize any harmonizing interpretation, but instead pressurizing literary critical revaluations in relation to morality, freedom, and their costs.

V.

"to think the unthinkable":

Cultivating the Practice of Paradoxical Reasoning

in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*

The final religious interlocutor this thesis will consider is Jesus. Not only do the titles of Coetzee's most recent fictions – *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) – signal his relevance to Coetzee's writing, but Coetzee also notably claimed, in the correspondence with Paul Auster published as *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011* (2013): "I would not be who I am without Freud or Kafka, to say nothing of that aberrant Jewish prophet Jesus of Nazareth" (146).[66] However, while Coetzee clearly suggests that Jesus is significant to his fiction, he does little to clarify what exactly he means by the name "Jesus."

Naturally, the identity and significance of Jesus has been long-debated, yielding innumerable conclusions. Scholars have persisted in investigating why the stories of Jesus have retained such prominence in the cultural imaginary of the West, and indeed beyond. In prior chapters, I have shown that Coetzee's historical approach to prominent social questions has been to investigate the structures and presuppositions behind them—structures and presuppositions also often shared by divergent responses. For example, in the throes of apartheid, instead of trying to answer what the proper relationship between people in the legislated categories black, white, Indian, and coloured should be, Coetzee wrote fictions that

[66] Henceforth abbreviated as *Childhood* and *Schooldays*, except in direct discussions of these titular formulas.

exposed the presuppositions requisite to even approaching humanity as divisible along such lines. Instead of offering exemplary models for responding to apartheid, his fictions positioned readers in a destabilized relationship to their narratives and the worlds they initially appeared to represent.

To appropriate the words of a character from *Schooldays*, Señor Arroyo, Coetzee's propensity has been to face key social questions by "scouring the world not for the true answer but for the true question" (96). This chapter will show how Coetzee's *Jesus* books specifically deploy the narrative strategies he developed through reimagining Christian conceptions of negation, conversion, and dialogism. Making use of these strategies, the *Jesus* stories demystify sacralized presuppositions that shape approaches to both Jesus and the novel, while positioning their readers to cultivate an awareness of differences, paradoxes, and contradictions in their readings, as the mundane work that just might also shape souls and societies.

Instead of simply providing yet another purportedly authoritative answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?", Coetzee's *Jesus* books explore the often paradoxical motivations and presuppositions behind any such answers, and indeed that question. They proffer a different kind of solution, by re-imagining the question. This entails a demystifying movement in how these stories approach the social significance and memorialized identity of Jesus. Not only do Coetzee's *Jesus* stories engage elements of the Scriptural stories of Jesus alongside non-canonical saint traditions and apocryphal stories, but they are also inflected by Coetzee's study of larger patterns by which folktales, stories, and characters have developed into culture-shaping myths.

This is not the first time that Coetzee has attended to the processes by which stories and characters are transformed into cultural myths and tropes. For example, in the essay "Gordimer and Turgenev" (1997) Coetzee examined how the character Bazarov, from Ivan

Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862), was taken into the social imaginary, bringing "it home to the Russian public that a phase in Russian history had ended and a new one, however ill understood, was about to begin" (*Stranger Shores* 223). He returned to the theme again in his Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Robinson Crusoe* (1999), which begins:

> Like Odysseus embarked for Ithaca, like Quixote mounted on Rocinante, Robinson Crusoe with his parrot and umbrella has become a figure in the collective consciousness of the West, transcending the book which—in its multitude of editions, translations, imitations and adaptations ('Robinsonades')—celebrates his adventures. Having pretended once to belong to history, he finds himself in the sphere of myth. (*Stranger Shores* 17)

Indeed, one might even identify Jesus as the noticeable absence in this recurring examination of how stories and heroes evolve into myths and mythologized figures: until the *Jesus* books. However, instead of attempting to adjudicate between the possible identities of Jesus as historical man, incarnate God, fiction, or myth, these stories incorporate religious resonances, allusions, and registers to draw readers' attention toward the complexities and contradictions held together in their fictional worlds.

"Is God no one?" Failure, Disappointed Expectations, and the Negative Way

In Chapter Three I showed how Coetzee's early engagement with the works of Christian theologian and New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann had contributed to his developing conception of negation as a literary process. Bultmann had claimed that the Gospel of John relied on Gnostic motifs, but also undermined them, in order to generate a reading experience that just might facilitate even fleeting encounters with the divine. By Bultmann's account, this narrative failure might also cultivate an experience of existential freedom from sedimented, mythological concepts that had originally been developed to point toward that which exceeds narrative, but had gradually come to be relied upon as representations themselves. Thus, this process of invoked and undermined expectation creates the conditions

for readers to also experience a different posture toward the relationship between narrative and God. Instead of anxiously depending on narrative as a means for controlling and mapping the ineffable, Bultmann's idea was that the experience of narrative failure can cultivate a posture of grateful dependence through increasing the reader's awareness of her own contingent and minor position in relation to the divine. One might call this posture "faith."

Coetzee reimagined Bultmann's concept of negation by reorienting it away from the transcendent, toward life itself. Instead of demythologizing the language used to speak of God, in *Michael K*, Coetzee's target was the conceptual framework of biography and myths of heroism; instead of attempting to re-sacralize the ineffability of God, his handling of a religious register tended to point readers toward what I have been tentatively calling the fullness of the quotidian. In *Childhood* and *Schooldays*, Coetzee complicates this use of negation yet further.

The very titles *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* encourage readers to expect coherent and authoritative accounts of Jesus, even if comprised of various parts. More specifically, they raise expectations that these stories may build on the "lives of Jesus" tradition. As I showed in Chapter Three, the "lives of Jesus" tradition resulted from biblical scholars using contemporary scholarship to parse the true (and generally that meant "historical") Jesus from fictions in the Gospel accounts. However, at a conference on "Zoë Wicomb and the Translocal: Scotland and South Africa," in September 2012, Coetzee indicated in conversation that the title *The Childhood of Jesus* alludes to a divergent contribution to that tradition: Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (*Vie de Jesus* 1863).

Renan's *Life of Jesus* differed from the dominant narratives in that it prioritized an understanding of the personality of Jesus, over efforts at strict historical accuracy, as inextricable from his teachings. Whereas most other lives-of-Jesus narratives tended to

expunge the miracle accounts, Renan retained them for their distinctive capacity to convey the psychological power and *pathos* of Jesus's personality and teachings. Renan claimed that, "The idea of Jesus […] was the most revolutionary idea ever formed in the human brain" (111). From his perspective, that "revolutionary idea" resulted from a combination of charisma and greatness of feeling, and it entailed reimagining religion as based on the purity of one's heart and on the brotherhood of all humanity before the universal Fatherhood of God. Instead of distinguishing ideas from personality, and fiction from history, Renan focused on bringing these different perspectives into dialogue. Coetzee's *Jesus* stories too bring different perspectives into dialogue, but they take a far more radical approach to illuminating the complex interconnections between personality, narratives, and structures of belief: they actively resist and demystify presuppositions about the autonomy of each, and the authority of history to parse one from another.

Though the titles *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* encourage readers to expect special access to truths about the development of Jesus, that expectation is quickly (at least initially) disappointed. No character in the ensuing texts is called by the name Jesus. While a common solution deployed by critics has been to read the main child character "David" as the Jesus in these texts, doing so also always requires an account of the differences between them.[67] That process itself reveals a reader's presuppositions about who Jesus is, or was, even when it simply entails noting that the name "David" is not the name "Jesus"; that though this story is set in an unidentified historical period, the presence of cars and cranes nevertheless confirms it is not 4 B.C. – c.30 A.D.; and that if Spanish is the spoken language in Novilla and Estrella, then they are assuredly not located in the Levant. If the titles of both stories encourage readers to expect truths about the development of the main

[67] Whereas in *Childhood* the orthography of "David" is conventional, in *Schooldays* the "i" takes on an accent: "Davíd." To emphasize this subtle play with historical changes and differences that inflect even a single word, I use the respective orthographies with faithfulness to the story I am describing.

child character into a culturally recognizable "Jesus," the narrative worlds dramatically disappoint those expectations.

The titular formulas for *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* may also encourage expectations that these stories will be variations of the *Bildungsroman*, yet each narrative is resistant to ready identifications of either development or progress in the boy-character, David. Instead of offering a unified, coherent, and authoritative perspective on the development of a single character, these stories present a variety of perspectives that intersect around the character David, within a larger third person, present tense narration that is focalized through his accompanying guardian, Simón. What these stories do not provide is any objective evidence for evaluating the extent to which various perspectives on David might actually be shaped by the personalities, affiliations, desires, and histories of each character.

When, in *Childhood*, David first proffers a claim that might attest to his divinity, much more banal, competing interpretations are also made available. The episode takes place in the first grade classroom of a school David has been asked to leave. Simón and David's female guardian, Inés, have taken him to demonstrate to the teacher, señor León, that David can in fact read and count, in an effort at having him readmitted to the school. All seems to go well enough until señor León instructs the boy, "Write, *Conviene que yo diga la verdad*, I must tell the truth. Write it. *Con-viene*," and instead the "boy writes: *Yo soy la verdad,* I am the truth" (225). It remains decidedly unclear as to whether this is a revelatory act; a child's silly derivation; a display of defiance; or worse, evidence that the boy is developing delusions of grandeur.

Lest this range of interpretive options sound inflated, it is worth noting that the *Childhood* narrative had, by this point, already drawn readers' attention to the most dramatic possibility of a psychological problem. Señora Oxtoa, the school psychologist, first raised

the possibility, saying, "The real, I want to suggest, is what David misses in his life. This experience of lacking the real includes the experience of lacking real parents. David has no anchor in his life. Hence his withdrawal and retreat into a fantasy world where he feels more in control" (207). Although señora Oxtoa makes only a brief appearance in the story, her perspective infuses the remaining reading of both stories with the possibility that David may not only not be divine, but that he might also be seriously troubled.

We know from handwritten notes in Coetzee's archived "Research Materials" that he was specifically reading about "Narcissism" on 1 April 2009, and asking himself, "How to avoid the moralizing disapproval of self-love (as opposed to self-respect)" (2). No bibliographical information is included, yet it seems that Coetzee was consulting a particular account of the Narcissus myth when he observes, "Not (p93) that N is well aware of what is going on: "What I desire I have" (2). Although Coetzee does not identify these research materials with the *Jesus* stories in particular, the character David persistently displays surprising varieties of confidence, and repeatedly distances himself from the web of friends and parental figures who adore him. The archived notes may suggest yet wider correlations with the *Jesus* stories when, under a heading "Narcissus (Metamorphosis)" Coetzee notes:

> There are two stories, the story of Echo (who could really be any girl), who falls in love with the beautiful Narcissus, is repelled by him as he repels all admirers, and hides away, shamed and broken until there is only her voice left and Narcissus, who is eventually afflicted by 'strange madness' and dies.

Rather than providing conclusive evidence that David is a burgeoning narcissist, Coetzee's *Jesus* stories raise a destabilizing array of interpretive possibilities, which they refuse to resolve into any singular perspective or judgment. As David's relationship to conventional institutions of education comes to an end, the narrative of *Childhood* offers little clarity as to whether or how this transition might indicate that he is special.

Not only does the narrative hold together contradictory perspectives, but it also draws readers' attention to the layers of contingency on which they rely. This destabilizing quality

is most dramatically demonstrated in the juxtaposition of episodes, in *Childhood*, that describe David's escape from the boarding school Punto Arenas. There is no direct description of Punto Arenas in this story, nor even indirect descriptions, focalized through Simón. Instead, the information assembled in the narrative is initially provided by David's accounts of schoolyard tales—accounts we have reason to view with suspicion, given David's pattern of dramatic imagination. The picture that is assembled includes David's "first-hand," but unreliable, claims "I escaped […] I walked through the barbed wire" (241). Descriptions of how "terrible" Punto Arenas is range from David reporting, "You have to be fourteen before they can beat you" and "Every Friday they made us eat fish" to "They made us wear sandals" and "they wouldn't let Inés visit. They said she wasn't my mother. They said I was a ward. A ward is someone who hasn't got a mother or a father" (242). There is no reliable way of parsing fact from fiction here, as these accounts are being conveyed through layers of remove and inflected with layers of affective charge that surely shape the stories they tell.

Those suggestions are emphasized further through the brief inclusion of the perspective of yet another character, a woman who works at Punto Arenas and seeks to retrieve David. Inés responds with a ferocious defensiveness that one might associate with a mother protecting her child from great harm; yet the narrative has already depicted David reporting that at Punto Arenas, "They said she wasn't my mother," which raises the interpretive possibility that her fury may just as well be the result of injured pride. This dissonance adds to the uncertainty with which the reader negotiates the ensuing confrontation. That there is little empirical evidence for the reliability of Inés's judgment on the matter is further emphasized when her accusative inquiry about what "kind of delinquents" are "in your school that you need barbed wire to keep them in?" is met with a direct denial by the woman from Punto Arenas: "The barbed wire is a myth […] A complete fabrication. There

is no barbed wire at Punto Arenas." The measured and reasonable tenor of this unnamed woman's response further encourages readers' awareness that the world we are imaginatively participating in might not be quite what we have come to believe.

When this unnamed woman invites all present to "come and see for yourselves," Inés plays the role of a veritable anti-Thomas, asserting: "I don't need to see […] I believe my child. If he says there is barbed wire, then it is true" (253). Although her tone of desperation may evoke sympathy, Inés's rising voice and her refusal to entertain this contradictory perspective invite skepticism. Moreover, when David responds to the lady's prompt, "tell us truthfully, is there barbed wire at Punto Arenas?", by saying, "There is barbed wire […] I walked through the barbed wire," the suggestion is made available that the perspectives of those closest to our focalizer, in this episode, may be shaped more by personal desires and motivations than a strict commitment to accuracy (253).

Before leaving, the unnamed woman from Punto Arenas entreats Simón in private with a very different picture of David's time at Punto Arenas, and of what motivated his escape. The story she tells about David's time there is not at all bleak, emphasizing, "how quickly he was taken into the hearts of the other boys […] from the beginning David found a place for himself in our community at Punto Arenas" (255). From her perspective, David did not run away "because he was unhappy, I can assure you. It was because he has a soft heart and could not bear the thought of señora Inés pining for him" (256). Although this woman's appeals do not sway Simón, her perspective does contribute to the interpretive possibilities available in this narrative.

In particular, this unnamed woman's perspective supports the possibility that if this story is a variation on "the flight of the holy family," it portrays no sacred or heroic affair. Rather, it conveys a complex interplay of conflicting perspectives, desires, and persons. Instead of a single, corrupt villain ordering the mass murder of infants, *Childhood* includes

no single, clearly identifiable site of evil. As Simón, Inés, and David flee child services, they evade the dictates of an institution, run by individuals, who very possibly may (or may not) be actively concerned for David's best interests.

Indeed, this perspectival dissonance also draws attention to one possibility that our focalizer does not seem able to face: the extent to which David might be being shaped (potentially in detrimental ways) by the lives of Inés and Simón. Under the doting of Inés, who has never had a baby of her own, it is possible to argue that David regresses to an infantilized state. It is equally possible to believe that his quasi-messianic aspirations are generated from the care of Simón, who laments, "Something is missing […] The life I have is not enough for me. I wish someone, some saviour, would descend from the skies and wave a magic wand and say, *Behold, read this book and all your questions will be answered*. Or, *Behold, here is an entirely new life for you*" (239). From the distance afforded by reading, it does not seem surprising that this father-figure's desires would shape the boy's dreams, especially given that Simón is recorded as explicitly admonishing David, "Take [Don Quixote] as your model […] Protect the poor. Save the oppressed. And honour your mother" (246). Yet in greater proximity, in moments of greater frustration, this does not seem to be at all evident to Simón. As the narrative of *Schooldays* puts it:

> He is about to answer, about to produce the correct, patient, educative words, when something wells up inside him. Anger? No. Irritation? No: more than that. Despair? Perhaps: despair in one of its minor forms. Why? Because he would like to believe he is guiding the child through the maze of the moral life when, correctly, patiently, he answers his unceasing *Why* questions. But where is there evidence that the child absorbs his guidance or even hears what he says? (51)

Not only does Simón seem blind to the nature of his influence on the boy, he also seems blind to the further possibility that David's development might be taking shape through attempts to be the solution to the yearnings of others. This possibility is more explicitly (and less cynically) raised by señor Arroyo, in *Schooldays*, when he says to Simón, "You remember meeting the boy on board ship and deciding he was lost and taking charge of him. Perhaps he

remembers the event differently. Perhaps you were the one who looked lost; perhaps *he* decided to take charge of *you*" (198). In holding open such varied interpretive possibilities, the narratives of *Childhood* and *Schooldays* repeatedly draw readers' attention to the complex potential ways in which David's development – and its transmission through these stories – could be intertwined with the lives of others in a knot of often-opaque desires.

Indeed, even the pinnacle moment of *Schooldays* is set within an episode inflected by tensions from a range of contradictory possible motivations and meanings. This moment is when David (now spelled Davíd) performs the dance of Seven. The setting is an unconventional philosophical debate. Señor Arroyo has just offered a short summary of his own position in the debate and had his two sons, Joaquín and Damian, demonstrate his point through dancing. Yet the wider context in the story more obliquely influences our reading: señor Arroyo is not only a philosopher, but also a man whose wife and business partner has just been murdered. In inviting his two sons to dance, in the way that he and his late wife had taught them, he may be doing more than making a philosophical point. So when "Davíd leaps from his seat and runs down the aisle," insisting, despite resistance from both Simón and señor Arroyo, "It is my turn," the narrative cultivates awareness of the possibility that the ensuing performance might be less sacred than the interwoven religious register initially suggests (245).

In a gesture that faintly recalls God's instructions to Moses before the burning bush, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3.5), the narrative reads, "Without a word the boy slips off his shoes […] in silence he begins his dance." The description remains at an elevated tone: "Arroyo watches, eyes narrowed in concentration, then raises the flute to his lips. The melody he plays is right and just and true; yet even he, Simón, can hear that it is the dancer who leads and the master who follows." Yet is this perspective really accurate, given Simón's apparent ineptitude with

dance and music? The staccato assertion of "right and just and true" may recall Old Testament descriptions of God himself (e.g., Proverbs 2.9, Proverbs 21.3, Deuteronomy 32.4), and perhaps it hints toward the perception of a profound integrality of difference. That possibility is sustained as Simón continues: "From some buried memory the words *pillar of grace* emerge, surprising him [Simón], for the image he holds to, from the football field, is of the boy as a compact bundle of energy." If "grace" here describes the elegant holding together of different positions and different movements, perhaps the sacralizing language points toward the way in which holding together such differences is integral to whatever is compelling in this embodied performance.

However, the possibility can hardly be ignored that there might also be a disturbingly competitive element in Davíd's performance. He insists upon performing a harder dance than señor Arroyo's own sons just completed, and (from Simón's perspective) does it better. That might seem somewhat impolite in itself, but readers are quickly reminded that this occurs just after their mother has been murdered. This darker interpretive possibility is suggested again when Simón's concludes that, "now, on the stage of the Institute, Ana Magdalena's legacy reveals itself." This concluding thought exercises a diffuse but significant effect by potentially infusing the reader's memory of the prior episode with a new perspective, or tone.

Consider how the following quotation now holds open the contradictory interpretive possibilities wherein, on the one hand, it might depict a moment of religious ecstasy, while on the other, it might depict a boy overpowered with love for the movements of his own body, and a (not-quite) father enraptured by his (not-quite) son:

> As if the earth has lost its downward power, the boy seems to shed all bodily weight, to become pure light. The logic of the dance eludes him [Simón] entirely, yet he knows that what is unfolding before him is extraordinary; and from the hush that falls in the auditorium he guesses that the people of Estrella find it extraordinary too […] the being who dances before them is neither child nor man, boy nor girl; he would even say neither body nor spirit. Eyes shut, mouth open, rapt, Davíd floats through

> the steps with such fluid grace that time stands still. Too caught up even to breathe, he, Simón, whispers to himself: *Remember this! If ever in the future you are tempted to doubt him, remember this!*

The reader may well be left with questions, such as: does Davíd's dance truly hold together different positions, poses, and movements with such extraordinary grace as Simón believes? Is the devoted (not-quite) father really a reliable judge of the audience's wider response to his (not-quite) son's performance? What additional factors might be at play when Davíd dances, "Eyes shut, mouth open, rapt," and Simón becomes, "Too caught up even to breathe"? Moreover, why does the episode climax in a veritable confession of faith, by the (not-quite) father in his (not-quite) son? These questions are not evoked by specific claims, but more diffusely, both in and after the reading experience, by the different hints and suggestions that permeate the text. So when Dmitri, the self-purported murderer of Arroyo's wife, signals his arrival through the "indistinct" shout, "*Bravo? Slavo?*", at the conclusion of Davíd's dance, that slippage may well make available the possibility that these diffuse and subtle invocations of contradictory thoughts, and doublings back of thought, constitute a performance of their own, which is the legacy of that Slavic writer, Dostoevsky, revealing itself (246).[68]

Repeatedly and diffusely, Coetzee's *Jesus* stories cultivate their readers' awareness of relying upon limited narrations, not least through integrating shifting allusions to myths and hero tales across these fictional biographies, without providing any singular insight that encapsulates them as a whole. In episodes where one allusion flows into another, attempts at clearly delineating along the lines of genres and intellectual or religious traditions invariably flounder. In *Childhood* a single conversation between David and Simón shifts from discussing David's school problems, and his ability to read, to a comedic exchange about whether David might find a lady to save, like Don Quixote did. When Simón remarks, "God

[68] Notably, although Dmitri was the one the courts convicted for the murder of Fyodor Karamazov, in *The Karamazov Brothers*, the step-brother Smerdyakov privately confesses to Ivan that he is the true murderer. The fiction holds open both possibilities for the reader's judgment, which inflects this allusion with the further interpretive complexity of holding open the possibility that in this judgment of this Dmitri, too, the courts might have erred.

knows whether there is a Dulcinea in this world or not," David in turn enquires into whom God is, and the conversation comes to span the subjects of writing, reading, and theology. As this line of digression continues, the narrative provides no certain means for evaluating its potential significance or value. Simón explains, "*God knows* is an expression. It is a way of saying no one knows," yet when David pushes the point – "Is God no one?" – Simón responds with irritation at the digression itself ("Don't change the subject") before explaining, "God is not no one, but he lives too far away for us to converse with him or have dealings with him. As for whether he notices us, *Dios sabe*" (218). As the narrative slips between mythological, literary, and domestic registers, it draws skeptical attention to presuppositions about how genre and subject boundaries map onto life.

From photocopied pages in Coetzee's archived "Research Materials," we know that Coetzee had studied Lord Raglan's theory about the influence of ritual on myth and on the hero of tradition. In Coetzee's copy of "The Hero of Tradition," from *The Study of Folklore* (1965), we can see how Raglan argues that there is strong reason to believe that traditional, or mythological, hero tales have been based not on history, but on patterns from ritual dramas. What is intriguing to consider is how Coetzee's *Jesus* stories create reading experiences that persistently shift as new perspectives interact with old ones, even to re-shape the reader's own interpretations and textual memories.

We know that when Coetzee was writing *Michael K* he expressly had Raglan's theory in view. That might seem to be a more tangential connection if it were not for several other prominent overlaps in the themes of these books. To begin with, we have already seen how Coetzee specifically engaged with the "Lives of" tradition in *Michael K,* destabilizing biographical presuppositions about the exemplary nature of protagonists' lives, to draw sacralizing attention to that which falls beyond the purview of "importance," or even articulability, in life. In addition to which, in a grey notebook of writing ideas for *Michael K*

Coetzee first raised the possibility of using "Childhood as a title" (8.viii.81). That same notebook of writing ideas includes an entry in which Coetzee specifically identifies "the myth of Jesus" with "Raglan's myth of the hero," saying:

> It dawns on me (pp. 168-9 of vn. 6) that the story is close to (is based on?) the myth of Jesus, or more generally on Raglan's myth of the hero. To follow: K escapes from the camp (escape from the tomb); takeover of the narration by K, who lives on Table Mountain […] plans his escape to the Karoo. (4.iii.82)

Raglan's theory specifically identified twenty-two motifs that recur across traditional hero biographies. From the identification of this pattern he deduced that it was unlikely that these heroes' lives had actually borne such striking overlaps, and much more likely that the motifs had been applied through the writing process. Coetzee's *Jesus* stories specifically draw desacralizing attention to the way in which conceptual frameworks, narrative structures, and cultural expectations influence how readers interpret these worlds. They do so, in part, through engaging with culturally prominent motifs from the myth of Jesus, as a hero who embodies all that is best, and in the process raise the possibility that the memorialized myth has eclipsed the particularity of the man, or even the character, of Jesus.

Conversion Refigured: Who is He, Who His Boy?

In Chapter Two, I demonstrated that in *Barbarians* Coetzee began reimagining René Girard's concept of conversion as a narrative structure. Skeptical of the possibility that one might actually leave behind old ways of thinking and assume entirely new ones, Coetzee's inquiry focused on how subjects might instead come to inhabit the same old narrative elements from new positions. The gravity of this pursuit was particularly palpable because it was conducted at the height of apartheid, from within a society physically mapped by the narrative categories black, white, Indian, and coloured. As I have shown, by engaging with Girard's concept of conversion, Coetzee was also grappling toward unimagined potential positions for inhabiting that very legislated narrative, without conceding its presuppositions. Moreover, he

was seeking to cultivate a posture that might just facilitate greater awareness of what life under this dominant narrative elided, whether intellectually, spiritually, or bodily.

Before turning to consider how concepts of conversion illuminate Coetzee's *Jesus* stories, I will quickly recapitulate three of Girard's main observations surrounding the conversionary structure of narrative. Firstly, Girard claimed that it was ubiquitous: all of "the great novels," as he put it, end with their protagonists experiencing either an intellectual or spiritual conversion in the face of death. Secondly, he identified these conversion experiences as episodes in which a protagonist encounters a truth to which she had previously been blind, renounces the deception she had been inhabiting, and as a result is reconciled with the greater society of characters as well as within her very self. Thirdly, Girard identified patterns in the deceptions that protagonist after protagonist renounced, and asserted that these patterns were conditioned by their authors' historical moments—and thus offered revelatory insights, for readers, into the their own historically-shaped beliefs and desires.

Whereas Girard claimed that the conversionary structure of narrative provides readers with opportunities to imaginatively participate in protagonists' own transformations, I have shown that Coetzee was less optimistic about the possibility of getting beyond "old" habits of thought, belief, and desire. Instead, he re-imagined Girard's concept of conversion through writing stories that destabilize and undermine the possibility of attaining access to the kind of totally authoritative or objective truths that Girard had in mind. I have argued that these stories do, nevertheless, also entail redemptive movements of a sort, as their protagonists develop new postures, new positions, in relation to the historically shaped narratives they inhabit.

Intriguingly, for our consideration of *Childhood* and *Schooldays*, in its broadest sense, the conversionary structure of narrative also characterizes the *Bildungsroman*. Readers expect to encounter a transformation story about the development of a child (fictional or real)

into a distinguished adult. Yet when it comes to evaluating the "development" of David, in Coetzee's *Jesus* stories, the reader's only point of certainty is in the contingency of her own position as she relies on textual evidence mediated through the varied perspectives of different characters, and the unnamed narrator.

Aside from the change to the spelling of his name (which acquires an accented "í" that is unconventional in both English and Spanish), the strongest evidence supporting the idea that David is developing into a man of distinction is provided from the perspective of Simón. Affirmations of Davíd's transformation can be connected from words Simón directs at señor Arroyo, about Davíd's response to gaps, at different times. Simón's first conversation with señor Arroyo rather surprisingly takes place on a beach, in the nude. This somewhat odd setting infuses the episode with a comic background awareness while Arroyo offers an account of his philosophy of dance: "While we [adults] stand paralysed, gazing on the gap that yawns between us and the stars – *What an abyss! How will we ever cross it?* – the child simply dances across." Simón in turn responds: "Davíd is not like that. He is full of anxiety about gaps. Sometimes paralysed. I have seen it. It is a phenomenon not uncommon among children. A syndrome" (97). Yet it remains unclear as to whether Simón and señor Arroyo are in fact talking about the same kind of gaps (or indeed what señor Arroyo was talking about at all). There is a ridiculous potential alive in this episode as two naked old men potentially talk past each other, at the school trip to the beach.

Simón, however, does not seem to register the possibility of a difference between their meanings, but later appears to build on that conversation in an imagined letter ("He ought really to write") to señor Arroyo ("Not just a note but something longer and fuller that would say what he might have said had he not stormed out of their meeting") (207). Once again the episode is infused with a background comic awareness, though now it results from the bizarre descriptions of Simón imagining this letter he ought to write, only to doze off. It

is within that context that Simón produces a (not-quite) confession, imaginatively directed to señor Arroyo, about how he "cannot believe in the numbers, the higher numbers, the numbers on high" and about his "distaste for paradoxes" (207, 208). Without any connecting phrase, Simón's imaginary letter transitions to inquiring as to why "a child schooled by you, when asked to explain the numbers, should reply that they cannot be explained, can only be danced." Again without any transition phrase, Simón continues, "The same child, before attending your Academy, was afraid of stepping from one paving stone to the next lest he fall through the gap and disappear into nothingness. Yet now he dances across gaps without a qualm. *What magical powers does dancing have?*" (208) Here, Simón clearly provides a variation on the conversion account, a testament to Davíd's transformative development, however it does not inspire confidence that his language opens an interpretive gap as it slips from concrete to metaphorical usages of the word "gap" itself.

I have already drawn attention to the climactic moment in Simón's portrayal of Davíd becoming, or revealing, something extraordinary: the episode in which Davíd performs the dance of Seven. I have also described the unsettling effects of the larger literary context on that episode. Within that context, Simón proffers another conversionary account of Davíd's transformation from "the boy as a compact bundle of energy" to the "now" where he "seems to shed all bodily weight, [and] to become pure light," which is again destabilized, undermined, questionable at best (246).

However, one aspect of this climactic episode that I have not yet emphasized is the distinctive way its religious resonances may point more toward the development of Simón's faith in Davíd than to any development in Davíd himself. When Simón affirms that, "the being who dances before them is neither child nor man, boy nor girl; he would even say neither body nor spirit," the rhythmic affirmation is evocative of the famous New Testament declaration, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is

neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28). Simón's euphoric considerations also culminate in an utterance of faith, when he "whispers to himself: *Remember this! If ever in the future you are tempted to doubt him, remember this!*" (246) In Galatians, the larger literary context is also a discourse on faith. On the matter of Davíd's development, then, there is yet more reason to question where the narrator's perspective ends and Simón's begins, or when other dialogue affirming the distinctiveness or development of Davíd might not reveal more about the perspective of the speaker. More specifically, here, one cannot clearly identify the extent to which Simón's affirmations of Davíd's development might not reveal more about Simón's own changing perspective than about Davíd himself.

If there is a movement, or transformation, in Simón's own approach to gaps, lack, and disappointed expectations it may (or may not) entail a shift from questing toward solutions to "shuffl[ing] in a slow circle" that has no teleological significance, but "begins to reveal a new structure, point by point, like a crystal growing in the air." It is, after all, not Davíd's, but Simón's dance that marks the conclusion of *Schooldays*. With an open-handed approach ("Visions will come when they come. Or they will not."), he begins swaying to an aria played by Juan Sebastián; "Bliss washes over him" (260). Here, Simón is the one in the school, being instructed.

Devoid of religious resonances, this concluding episode is instead infused with the kind of bathos that often signals and surrounds more serious, even potentially sacred, moments in Coetzee's fictions. Having obtained silver dancing slippers that are too small for him, Simón cuts off the fronts so that his "toes project obscenely" (259). Mercedes, his instructor and dance partner, greets him as a spectacle ("Where did you get the clown shoes? […] Juan Sebastián! […] Come and look!"), before drawing attention to the way she too contributes to the ridiculous picture they cut, depicting herself as, not "some unattainably beautiful young goddess," but "ugly old Mercedes." As the middle-aged man begins to step

and sway, J.S. plays "a simple tune, a child's tune" (259). If the results of Simón's efforts are a little ridiculous, they are also uncertain: after the allusions to his experience of bliss, Simón complains of "feeling dizzy." He issues forth a Beckettian, "How long must I go on?", to which Mercedes responds: "Go on. You will get over the dizziness." Yet the interpretive possibility that Mercedes may be wrong, that Simón might not, in fact, get over his dizziness, is sustained by the words: "He obeys. It is cool in the studio; he is conscious of the high space above his head. Mercedes recedes; there is only the music. Arms extended, eyes closed, he shuffles in a slow circle. Over the horizon the first star begins to rise" (260). The narrative holds open the contradictory possibilities that Simón's concluding experience of this star-rise might be a mystical experience, or it might merely be the dizziness, or perhaps some combination of both. This concluding account of a middle-aged man turning in circles, beyond the point of dizziness, to a children's tune, also raises the interpretive possibility that the childhood and schooldays of these stories might actually be Simón's, or at least not exclusively Davíd's.

Simón's open-handed approach to dance, and the possibility of visions, strongly contrasts with some of Simón's earlier approaches to his desires, his appetites. In *Childhood*, in a disagreement with his neighbor and friend, Elena, that takes place while they lie together on her bed, chatting, as their boys play outside, Simón persists in expressing his desire for "something-more that is missing." Elena expressly diagnoses his yearning as delusional. However, an oblique religious resonance in Elena's account moves in another direction:

> In the old way of thinking, no matter how much you may have, there is always something missing. The name you choose to give this *something-more* that is missing is passion. Yet I am willing to bet that if tomorrow you were offered all the passion you wanted – passion by the bucketful – you would promptly find something new to miss, to lack. This endless dissatisfaction, this yearning for the something-more that is missing, is a way of thinking we are well rid of, in my opinion**.** *Nothing is missing*. The nothing that you think is missing is an illusion. You are living by an illusion. (62)

Indeed, one can easily replace the word "passion" with "God" or "truth" or anything else and the problem remains the same, yet Elena's confident denial of what is missing might also be seen as renaming it as "illusion." Paradoxically, her emphatic negation may also point readers toward the possibility of a sacralized awareness that aspects of reality perpetually remain beyond available narrative and imaginative capacities. The idea that in dance Simón just might find an alternative posture toward that *Nothing*, by making use of old ways of thinking, is a possibility suggested, in *Schooldays*, by señor Arroyo, who describes an "older mode of apprehension [that] comes from body and mind moving together, body-mind, to the rhythm of music-dance," a mode of remembering "archaic memories, knowledge we lost when we voyaged here across the oceans": a ritual (243).

The most vivid contrast with Simón's "dance" at the end of *Schooldays*, though, is his quest, in *Childhood*, to find that *something more that is missing* in the form of a mother for David. At times it seems that a sacralized vision of motherhood serves as a guise for Simón's pursuit of his Dulcinea, for by Simón's "logic," an emotional experience will confirm some unknown woman as truly being David's mother, a woman who will "be everything to him." With religious resonances, upon meeting Inés, Simón confesses to her:

> I have always been sure – don't ask me why – that I would know David's mother when I saw her; and now that I have met you I know I was right. It could not have been chance that led us to La Residencia. *Some hand must have been guiding us* […] *Some unseen hand* […] (my emphasis 79)

From a more skeptical perspective, Simón's confession might be seen as the untouchable, "sacred" veil behind which is hidden his own desires for a woman that will actually be everything to *him*, or perhaps simply a veil that protects his sense of inadequacy before the challenges of sole-parenting, "I cannot be everything to him. I cannot be his mother" (80). Yet by reaching for a religious register, he may also be seen to be deferring his intellectual responsibility for evaluating this woman as a potential mother for David. Once again, instead of resolving these interpretive possibilities, the narrative holds them open. The larger context

also deflates the value of these claims, by showing the quest itself to be less dramatic than it might sound. For, the day that Simón and David stumble upon Inés, they have actually taken a bus out of town to go for a scenic walk, but misread the map, which led them to the walls of the exclusive compound, where they beheld her. Of course, this might also make the encounter all the more miraculous.

Uncertain though the development of any character in these books may be, tracing the potential changes in these parallel lives contributes to an understanding of what may be most distinctive about these stories: namely, the way in which the (not-quite) father and (not-quite) son are depicted as changing in relation to one another. The authority assumed by Davíd at different points in the narrative at times appears self-interested or detached from reality, but he can clearly be seen to be practicing independence, free from fatherly control; and though Simón exercises responsibility for Davíd, he also often obeys, serves, and learns from the boy. One might even say that while in some moments Davíd acts like the son, in others he acts like the father; in other moments Simón acts like the father, but sometimes like the son. (Even in *Childhood* Simón explains, "While I was in hospital with nothing else to do, I tried, as a mental exercise, to see the world through David's eyes" (248).) This flexibility and fluctuation certainly does not distinguish either of them as heroic and exemplary: it would be worse than unwise for a reader to attempt to map her own life by the example of these characters.

Yet the possibilities this observation also raise are: what if a boy driven by the most disturbing forms of lack (for example, experiencing traumas such as the loss of parents and then developing counterproductive psychological tendencies that flower as narcissism) also cultivates a posture of openness to difference, and instead of demanding attention through endeavoring to become the ultimate oppressive father, just possibly pursues delusions of grandeur through acts of service and self-sacrifice? Instead of creating an exemplary life,

these books work more precisely as a negative theology, creating reading conditions that dislodge and disorient the many familiar narratives that offer to interpret reality and thereby abstract it into something thinner, more mythological.

In a way, Simón and David themselves stage what the reader goes through in encountering these texts. Both of these characters struggle to negotiate the various perspectives and narrative frameworks they encounter, in the face of befuddling encounters with worlds that do not conform to those perspectives or frameworks. This is no particularly special skill, but mundane, the stuff of moment-by-moment life; yet it is precisely in performing these mundane processes that these characters provide readers with a means for gaining greater conscious awareness of the interpretive processes that pervade, shape, and inflect readers' lives far beyond the bindings of these books, in a world that is dramatically different from the ones in which prior generations grew up.

The usefulness of considering the correlations between the acts of reading this fiction and Simón and Davíd's efforts at reading their worlds is not contingent on the success with which they do so. And by no means are their efforts uniformly responded to as successes by the other characters in these stories. I have already noted how Señora Oxtoa offers a psychological diagnosis that, through "withdrawal and retreat," David has shrunk back from a foundational sense of "lacking the real," specifically "real parents," and "into a fantasy world where he feels more in control" (207). The three sisters who initially financed Davíd's enrollment in the Dance Academy later post a critical letter saying, "Davíd seems to us excessively indulged. It would do him good, we believe, if his natural high spirits were sometimes reigned in" (256). Yet although these characters' judgments draw attention to Simón and Davíd's decisions as less-than-exemplary, we can see that both characters respond to their own bewilderment in ways that necessarily command a certain empathy from the reader.

Indeed, these stories do not offer a singular voice of truth or moral development, but pair and intertwine the movements of a (not-quite) father with his (not-quite) son, in counterpoint. The movements of Davíd are often directed toward asserting his own authority and independence, whereas Simón is frequently depicted in more kenotic movements; the movements of both are apparently – though not expressly – interconnected. If Coetzee's fictions persistently represent elements of the reading experiences they aim to stage, then perhaps these doubled and interconnected movements also suggest his interconnected aims for cultivating shifts in the posture of readers (as well as our writer) toward the relationship between narrative and life.

Dialogism Revisited and the Cultivation of Character

If the way these texts offer to reimagine the available positions between readers, writers, narratives, and the wider world has something of the philosophical game about it, it is nonetheless a form of playfulness that is invested with moral, political, and even spiritual significance. Something of this seriousness can be understood if, to conclude, we reflect on the way the *Jesus* stories engage a certain kind of dialogism.

As we have seen, Dostoevsky's dialogism was informed by a kenotic Christology, which emphasized God's relinquishing of divine authority and assumption of humanity to bring special revelation within the province of ordinary life. Dostoevsky's writings are distinctively shaped by his commitment to an authorial kenosis in which he subjected his own beliefs to the evaluation of various voices. Instead of leading readers to one main point, he attempted to craft fictions in which readers might hone their own beliefs and ideas through imaginative participation in interaction and juxtaposition with multi-layered difference. The reader is invited to submit her mind to different perspectives, and in so doing to develop her own. If the dissonance between title and text in the *Jesus* books implicitly encourages

readers to search for the unnamed "Jesus" in these stories, then it also encourages readers to practice making judgments about what is sacred, and what is good, in complex narrated worlds. In so doing, it encourages readers to develop a conscious awareness of that pervasive habit of deferment to the presumed authority of narratives, over and against the experienced complexities of life. Enacting my own dialogical judgment, I would suggest that this habit might even be seen as a psychological elaboration on Hannah Arendt's paradoxical thesis on the banality of evil, with a Girardian twist.

If, in the popular imagination, the figure of Jesus embodies that which is good, then the figure of Hitler surely embodies evil. So it is perhaps apt, if unsavory, that a chapter on the motif of paradox in Coetzee's *Jesus* books would also consider Coetzee's review of a fictional biography about the young Adolf Hitler, Norman Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest* (2007). In "Portrait of the Monster as a Young Artist" (2007), Coetzee expressly looked to Hannah Arendt's account of evil, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), to introduce the very paradox with which he claims Mailer too ("beneath the surface") grapples. He called it "the paradox *infernal-banal*." What is so useful about this review is the care Coetzee took in articulating both sides of Arendt's paradoxical thesis.

As Coetzee emphasizes, by Arendt's account, neither did the banality of the actors diminish the infernal nature of the holocaust, nor did the infernal results confirm the presence of anything special about the human agents. In Coetzee's words, "what is peculiar to the everyday banality of a bureaucratically administered, industrially organized policy of wholesale extermination is that it is also 'word-and-thought-defying' beyond our power to understand or describe." He elaborates:

> the paradox [is] that though the actions of Hitler and his associates may defy our understanding, there was no depth of thought behind their conception, no grandeur of intention. Eichmann, a humanly uninteresting man, a bureaucrat through and through, never realized in any philosophically full sense of the word what he was doing; the same might be said, mutatis mutandis, for the rest of the gang. (11)

This paradox in turn raises two key questions for the chapter at hand. First, if evil can be, mysteriously and simultaneously, both infernal and banal, might not good also be constituted by a correlate paradox? For example, divine-banal, God-man, the short hand for which – the figuration of which – being simply *Jesus*?

The second question results from taking seriously Coetzee's claim that Eichmann actively participated in the systematic mass murder of other humans, but "never realized in any philosophically full sense of the word what he was doing." That this concern is germane to a reading of Coetzee's *Jesus* stories is suggested in *Schooldays*, when the self-proclaimed murderer, Dmitri, suggests something similar, upon being taken away the police: "Back to the doctors. *Why did you do it, Dmitri? Why? Why? Why?* But maybe there is no why. Maybe it's like asking why is a chicken a chicken, or why is there a universe instead of a great big hole in the sky" (252). If one takes this possibility seriously, that vile and evil deeds might not be the results of any serious understanding or intentions, then the pressing question is: how does one consciously resist evil and cultivate goodness?

One answer might be through iterative efforts at practicing conscious awareness of the potential implications of the presuppositions, affections, lacks, and desires that structure one's relations with the wider world. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard described the "evil" of mimetic rivalry as that metaphysical desire "which weaves man's thread in the wrong direction, thus separating what it claims to unite and uniting what it claims to separate" (192). Girard identified a pattern of characters who encounter the falsity and divisiveness of their own beliefs in human autonomy, human divinity. The demystifying movements in *Childhood* and *Schooldays* also make available an awareness of the divisive effects of deifying narratives or concepts, as autonomous repositories of authoritative truths, staved off from "real life."

In figuring their pair of protagonists (not-quite father and not-quite son) as shifting – potentially, slowly, inconstantly – from pursuing that which might fill their senses of lack toward an openness to a logic that holds differences across the gaps, the *Jesus* books present two heroes who are also not heroes. David attains his own "í," and Simón is in the rather ridiculous position of a child, a student. Each life is shaped and unfolds through innumerable moments of interaction with the varied voiced narrative they inhabit. The prolific presence of the pronoun "he" – sometimes without any clearly identified referent, other times accompanied by an unnecessary, overly proximate one – perhaps subtly indicates how complexly and deeply these different characters are held together in the narrative.

Once again the embodied re-location of characters corresponds with what may or may not be their "conversions." Yet as the larger narratives resist the role of authoritative judge, it is left to the reader to adjudicate between paradoxical, contradictory evidence, to determine whether any development has taken place, and indeed what kind. The stories thus encourage readers to practice negotiating contradictory evidence, taking responsibility for their own judgments, which necessarily cannot be comprehensive of all the textual evidence. This practice not only encourages readers to make immediate judgments in response to these worlds, but through allusions and patterns it also invites conscious consideration of how these fictional worlds might relate to Coetzee's wider *oeuvre*, his historical moment, his autobiography, and of course, his interlocutors. Finally, for the critic, the practice encouraged by these narratives entails a further possibility for cultivating conscious awareness of the impact of interpretive judgments, and what they may leave out, whenever one's readings are submitted to a wider community of readers, of critics.

To put it otherwise, these *Jesus* stories might be said to stage a counter-intuitive *imitatio Christi* by inviting encounters that also (might just) provide the necessary (though banal) conditions for expanding existential freedom and moral responsibility through

cultivating a posture conducive to gaining an expanded awareness of one's own contingent position—and for practicing different poses and movements of the mind, through following the embodied dance of the pen that always, already recombines various narratives to make sense of the world. Yet lest this all start to sound rather pious, the reader might just also retain a background comic awareness infused by the bizarre contextual features of nude beaches, dancing shoes with toes jutting out, and the mayhem caused by a headstrong boy insistent that it is *his turn* to dance for the crowd.

Conclusion

Amid the fragmentation of a more monolithic Christendom, Coetzee has been writing fictions aimed at cultivating conscious awareness of how the contemporary narrative landscape remains shaped by historical stories, which prominently include stories from Christianity. His own fictions thus reflexively engage with a complex lineage that is inherited, contested, and consciously appropriated from Christianity—although by no means from Christianity alone. I have traced Coetzee's mediated engagements with Calvin, Bultmann, Girard, Dostoevsky, and Jesus, precisely because each figure has been important to Coetzee's reconceptions of the available positions from which to relate narratives to life. By tracing his engagements with these interlocutors, I have also illuminated a much larger aspect of Coetzee's approach to writing: namely, his reflexive engagement with various strands of a storytelling heritage that extends back through classical mythology as providing narrative resources to renegotiate and reimagine in order to change one's relations to the wider world.

Moreover, I have shown that this crafting of stories that rely upon – but also attempt to reimagine – a fraught cultural history might itself constitute an unconventional act of faith. For Coetzee's approach to writing entails stepping beyond familiar interpretive options, in a process that reimagines a leap of faith. The uncertainty of the merits of this approach to writing are not reserved for Coetzee alone, but also extended to his readers, as they imaginatively inhabit fictional worlds in which the possibility always remains available that any mode of responding to intuitions of justice and freedom might be yet another guise for self interest, motivated by desires to which the self is blind or suppressing.

As we have seen through examining the shifts in Coetzee's engagement with Christianity, this approach to writing has not been constant or fixed across Coetzee's *oeuvre*, but has developed over time. From initial commitments to demystifying processes, Coetzee's fictions reveal a gradual movement toward greater uncertainty that might itself be bound up in a movement toward what I am calling "faith," or even "redemption": not because uncertainty is itself hallowed, but because it is inflected with the potential for greater awareness of competing perspectives and interpretations that destabilize self-certitude. For a writer and for readers inhabiting social spaces in which competing beliefs and conceptions of the world co-exist with unprecedented plurality, Coetzee's fictions might thus offer a training ground for practicing the interpretive choices with which we more widely negotiate the relations between narrative and life.

There is even reason to believe that Coetzee came to see himself as standing in a line of spiritually concerned storytellers that extends back to Augustine, in particular. If these terms seem rather more like mine than Coetzee's, it is notable that in an interview with Erik Grayson, for *Stirrings Still: The Journal of Existential Literature* (2006), Coetzee would respond to the question, "What, in your opinion, makes for a good educator?" with the enigmatic claim, "An active interest in your students' intellectual and spiritual growth" (6). This may have been nothing more than a passing comment, or perhaps it was more significant: both options remain entirely possible.

If it was more than a passing comment, an anomaly within the Coetzee Papers' fastidiously alphabetized "Research Materials" may be illuminating. In this section, each folder includes files, which consistently include only documents written by the authors whose initials correspond to the letter of the alphabet under which they are organized. However, in the folder "Adorno-Augustine, 1934-1989" there is a file identified as "Augustine, Lucrece,

undated"[69] whose contents extend beyond the A-range. Inside the folder are photocopied excerpt from Augustine's *City of God* (413-427 C.E.), as well as from English translations of Livy's *History of Rome*,[70] Ovid's *Fasti*,[71] and Peter Brown's prominent *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (1967). This may of course be nothing but an oversight. However, the possibility remains that the point of inconsistency signals some intentional endeavor – a possibility that gains significance when one considers that the same author incorporated the apparent oversight of successive accounts of the death of the Klawer in his first published fiction – and this possibility prompts a consideration of what the relation between these excerpts might be.

The excerpts from Ovid and Livy each provide traditional Roman accounts of a foundational Roman myth, the Rape of Lucretia, which the excerpt from Augustine renegotiates to argue for a change in moral sensibilities. Ovid and Livy's accounts seem to provide the background intertexts for understanding the photocopied excerpt of Augustine's renegotiation of this politicized tale. For, in the excerpt from Augustine, he makes polemical use of the well-established story to argue for the enduring moral chastity of Christian women who have been raped, and to argue against social mores requiring their suicide.[72] The juxtaposition of these photocopied excerpts emphasizes Augustine's evocative re-negotiation of his own narrative resources in order to inspire a change in prevailing moral sensibilities,

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[69] This deviant spelling of "Lucrece" is a clear allusion to Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), which signals yet further the thick intellectual history surrounding this trope.

[70] Translated by George Baker.

[71] Translated by J.G. Frazer, anthropologist of folk religion and author of *The Golden Bough* (1890).

[72] Augustine's subversive re-orientation of the Lucretia myth is prominent in the following long quotation from the photocopied excerpt Coetzee includes from *City of God*: "If there is no unchastity when a woman is ravished against her will, then there is no justice in the punishment of the chaste. I appeal to Roman laws and Roman judges. If anyone was charged in your courts with having put to death a woman not merely uncondemned but chaste and innocent, and this charge had been proved, would you not have chastised the culprit with appropriate severity?

This is what Lucretia did. That highly extolled Lucretia also did away with the innocent, chaste, outraged Lucretia. Give your sentence. Or if you cannot do this, because the culprit is not present to receive the punishment, why do you extol with such praises the killer of the chaste and innocent? You certainly have no means of defending her before the judges of the underworld, such as are described in the verses of your poets" (I.19).

from Pagan to Christian, through sermons and writings that relocate the site of purity in the will as opposed to the body.

The final photocopied excerpt in this folder, from Peter Brown's biography of Augustine, specifically emphasizes the role of affect in Augustine's sermons. Brown draws attention to Augustine's rhetorical capacity "to place himself in the midst of his congregation, to appeal to their feelings for him, to react with immense sensitivity to their emotions, and so, as the sermon progressed, to sweep them up into his own way of feeling" (251). The juxtaposition of these texts may provide a keyhole into a remarkable moment, near the beginning of the Christian era, in which Augustine appealed to the dominant conventions of Roman law and literature to argue against established expectations for honor suicides.

In challenging the myth of Lucretia, Augustine confronted a much-storied tradition, and a prevailing moral sensibility, to promote a Christian revision of pagan social mores. At least from the perspective of the excerpts juxtaposed in Coetzee's folder, Augustine did so by engaging with the very founding myth of the Roman Republic: Livy and Ovid both associate the rape of Lucretia with the revolution that ended two hundred and forty-four years of governance by hereditary monarchy. Coetzee's inclusion of these excerpts from Livy, Ovid, Augustine, and Brown may thus provide insight into one storyteller's efforts at studying how another storyteller influenced pervasive moral sensibilities by marshaling his rhetorical resources and renegotiating a foundational fiction. Or it may not. Rather than offering any firm explication, Coetzee's archived research materials are presented as selections from intertexts, in a juxtaposition that raises interpretive possibilities for the reader to negotiate by practicing their own interpretive judgments.

It does not take the recurrence of the word "disgrace" in the translations of Livy and Ovid's works to bring the most prominent rape episodes from Coetzee's fiction to mind in relation to the claim I am making. Not only does *Disgrace* (1999) turn on two complex

accounts that the reader is left to determine as to whether they are rapes, but both episodes provoke uneasy confrontations with a variety of prevailing sensibilities. In the frenzy of university politics that results from the student Melanie's charge against her professor, David Lurie, a "committee of enquiry" assembles to recommend on Lurie's punishment. Less concerned with the acts of his body with than the condition of his heart, they want Lurie not only to plead guilty or offer a confession, but also to feel it, to mean it. As one character on the committee, Dr Farodia Rassool, puts it, "The statement should come from [Lurie], in his own words. Then we can see if it comes from the heart" (54). While this requirement for sincere contrition resonates most immediately with a sensibility evident in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's own requirements of confessions, in the 1990s, it is also recognizably resonant with Augustine's reorientation of the site of morality away from the body to the intentions.

However, in *Disgrace*, as in many of the works I have discussed in this thesis, Coetzee draws readers' attention to a more complex understanding of the relations between the intentions of the heart and the actions of the body. As the cast of characters circles around uncovering the desires and motivations that fuel each episode of sexual violation around which this story turns, a wide array of interpretive possibilities are presented to readers, to negotiate and reconstruct in making their own interpretive judgments. As David reflects, "More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa," the reader is also confronted by failures in the fit between the larger narrative and the aspects of life it purports to represent (117). The demand for interpretive judgments is intensified through the story's refusal to sanction any single name or narrative as the right fit: the true meaning.

Not only are the episodes that I name as rape presented from competing perspectives, but these perspectives are mediated and inconstant, shifting over the course of the story.

Melanie's perspective on David Lurie's advances is never directly provided, but mediated through his interpretation of her bodily response, through the words of her boyfriend and parents, and through the decision to report the relationship—a decision potentially freighted with the self-interest of a student whose grades have suffered and could be in need of an excuse for her failings. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a clash between her perspective and David Lurie's, as is suggested by the juxtaposition of his descriptions of Melanie as being "from the quiver of Aphrodite" just before observing that she "turns her back on him," which seems to prompt his defense of the act as, "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core." The most powerful form of competing perspective, however, seems to come through his bodily observations that, in the encounter, it was "As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away" (25). Moreover, David's own perspective fluctuates from a Romanticized conception of Eros to a sense of apparent remorse after his own daughter, Lucy, is violated. Lucy's response, which prioritizes a socio-political reading over an emphasis on the individual, draws yet further attention to the way in which larger structures impinge upon the acts of desire that David Lurie so vehemently wants to see as the result of individual feelings.

If there is a way of seeing this story as circling around Lurie's pursuit of resolution and insight into problems of desire, what he calls "the problem of sex," there is another perspective from which the theme of sex is but one distinctively pressurized keyhole for viewing larger problems in the socio-political structures that Coetzee presents as shaping – and shaped by – desire (1). If there is a grace for Lurie, it does not seem to be connected with a movement toward moral purity (there is little evidence that he shakes the power his desires hold over him, as he goes on to have an affair with another man's wife). Rather, the potential

for grace is detectable in interactions and insights that gradually reveal increased evidence of being shaped by perspectives that Lurie could not initially register.

At least in this story, the promises of ontological fulfillment through sexual or confessional conquest are false: there is no way of attaining certain and privileged insight that will enable an authoritative, comprehensive naming and narrating of life. Instead of yielding before the promise of hidden truths and experiential intensity, the reader and Lurie are both positioned before encounters that offer no sure authority before which to defer. The book positions its characters and readers to exercise responsibility for interpretive choices that will remain limited, fallible, and all too human. Re-positioned in this way, we are also situated in the very place of uncertainty wherein lies the possibility for encountering the grace of other perspectives, with the interpretive freedom that just might entail (or indeed might not) a leap of faith.

And that leap, that movement, is kenotic. For it is a movement away from possession, from certitude, toward interpretive decisions that might turn out to be "little enough, less than little: nothing." This is the note that the book ends on, as Lurie confirms, with regards to the dog he has developed an attachment to, that, "Yes, I am giving him up" (220). But it is also a more persistent theme that develops across the narrative, as Lurie's narrative comes to include voices that initially seem to lie outside its rationality. Whereas Lurie could hardly register the possibility that Melanie might not secretly share his desires, early in the book, by its end, the narrative expands to include Lucy's rationale for responding to her own rape by ceding her land to Petrus, in an act of politicized restitution for the colonial rapine of the land:

> Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity […] like a dog. (205)

The narrative progression makes available a sense that Lurie's perspective is increasingly able to host the perspectives of others, which we now recognize as that counter-intuitive form of grace. Whereas *Dusklands* depicted men struggling to assert their divinity over the earth, in *Disgrace*, as the above quotation suggests, the protagonists come to see themselves not as gods but as rather "like a dog"—in a half-palindrome that negates early associations of an aspiration to assert one's own ontological completion, autonomy, and special significance through heroic self-narration.

If this is a redemptive movement, it is not toward a higher morality or greater historical significance, as Lurie comes to occupy an ever more peripheral social and geographical position. But it nevertheless might entail a "progression" toward a less delusional way of life, as Rosalind, Lurie's ex-wife, suggests in recalling, "you were always a great self-deceiver, David. A great deceiver and a great self-deceiver" (188). It is a potential movement away from the monological distortions that have embodied implications, which Lucy flags by saying:

> You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions. (198)

This progression toward hosting alternative perspectives passes not through success and strength but through disgrace, in the paradox that we might now recognize as cruciform logic. For it is his disgrace, his fall, that raises the uncertain possibility that Lurie has become more fully able to experience and recognize the complexities of life. However, by intentionally cultivating a historical awareness of concepts such as grace, and of the moral assumptions that might now appear natural and given, Coetzee also emphasizes the simultaneous possibility that Lurie's disgrace may be nothing more than a futile romp with the dogs down blind allies of failure.

Unlike Augustine, Coetzee's renegotiations of foundational fictions in stories of apparent rapes offer readers no authoritative moral instruction. Instead of sanctioning certain judgments over Lurie's acts, or even Lucy's assaulters, the narrative confronts readers with unsavory interconnections and protean instabilities that heighten the demands on each reader to take responsibility for their own judgments about the virtues and representations of morality of this story. What I am claiming is that this is part of a larger effort, whose development I have traced, in which Coetzee came to produce affectively engaging stories that aim to please but also to change the reader: "to revise and recreate her" (*Giving Offense* 38).

If Augustine contributed to a formation of sensibilities that has accompanied the establishment of a more monolithic Christendom, Coetzee reveals and contributes to a more ambiguous moral landscape. Amy Hungerford has made the relevant observation, in *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (2010), that recent American fiction cultivates "belief without meaning," and that it does so by (often) subtly drawing on religious resources. For her, this prompts the concern that authors "want the fruits of religious power […] without having to answer for one's assumptions about the world, and about writing, upon which such visions are built" (133). I show that Coetzee's fictions do something very different: in their interrogations of religious language, narrative structures, and themes, they generate an expanded awareness of the historical legacies that continue to shape interpretive habits in the wake of a more monolithic Christendom, and thereby endeavor to create the conditions for the possibility of reimagining those legacies. Coetzee's fictions invite readers to enter a wider dialogue, and take on greater responsibility, in our own negotiations of the legacies that continue to shape these stories, as well as the very narratives that mediate life.

Rather than diminishing or denying the deep differences with which people occupy shared public spaces in a potentially post-secular age, Coetzee's fictions point toward a web of informative intertexts that illuminate the differences themselves. They do so in the hope, perhaps even the faith, of pursuing fresh positions for viewing these differences. Moving against the potential for over-piousness in such a summary, however, is the persistent comic awareness of his writing, and its capacity to rouse awareness that, deadly serious though life might be, the part we play in it always carries the potential of being rather different than we think. Indeed, Coetzee drew attention to this possibility in relation to his own writings in the enigmatic but very prominent speech he gave at his Nobel Banquet, in 2003, which specifically raises the deflationary possibility that his honored accomplishments may also – or even finally – be the guise of man, no longer a boy, travailing to report, "Mommy, Mommy, I won a prize!"

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