

**“Speaking Politically, Not Politics”: An Adornian Study of
“Apolitical” Twentieth-century Fiction**

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Abstract

My thesis is concerned with Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), the Frankfurt School theorist, and the implications of his philosophy for literary studies. I show that Adorno's thought may offer a valid contribution to the analysis of literary texts, even texts with which he is not historically associated. More specifically, I link Adorno with texts that emerge out of situations of political extremity but are not necessarily understood as "political" protest literature.

Drawing on a variety of Adorno's texts, I assert that key concepts within Adorno's thought – truth content, immanence, the non-identical – allow us a way of understanding literary texts that appear apolitical, but in fact are speaking to the social and material relations of their specific (political) context. Adorno's exposition on the interface between the artwork and history usefully engages authors that problematise or dismantle our traditional conception of what constitutes the "political" – overt manifest content that aligns itself with a particular ideological position.

I have chosen three twentieth-century authors (J.M. Coetzee; Margarita Karapanou; Michael Ondaatje) whose literature bear the burden of political extremity (respectively, South African apartheid, the 1970s Greek military junta, and the Sri Lankan civil war), and is at loggerheads with the literature of political commitment emerging from each of those situations. Each of these authors asserts his or her

aesthetic autonomy over prescriptive understandings of literature as a vehicle actively espousing a particular nationalist, political, ideological or even aesthetically formalist position. The work of these authors, I argue, embodies an alternative Adornian version of engaged literature.

In short, my thesis operates as a two way conversation asking: “What can Adorno’s concepts give to certain literary texts?”, and reciprocally, “What can those texts give to our traditional understanding of Adorno and his applicability?” This thesis is an act of rethinking the literary in Adornian terms, and rethinking Adorno through the literary.

Acknowledgments

There is an African proverb that states, “It takes a village to raise a child”. The proverb suggests that a child cannot be raised in isolation; its nurture and care is a collective endeavour. In this instance that child is a thesis of over 80 000 words and three years of work, and I would like to express my immense gratitude towards the “village” that contributed towards its maturation and completion:

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“Speaking Politically, Not Politics”: An Introduction

During the terrible years of the Yekhov terror I spent seventeen months in the prison queues in Leningrad. One day someone “identified” me. Then a woman with lips blue with cold who was standing behind me, and of course had never heard of my name, came out of the numbness which affected us all and whispered in my ear – (we all spoke in whispers there):

“Could you describe this?”

I said, “I can!”

Then something resembling a smile slipped over what had once been her face.

— Anna Akhmatova "Instead of a Preface" 95

The artist by his very nature, must have the very immediate, the most intimate contact with the people. His life is communication. And the dictatorship would keep the people incommunicado. So beware of the artist who informs, who exposes, who inspires, who enflames.

— Melina Mercouri "We Will Be Free" 377

Political literature: a brutal combination. A combination stretching back from the ancient comic plays of Aristophanes to the tortured twentieth-century poems of Anna Akhmatova: a textured thread binding together centuries of humanity subject to unjust laws and oppression. The combination appears almost logical, natural. Surely it is through literature, the written word, that politics is to be debated, interrogated, understood? Perhaps Melina Mercouri, the Greek actress and cultural

activist, said it best in her address to the Women's Democratic Club in Washington in 1968, "I believe that those who say the artist has no place in politics not only strip him of his citizenship but would also deny all of history" (376). Mercuri's statement certainly brings to mind a legion of artists manacled to the deadweight of history: George Orwell, Nadine Gordimer, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn – individuals actively negotiating the ethical and moral force of various political systems, advocating literature as the repository of political rebellion. Of course, adopting the position of the writer who speaks politically is fraught by difficulty and danger – we only need to think of the detention and execution of Ken Saro Wira by the military government of General Sani Abacha in 1995 to fully understand the implications of speaking out. Joseph Brodsky, with his typical ingenuity, puts a humorous spin on the writer's predicament in his 1987 acceptance lecture for the Nobel Prize for Literature: "A literate, educated person, to be sure, is fully capable of, after reading this political treatise or tract, of killing his like, and even of experiencing, in so doing, a rapture of conviction" (292). He continues, "Lenin was literate, Stalin was literate, so was Hitler, as for Mao Zedong, he even wrote verse. What all these men had in common, though, was that their hit list was longer than their reading list" (292).

The strength needed by writers to rally against oppression has not gone unnoticed by major literary awards, such as the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Jerusalem Prize. Without actively stating so, the committee for the Nobel Prize for Literature chooses some of its laureates with the understanding that they not only embody the highest literary ideals, but also function as political entities – individuals

who champion a particular socio-political cause or viewpoint. In the past, winners of the Prize have been caustic critics of their particular social and political milieu (Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's condemnation of the USSR is a case in point). Pushed to the extreme though, the Nobel committee's interest in politics has resulted in the view, held by academics and the general public alike, that nominations are often solely motivated by non-literary reasons. Alan Jenkins, deputy editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, states rather flatly that the Prize "often goes to someone whose political stance is found to be sympathetic at a given moment" (Smith). The 2006 nomination of the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk triggered much controversy: it was generally assumed that Pamuk's criticism of Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the Kurdish and Armenian genocides was the motivating factor behind his selection. Put on trial, upon the instigation of right-wing Turkish nationalists, in 2005 for "insulting Turkishness" (the charge was later dropped, presumably because of the intense international outcry), Pamuk was awarded the Nobel a year later. The 2007 awardee, the British Doris Lessing, was supposedly chosen for forwarding a feminist agenda in her work, which led critic Harold Bloom to refer spitefully to her nomination as "pure political correctness" (Solomon) – a nod in the direction of equal opportunities.

Yet, if we expect that the lectures of the Nobel Laureates themselves to espouse unequivocally the idea of the committed artist beating the weathered war drum, nothing could be further from the truth. Instead many of the lectures emphasise the need for literature to be nuanced, concerned with a reaching out

(however tentatively) through an existential and ontological darkness towards the human subject. Take for instance, the 2003 lecture of Gao Xingjian, the exiled Chinese writer. Regarded as a *persona non grata* by the Chinese government, Xingjian's Nobel lecture makes a case for literature as the fragile "voice of the individual" (91), not a crude "contriv[ance] of the hymn of the nation, the flag of the race" (91). For Xingjian, literature's first allegiance is to the "preserve of human consciousness" (93), the complex emotions and experience of the *individual*. In a statement in which he refuses to adopt a prescriptive notion of literature that could possibly shift the locus of interest from the human subject to ideology, he states, "This is not to say that literature must therefore be divorced from politics or that it must necessarily be involved in politics" (91–2). The 1987 Prize recipient, the Jewish Russian writer, Joseph Brodsky – sentenced at the age of 23 to five years of hard labour for "social parasitism" (being a poet was not considered a legitimate profession in Soviet Russia) – echoes Xingjian's definition of literature, seeing it as a "tiny human, albeit not always pretty, face" (286). Noting that the book is not a replica of history, but parallel to it (287–8), Brodsky expresses that artists have various reasons for creating literature, reasons as simple as aiming "to win the heart of [one's] beloved" (295). For Brodsky, human cognisance and moral contemplation gravitate centripetally towards literature, asserting, "The one who writes a poem writes it above all because verse writing is an extraordinary accelerator of conscience, of thinking, of comprehending the universe" (297).

In these lectures, as with many others, the crude conflation of politics with literature disappears. The terms of literature *engagé*, committed literature, are reconstituted. If anything, what it means to be a “political writer” crumbles away, and we have to ask what is it that makes a text political, what gives it political power or valency? How do we respond to authors and writing that don’t quite “fit” with preconceived notions of “the political”? It is easy to understand why Bertolt Brecht, with his pro-Marxist theatre, or Maishe Maponya, with his anti-apartheid plays, are political writers. It is more difficult though to categorise a writer, like, say, J.M. Coetzee. We can say in the most general way that Coetzee has in mind proxy-European colonialism in the form of apartheid when he writes a book like *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), but do we *really* know what Coetzee is saying politically when he presents us with his strange protagonist – a protagonist without race, speechless, mystically turning up the African soil to plant pumpkins? And what makes this type of work “less” political than Brecht or Maponya? On an obvious level, there is no sloganeering, fewer binary oppositions on the level of character, no conceivable message, but Coetzee, like Brecht or Maponya, explores the concept of injustice, the right to individual freedom, the “infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing” (to quote T.S. Eliot’s “Preludes”) that is the human spirit.

This thesis suggests that these questions may be addressed, if not definitively, on a theoretical level, by the critical theorist Theodor Adorno (1903–1969). Adorno’s value lies in his understanding of the artwork as “fait social” (*Aesthetic* 229). In the “Society” section of *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), his magnum opus, Adorno discusses the

relationship between the artwork and society. He begins by noting that the artwork is locked into the “structure of commodity production” (Eagleton 348). Adorno sees the artwork as the “concentrat[ion]” of the “dialectic of the forces and relations [and modes] of production”¹(*Aesthetic* 225). This dialectic,² at the core of the artwork, is precisely what places the artwork in the unique position of being able to comment upon society. The social aspect of the artwork is inherent to it, and for this reason it is able to communicate and comment upon society’s social and material fixtures. (The artwork’s ability to critique social and material relations is what Simon Jarvis refers to as “judgementless judgement” (105).) Crucially, the social is “imprinted” (*Aesthetic* 232) upon the artwork – it is not simply “reflected” in it. Adorno himself states, “Social struggles and the relations of classes are imprinted in the structure of artworks” (*Aesthetic* 232).

Crucially however, it is only the autonomous artwork, an artwork free from religio-cultural or socio-political positioning,³ that is subject to this dialectical interplay. Adorno states, “[A]rt becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art” (*Aesthetic* 225). For Adorno, under modernity, the artwork is “functionless” (*Aesthetic*) – it does not qualify as “socially useful” (*Aesthetic* 226). Its criticism of society occurs through its “merely existing” (*Aesthetic* 226). Despite its functionlessness (its supposed disconnection from society)

¹ Hohendahl stresses that the artwork does not reflect social conditions but human labo[u]r (150).

² A style of criticism or conceptual process that aims to highlight rather than obliterate material and abstract contradictions. Also see pages 220–1.

³ See Chapter 1; page 50 for a brief definition of artistic autonomy.

its bond to society remains potent, thereby giving it a “double character” (*Aesthetic* 229). The artwork’s “social essence” forces us to acknowledge the artwork’s duality – artworks are both “being-for-themselves and [expressions] on their relations to society” (*Aesthetic* 227).

However, the artwork’s commentary on the social should never take the form of an overt polemical diatribe. Adorno reiterates, “The critical concept of society...inheres in authentic⁴ artworks without having to be added to them” (*Aesthetic* 236). He also states, “[T]he political positions deliberately adopted by artworks are epiphenomena and usually impinge on the elaboration of works, and thus, ultimately, on their social truth content. Political opinions count for little” (*Aesthetic* 232).⁵ In other words, Adorno believes that the artwork’s commentary upon society is not to be found in “manifest opinions” (*Aesthetic* 227), which are the expression of a reified consciousness. He comments, “[The] open or covert treatment of social matters, is the most superficial and deceptive” (*Aesthetic* 229). What Adorno is suggesting is that the artwork that consciously references social matters (even obliquely) is problematic. Adorno consistently advocates the need for the artwork to respond to social issues immanently (a concept that will be dealt with substantially in the next chapter).⁶ Adorno states of the artwork: “It must make its latent social

⁴ Adorno appears to be using the term “authentic” interchangeably with “autonomous”.

⁵ In the “Commitment” essay, Adorno sets up the opposition between the autonomous artwork and the committed artwork thus: “This is why today autonomous rather than committed art should be encouraged in Germany” (193).

⁶ Averse to biographical, historicist, and psychological approaches to the artwork, Adorno adopts an immanent approach to the artwork, which judges an artwork not through an externally-imposed

content eloquent: It must go within in order to go beyond itself" (*Aesthetic* 260).

Hohendahl notes, "In this case, the absence of a specific social moment in the text can be as telling as its presence" (*Prismatic* 173). For protest to be potent, it must be "silent".

Clearly, in his reading of the autonomous artwork, in his explicit connection between the artwork and social and material relations, Adorno creates a paradigm in which even an artwork that ostensibly appears to be entirely oblivious to its context is in fact inherently and immediately speaking to it. Simply put, Adorno's interface between the artwork and society allows us a way of understanding artworks that may patently appear subjective, apolitical or innocuous, but in fact are speaking to the social and material relations of their particular (political) context. Therefore Adorno's exposition on the artwork in *Aesthetic Theory* usefully engages authors that problematise or dismantle our traditional conception of what constitutes the "political" – overt manifest content that aligns itself with a particular ideological position.

It is in *Aesthetic Theory* that Adorno's attitude towards the artwork is explicated to its fullest, but essay collections such as that of *Notes to Literature* (1958–1974), should not be ignored in investigating Adorno's view of literature. Of course, academic discussions of *Notes to Literature* are almost universally introduced with a cautionary statement reminding the reader that these are "notes" or "supplements"

framework but through its very own internal dynamics. Also see footnote 25, and chapter 1, pages 79–81.

to literature – not exegetical pieces – and should be read as such.⁷ Certainly, *Notes to Literature* does point us in the direction of what could be interpreted as Adorno's major shortcomings: a reading of texts motivated by subjective interests, rather than rigorous research, and a Eurocentric and exclusionary literary focus. However, the strength of these essays may lie precisely in the fact that they are not strictly academic. The essays suggest (despite their convoluted writing style) a level of playfulness, "unbound by the rules of rigour" – a manner of approaching literature that functions through the strategies of "suggestions and associations" (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 101), rather than through the more systematic normative discourses of literary criticism.⁸

More importantly, these essays allow us to construct a viable or working definition of Adorno's understanding of literature, particularly in reference to the text as politicised beyond the limited definitional confines of protest literature. For example, "Lyric Poetry and Society" in its discussion of the romantic lyric poem not as an expression of subjective self-indulgence but as a reaction to the process of industrialisation offers us the view that history is inherent to the text. Although the poem's overt content is not about the process of modernisation, its very creation, and its romantic meditation on the "untouched virgin world" (214) is symptomatic of the times. Furthermore, this seminal essay presents us with the interpretative model of

⁷ See NicholSEN's *Exact Imagination* and Hohendahl's *Prismatic Thought* for in-depth discussions on the value of *Notes to Literature* for literary criticism.

⁸ NicholSEN declares that the second volume of *Notes to Literature* "contain some of Adorno's most highly elaborated articulations of his understanding of literary and poetic language" (ix).

immanent criticism, which may be paired with a similar discussion in “Cultural Criticism and Society” in *Prisms* (1955), which both acknowledge the innate historicity of the text. “Commitment” stimulates thought around political engagement in terms of “fundamental attitudes” (180) rather than as manifest political opinions. “Trying to Understand Endgame”, in which Adorno states that “Beckett’s trashcans” are the “emblems of the culture rebuilt after Auschwitz” (266–7), distils Adorno’s complicated vision of the post-Holocaust artwork, an artwork that must function with an awareness of the after-effects of various political and historical choices.

Although it is *Aesthetic Theory* and *Notes to Literature* that offer us the substantive basis, the very conceptual core, for Adorno’s thoughts on literature, the Benjamin-inspired constellatory nature of Adorno’s thought makes reference to his other seminal texts, such as *Prisms* (1955), *Negative Dialectics* (1966), *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), and *Minima Moralia* (1951), among others, valuable if we are to gain a clear picture of Adorno’s view of literature. The key concepts gleaned from these various theoretical texts – immanent criticism, truth-content, negative critique – offer us useful tools to think about literary texts that ordinarily complicate or confuse our traditional understanding of the “political”. Indeed, it is through applying these key theoretical concepts from Adorno’s oeuvre to specific literary texts by J.M. Coetzee, Margarita Karapanou, and Michael Ondaatje that the texts are given a breath of life, proffered a relationship with the political often denied them

owing to their profound discursive and conceptual ambiguity that is often mistaken for political uninterest or apathy by literary critics and lay audiences alike.

Certainly each of the chosen literary texts bears the burden of some sort of political extremity, although this may not appear obvious at first glance. J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974); *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Foe* (1986) range in scope from the internal monologue of an American military analyst to the imaginative rewriting of Daniel Defoe's eighteenth century novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). These novels are written during the period of apartheid, the legal and political system of racial segregation favouring the white minority, which was active in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000), is the tale of a young forensic anthropologist, Anil Tissera, estranged from her homeland, Sri Lanka, after the death of her parents and fifteen years spent studying and working abroad. Tissera is sent to Sri Lanka on an international mandate to investigate the ever increasing murders on the island. The novel is located within the Sri-Lankan civil war context (1983 – 2009), a violent and protracted struggle between the Hindu Tamil minority in the north, and the (largely Buddhist) Sinhalese majority. And from the seven black years of the Greek military junta, initiated by a CIA-backed coup d'état in April 1967, emerges Margarita Karapanou's *Kassandra and the Wolf* (1974). Karapanou's novel presents a child, named Kassandra, living in an upper class Athenian home. In a series of surrealistic episodes, the child observes (and at times engages in) the complex adult world, steeped in sex, violence, and bouts of madness.

Ostensibly, on the level of plot, most of these texts appear not to deal with the political situation from which they emerge. They could be variously described as self-indulgent or simply politically indifferent when we consider that they do not feed into a revolutionary praxis, nor make polemical calls for change. The chosen novels are in no way contrived, straining under the weight of political expectation, and in this way are completely antithetical to the heavy-handed moralistic lectures or diatribes that pervade much political literature. They are out-of-kilter with definitions that see the political novel as a “work of prose fiction [invariably of the bourgeois realist sort] which leans rather to ‘ideas’ than to ‘emotions’; which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct” (Speare qtd. in Wilding ix).⁹ Instead, each of the novels grapple with the term “political”, expressing, in varying degrees, distaste towards the text as a cumbersome vehicle of reductive political ideology, which lacks nuance and introspection.¹⁰ However, this is not to say that the novels are not charged with the electric currents of a political consciousness.

When Coetzee famously sets up his aesthetic project as a rival not as a supplement to history in *The Novel Today* (1988), he is by no means endorsing an apolitical stance. Coetzee explains that in apartheid South Africa the “colonisation of

⁹ Speare had in mind the parliamentary political novel specifically when he wrote *The Political Novel* (1924) but this does not undermine the relevancy of the quoted definition.

¹⁰ Maxime Rodinson notes in Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1987) that “ideology always goes for the simplest solutions.” He continues, “It does not argue that an oppressed people is to be defended because it is oppressed and to the exact extent to which it is oppressed. On the contrary, the oppressed are sanctified, and every aspect of their actions, their culture, their past, present and future behaviour is presented as admirable” (29).

the novel by the discourse of history is proceeding with alarming rapidity" (3).

Novels that do not feed into the discourse of history are undermined as "lacking in seriousness" (1) or superfluous. Coetzee reiterates that writing concerned exclusively with pushing forward a message in the name of history is problematic for history is a metanarrative that endeavours "with varying degrees of forcefulness...to claim primacy"(4). Coetzee rejects this primacy, which is by no means the same thing as rejecting the political. He emphatically states: "Am I saying [these things] in order to distance myself from revolutionary art and ally myself with those people who think there is nothing better than cuddling up in bed with a novel and having a good old read, people who, as they will say, have had quite enough of reality on the streets, thank you? I hope not" (4).

With their unique response to the political, these novels both broaden and complicate the definition of the political novel. Yet this inability to straightforwardly categorise these novels has led to a mixed reception within academic circles, both in the countries where their work bears more direct relevance, and internationally. If we turn our attention specifically to the South African paradigm, it becomes apparent that the critical industry up until the interregnum was almost exclusively concerned with Coetzee's relationship to the political. Critics were divided into two very clear camps – those who viewed his work as apolitical, curiously indulgent in a country fraught by racialised social tensions, and those who saw Coetzee as speaking to the political in its own highly-sophisticated, theory-conscious, and idiosyncratic way. Within this dichotomized critical industry, certain critics were

keen to place Coetzee's writing within the parameters of apartheid. This was done, in the case of Sue Kossew, by setting up productive comparisons between Coetzee and social realists, such as Andre Brink, or, as with Susan VanZanten Gallagher, by drawing connections between actual historical events and Coetzee's plotlines. David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) imbedded Coetzee's "self-reflexive textuality" (Head 97) within the context of apartheid with robust references to critical theory.

A number of recent studies, especially of Coetzee's Australian fiction, are less bound to historiography, taking on thematic approaches (sympathy, reconciliation, the symbolism of animals) or an interest in his fiction's form or genre. Certain literary critics, such as Jane Poyner, interrogate the concepts of the public intellectual and postcolonial authorship in relation to Coetzee. These developments in recent criticism have been used retrospectively to understand or shed light on Coetzee's earlier fiction. However, even if Coetzee's Australian fiction has moved from an "overt concern with the politics of difference and the problem of inhabiting a radically intercultural society in South Africa, to focus on the different, though related, moral debate over what it means to live in a cultural space dominated by the sceptical, rational, and egalitarian side of post-Enlightenment political culture" (Hayes 223), literary critics have by no means been willing to entirely dismantle the conceptual apparatus that structured earlier readings of Coetzee's work.

Understanding or explaining Coetzee in political terms continue to persist: one need only look to Patrick Hayes's 2010 study, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* that makes a claim

for Coetzee as a political writer through his relationship with the novel form, especially his appropriation of Beckett's comic prose style (11). Hayes notes that Coetzee's approach suggests "that there may be other ways of imagining the political, ways that consist of holding open, rather than perfecting or closing down, different ideas of what constitutes a good community, to which his writing is indeed amenable" (9). Hayes interest in widening the scope of "the political" is not unrelated to my definitive aim of redefining the political through the theoretics of Adorno.¹¹

Certainly critics have been pointing us in the direction of Adorno to address Coetzee's relationship with the political, although never in a systematic or fully-embodied way. In the 1980s, Neil Lazarus, in his article "Modernism and Modernity: T. W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature", establishes a broad connection between white South African writing and Adorno, yet leaves the specific connection between Coetzee and Adorno largely untouched and underdeveloped. Lazarus draws parallels between European modernism and South African white writing through the figure of Adorno owing to the fact that Adorno's

¹¹ Attridge's reading in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004) argues for Coetzee's literature as an act of reading that performs the ethical. Attridge, in this definitive work for Coetzee studies, asserts "'the literary work as an event' in which the reader 'brings the work into being, differently each time, in a singular performance of the work'" (Head 102). Attridge acknowledges that "historical and contextual forces operate on authors and readers" but he insists that the very complexity of the text undermines the "form of instrumental reading that would appropriate Coetzee as a 'South African novelist', judged in terms of the 'adequacy' of his responses to changing political circumstances" (Head 103). In this sense Attridge's response is unique – taking a middle ground – conceding that Coetzee is a function of his times, but beyond the superficial rendering of event emblematic of much of the writings of his South African writer-activist contemporaries. See footnote 71 for Coetzee's own comments on his typecasting as a South African novelist by the (global) publishing industry.

theory of aesthetics was sensitive to the “question of writing in extremity” (135). Lazarus asserts that both forms of modernism are characterized by an “unflinching truthfulness” (139) in rendering the “existence of domination and violence through their internal ruptures and contradictions” (139).¹² Crucially Lazarus’s definition of oppositional white writing includes the disparate committed modernisms of Coetzee, Gordimer, and Breytenbach, which he sets up against the politically “neutralis[ed]” (135) white writing of Athol Fugard and Alan Paton. Jayne Poyner’s essay “Writing Under Pressure” that makes reference to aesthetic production under apartheid while investigating the state of post-1994 South African literature, suggesting that the work of contemporary South African writers is defined by questions of “ethico-political responsibility” (103) and South Africa’s past, briefly appeals to Adorno to argue that Coetzee’s perceived “nonposition” during apartheid be read as a form of engagement. Quoting Adorno’s “Commitment” essay, Poyner declares that the understanding of committed literature under apartheid can be extended by defining it through Adorno as “working at the level of ‘fundamental attitudes’ rather than didacticism (78)” (“Writing” 105).¹³ An article, “From the Standpoint of Redemption”, published by Mike Marais in 2008 is another example of

¹² This is not to say that Lazarus is in complete agreement with Adorno – for example, he finds Adorno’s interpretation of history essentialist, and warns that Adorno’s scorn of “committed literature” is overstated.

¹³ Poyner also notes, “Attridge’s reading [in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*] of the estranging text is not unlike Theodor Adorno’s concept of literary commitment, crucially distinguished by Adorno’s concern for politics rather than simply ethics (Adorno, ‘Commitment’)” (*J.M. Coetzee* 10).

an attempt to link Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* to Coetzee.¹⁴ Most recently, Elleke Boehmer, Katy Iddiols, and Robert Eaglestone have connected the impermeable hermeneutic core of Coetzee's work as embodying the quality Adorno and Derrida lauded as quintessential to the artwork, fostering "thinking and responses" (*J.M. Coetzee* 3).

However, whereas Coetzee's reputation as a political writer was, and is, a point of relevance to critics, Karapanou's position in the literary world is far more precarious. Greek academia has largely neglected Karapanou's work. This may be attributed to the fact that, in Greece, the critical industry is heavily male-dominated, and was certainly so in the 1970s when Karapanou began her career. Furthermore, Greek literary scholarship is characterised by a level of conservatism that finds Karapanou's eccentric novelistic style alienating. This may seem surprising considering that the poetic face of Greece, from at least the 1920s, is both avant-garde and modernist, with some of Greece's preeminent poets, such as George Seferis (1900 – 1971), self-consciously modelling their writing on the modernism of T.S. Eliot, and others, like Nikos Engonopoulos (1907 – 1985), clearly mimicking surrealism and French symbolism. Yet, stylistic experimentation was, and continues to be, more pervasive in poetry than in the novel form, and Margarita Karapanou's novels, described as "broken narratives, concatenations of vignettes that parodize

¹⁴ Mike Marais's *Secretary of the Invisible* (2009) contains a variation of this article.

rather than respect the conventions of narrativity itself" (Faubion, *Modern* 191)

unsettled traditionally-minded Greek academics. James Faubion states,

[Karapanou] is among the first voices of the generation made in the crucible of the junta and in the creative catastrophe of its fall. Greece's critical establishment is not necessarily 'reactionary'; but it is older and has itself been made in the crucible of older catastrophes: the Asia Minor Disaster; the Second World War; the Civil War...Greece's critical establishment, tutored on former catastrophes, has yet to appreciate Karapanou's critique of classicism, which at once condemns obscenity and celebrates it (195–6).

Nick Germanacos, Karapanou's English translator, places a more sinister twist on the Greek critics' coolness towards Karapanou as owing to a "congenital envy that pervades the small and incestuous literary circle of Athens" (Plum "I") that continues to the present day. He adds, "The fact that on her first attempt she had published a book in the US, which then went on to publication in France and other countries, excited the resentment of most of her peers and critics" (Plum "I").

Internationally, Karapanou's novels have fared better, with a recent resurgence in interest after her death in 2008,¹⁵ especially considering the relative marginality of Modern Greek literature on the world stage. Neither postcolonial (in the traditional sense)¹⁶ nor metropolitan – neither fish nor fowl – it waits in the

¹⁵ The American publisher Clockroot reissued Karapanou's *Kassandra* in 2009. In the same year they released her newly translated *Rien ne va plus*. Clockroot published her novel *The Sleepwalker* in English in 2010.

¹⁶ Greece's experience of Ottoman rule is distinct from the colonisation of Africa and parts of Asia, which were clearly constructed as civilising missions. The Ottoman Empire functioned as an economic construct, but also largely before the conception of the nation-state that is so fundamental an ideological feature of the European colonial powers. However, Michael Herzfeld, the esteemed social anthropologist, has applied the term "crypto-colonialism" to modern Greece, suggesting that although "nominally independent...that independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence" (901). Interestingly though, Herzfeld reads Greece as a crypto-colony not because of its history with the Ottomans, but through the foreign policy of twentieth-century

margins of the Anglophone literary establishment. In addition, much like the literature of many other European countries, the dissemination of texts has been marred by limited English translations and the marketing demands of an international market that feed into preconceived notions of Greece, either linked to antiquarian images, populated by Olympian Gods, or a more contemporary, yet equally stereotypical vision of Zorba figures embodying raw Mediterranean zest and vitality. Angela Dimitraki, the Greek writer, reiterates, “[Karapanou] liberated a whole generation of writers who don’t feel compelled to write about ‘that stuff,’ whatever counts as quintessential Greekness...despite pressure from the international literary scene on all Greek writers to write and sell an identity of cultural difference that can be marketed as such” (Plum “I”).

Interestingly, whereas certain international literary critics have been keen to disassociate Karapanou’s *Kassandra* from political writing,¹⁷ others place it clearly within its ambit. Germanacos sees the reluctance of critics to integrate Karapanou as linked to the “insistence of Greek writers during the seven years of the junta and in the years following it on politicized if not political writing” (Plum “I”). He declares, “Margarita had no interest whatsoever in writing like that” (Plum “I”). Faubion emphasises the cathartic subjective value of Karapanou’s work, rather than its

Western powers. See his journal article “The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism” for an extended discussion of the concept.

¹⁷ When discussing writing under the junta many literary critics fixate on Seferis’s involvement, late as it was (1969), that ultimately prompted the famous *Eighteen Texts* (1970), a provocative collection of politically-conscious texts by established Greek writers.

political value (*Modern* 193). However, Roderick Beaton asserts that Karapanou's novel "owes much to the recent experience of censorship and the 'usurped authority' of the Colonels" (*Introduction* 284), whereas Karen van Dyck's groundbreaking study *Kassandra and the Censors* (1998) clearly reads *Kassandra* as a complex response to the gendered discourse of the junta. For Van Dyck, Karapanou "offers the study of censorship a gendered perspective" (8). She asserts that the linguistic play – the stilted non-sequiturs, free-floating letters, truncated words – that pervade *Kassandra* is a reaction to the patriarchy of the junta, which embodied an obsession with linguistic literality and fixed meanings.

However, Van Dyck's emphasis on gender in the novel potentially short-circuits or obscures other critiques of the junta's politics – particularly their appropriation of classical history, or the manipulation of the education system, to serve a particular nationalist agenda. Furthermore, her use of Lyotard's theory of paralogy to "unsettle" reductive critical approaches to aesthetic production under the junta in terms of "those who were silent versus those who were not, those who wrote engaged poetry versus those who did not" (31) has the potential to enervate the political energies of the work, as she herself notes. Van Dyck sees Karapanou's work as straddling the boundary between engaged literature, with staid stylistics, and a politicised literature characterised by stylistic innovation, and although Lyotard "provides a seductive theory of evasion, the question of how this might translate into anything but political quietism is left unelaborated" (31). Tellingly, Van Dyck refers to Adorno's "Commitment" essay in a brief footnote to suggest him as a

theorist who may be useful in approaching the commonalities between “authoritarian, disinterested, and engaged writing” and illustrating how “writing in the name of resistance [may be] collusive with the discourses it challenges” (38). She states that Adorno “raises a similar set of questions in regard to the oppositional art of Sartre and Brecht” (38), who in the effort of communicating their particular messages, existentialism and Marxism respectively, undermine the complexity and nuance of the artwork.

Unlike Coetzee and Karapanou, Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* is much more firmly located in its historical moment. Is academia then any less conflicted about his work? Unlike much South Asian literature, Sri Lankan literature has been described as an “emergent canon of writing...yet to find settlement in the field of postcolonial studies” (Salgado 9). There are complex historical reasons attached to this categorical and epistemic instability, with the foremost being that the liberation from British colonialism in 1948 (which was largely implicated in the Indian struggle) has largely been obscured by the ethnic factionalism that eventually escalated into the protracted and bloody civil war that began in 1983. Sri Lankan literature, both that written in the local languages – Sinhalese and Tamil – and that written in English, rotates around the barbed focal point of the civil war. Similarly, literary scholars in Sri Lanka (and, up to a certain degree, internationally) has often engaged with Sri Lankan literature in terms of the author’s ethnicity and political affiliations, or the political engagement of the text itself. Chelva Kanaganayakam explicitly states that “[L]iterary criticism in Sri Lanka is determined by personal biases and subjective

attitudes, the result could well be the creation of a canon that has neither the energy nor the complexity to hold its own against the literature of other postcolonial nations" (64). He also states, "This again is hardly surprising in a country where the political violence has been of such magnitude that it is often difficult, even for the most liberal academics, to achieve the kind of objectivity that comes naturally when dealing with literature that is insistently apolitical" (57).

Certainly Ondaatje's work, particularly the texts based in Sri Lanka – *Running in the Family* (1983) and *Anil's Ghost*, has been found wanting by Sri Lankan critics, especially those adopting a nativist approach, in which Western styles and influences, are read with a puritan distaste as a loss of indigenous culture (Salgado 34). Critics, such as Qadri Ismail, emphatically assert that the works do not adequately deal with the country's complicated identitarian politics, and actively promote a pro-Sinhala stance. Furthermore, local Sri Lankan criticism fixates on Ondaatje's lack of realist representationalism,¹⁸ a form of writing that more easily communicates specific ideological concepts (Salgado 37).

Certain international critics have been no less harsh, feeling that Ondaatje does not draw proper attention to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. In the case of *Anil's Ghost* the violence and terror of the civil war is seen as an arbitrary backdrop to the interpersonal relationships and romances of the lead characters. Ondaatje has also been accused of not adequately addressing the historical reasons behind the civil

¹⁸ A style associated some of the major authors associated with writing in English.

war, and thereby evacuating the conflict of its legitimacy, significance or meaning (LeClair). Tom LeClair's most cutting criticism is that Ondaatje's "failure to adopt a political position upon the civil war results...in a bland and apolitical humanism." However, among his various detractors, a number of critics have been sensitive to Ondaatje's interest in communicating the nuances of identity politics. Cook states that *Anil's Ghost's* value lies in the way that Ondaatje "problematizes notions of either individual or national identity as being fixed and immutable, adopting instead a perspective that considers such boundaries as both flexible and permeable" (7).

More recently, studies, no doubt influenced by a current global climate increasingly concerned with ethnically and religiously motivated terrorism, internecine wars, and riots under a fragile EU, turn to *Anil's Ghost* to suggest a way of negotiating violence and terror. For example, Robert Young's article "Terror Effects" in *Terror and the Postcolonial* (2010) posits the topicality of the novel, and its attempt to negotiate violence through the literary. Young argues that *Anil's Ghost* shows how individuals "subjected to terror learn how to resist the terror effect, challenging its affect through a radically reimagined voyage into the ethical, psychic, and political space of androgyny, non-violence, and the post-human" (326). Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* (2007) offers a different interpretation through one of the most innovative readings of *Anil's Ghost*. He views the various discourses and counter-discourses of international human rights law as being played out in complex ways in the *Bildungsroman* form (a form concerned with the integration and development of human subject), of which *Anil's Ghost* is a type of postcolonial

manifestation. Slaughter acknowledges that the novel's questioning of institutionalised Westernised "narratives" of human rights have little bearing in a country with a compromised civic sphere, and where the State (traditionally the purveyor and protector of human rights) is an active participant in violence. The complicated narratives of the civic sphere (and indeed, alternative imagined communities) are submerged by the ethno-nationalist metanarrative of the State, (neither a democratic nor legitimate entity).

Importantly, Adorno meditates on the implications of the charged link between identity and violence. For Adorno the politics of "pure identity" – the reduction of the individual to a mere stereotype – propels entire societies headlong towards the ultimate stop point of death. In this way, Adorno and Ondaatje see eye to eye: both authors consistently maintain the integrity of the individual, and by extension, the innate integrity of the text itself to uphold an intellectual complexity that transcends social realism, stereotype, and one-dimensional political rhetoric.

As has become clear, past and contemporary criticism questions and interrogates, in varying degrees of intensity, the writing of Ondaatje, Coetzee, and Karapanou in relation to their individual socio-political contexts. Of course, the question of artistic commitment, of how artists engage with politics, will undoubtedly persist for as long as socio-political conflict or upheaval is a feature of human societies.¹⁹ But this thesis goes one step further in investigating texts

¹⁹ See footnote 35 for a historical account of the category of commitment.

constructed without an obvious or ostensible political intent or aim. The thesis is concerned with what happens when the writer is not writing “committed literature” in the way that literary criticism or the general populace expects, and questions if this too is a form of political writing, and, if so, what can we say about it? The political alignment of individual authors with a particular party or ideological position is irrelevant: I am not looking for instances of an author showing that they are card-holding members of the Communist Party or African National Congress. In fact, as Stanley Fish states, “[Political i]ntentionalism is not an issue; it is not a theoretically interesting question because the only question is in what places will you look for evidence of it, and that question is not a theoretical one” (128), but rather how these individual authors (taciturn in relation to their political commitments) respond and engage with the political climate from which their work emerges in ways that develop or expand the definition or category of commitment to include texts that seem to be devoid of political or historical content.

In other words, this thesis is interested in when authors speak “politically, not politics”. In her address to the Women’s Democratic Club in Washington in 1968, Melina Mercouri – the Greek cultural activist – demanded that the world assist Greece against the junta of the Colonels. In her address on the role of the artist and politics, she commented, “I am here to talk politically. Politically, not politics. I am not a politician. Politicians are more dangerous than artists and often funnier” (377–378). Mercouri’s speaking “politically, not politics” distinguishes between a sophisticated engagement with a political situation or event, and the kowtowing to a

specific party or ideological line. I argue that speaking “politically, not politics” means being for equality, for the sanctity of the individual, but against ideology, against a party line, against the collective, against the inability to think critically. All of which Adorno would actively espouse. Speaking “politically, not politics” is about the “necessity of the intellectual, however defined, to remain true to his task of what Julien Benda has called ‘the conscience of humanity’” (Schalk 27), but doing this in a way that the text is actively distanced from the genre of propaganda and facile political flattening. As Raymond Williams duly notes, Adorno’s critique and interrogation of commitment is “convincing” (202) in this sense:

“commitment...remains politically polyvalent so long as it not reduced to propaganda” (Adorno, “Commitment” 178).

Placing Adorno in relation to each of the texts, feeds into the overall project of the Frankfurt School – the constant updating and revising of philosophy to ensure that its topicality, force, and valency are not lost. The Frankfurt School rails against the ossification, the petrification, of thought or hermeneutic tools. Therefore, to appropriate and revise Adorno’s thought, showing how it may “work” for literature, is an endeavour no doubt surprisingly amenable to explicating the political nuances inherent to the texts of Karapanou, Coetzee, and Ondaatje. This is not to say that Adornian concepts can simply be “copy-pasted” onto literature; Adorno reminds us time and time again of the enigmatic character of both autonomous literature and philosophy: the fact that within artworks there is always an element (which may be

understood as Adorno's infamous "truth content"²⁰) that resists interpretation. Much in the same way that Adorno's work cannot be "systematically conceptualised without remainder,...[cannot be] completely grasped by methodically reconstructing lines of argument" (Hohendahl, *Fleeting* 152), similarly autonomous works of art remain committed to their own enigmaticalness, to an aporia or contradiction that cannot be simply explained away or reconciled. Each of the thesis's chosen literary works are radical in their ambiguity, their irreconcilability, their capacity to be read in complex and diverse ways – only one of which is politically and historically.

Moreover, within this desire to show these versions of the literary as political, we are confronted by the fact that each of the literary works could have easily accommodated an Adornian concept other than the one I applied to it. In the first chapter I decided to investigate how Adorno's concept of commitment, a commitment that is acutely sceptical of revolutionary praxis, is applicable to Coetzee's version of politics. However, Coetzee's literary texts that emerge from apartheid South Africa that was fanatically obsessed with racial categories could have effortlessly sustained an analysis through the concept of the non-identical (broadly speaking a respect for the concept of individual heterogeneity), which I rigorously applied to my chapter on Ondaatje and his engagement with Sri Lanka's identitarian war. Conversely, Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* could have been understood through an aversion to traditional readings of commitment. What I am hoping to

²⁰ An important concept in this thesis. See pages 173–185.

emphasise here is the interchangeability of the Adornian concepts with the various authors; the fact that Adorno can coherently address the same question – how are these authors political? – in different ways for different authors, but still offer a refreshing and illuminatory take on what constitutes the political. Yet, in applying specific Adornian concepts to these individual authors (commitment and silence to Coetzee; truth content to Karapanou; non-identity to Ondaatje), there was the sense that the chosen concept more coherently addressed what critics had fixated on in relation to each individual author, or what the text seemed more definitively to insist upon. Shutting down persistent misinterpretations of these authors as apolitical and superfluous, inversely correlated with opening them up to readings that were nuanced and sophisticated, supported by the possibilities inherent to Adorno's thought.

Eating Lunch after Auschwitz: Adorno's Reception

In his Nobel Lecture on the value of literature, Joseph Brodsky, like a number of other recipients of the Prize, makes mention of Adorno. Brodsky in an attempt to emphasise the need for the continuity of culture in the face of human suffering, answers Adorno's question "How can one write music after Auschwitz?" (293), with the tongue-in-cheek quip by the American poet, Mark Strand, "And how can you eat lunch?" (294). Strand's facetious joke, and Brodsky's willingness to cite it, caused a

furore among critics – Susan Gubar and Irving Feldman are worth citing here²¹ – who felt that interrogating the presence of the Holocaust in twentieth-century art is by no means a laughing matter. However, to my thinking, Strand’s quip does not necessarily express a refusal to investigate the complexity of representing suffering, but rather a dismissal of the very figure of Adorno himself, a figure whose question is seen as pompous and self-aggrandising, rather than an uncomfortable, probing truth. Underlying Strand’s quip is the somewhat spiteful suggestion that Adorno is open to ridicule. And, indeed, Strand is, by no means, alone – there are a number of critics (particularly Anglophone critics) who have a fraught relationship with Adorno’s work, (wrongly) accusing him of elitism, deliberate obfuscation, and wildly misreading modern culture.²² His critical reception is far from straightforward, and, as I intend to show, his value for literature has not been fully exploited.

This uneven critical response within the English-speaking world may partly be related to Adorno’s difficult publication history and dissemination. Adorno’s permanent return to Germany from America in 1949 was marked by a series of wild successes: his *Minima Moralia* (1951) sold so exceedingly well that through it “Adorno became virtually a popular author” (Goehr viii). Just five years before his death, the paperback edition of *Prisms* (1955) “was printed with a run of 25, 000

²¹ See Irving Feldman’s poem “Outrage Is Anointed by Levity, or Two Laureates A-lunching” in his *Collected Poems*, and Susan Gubar’s *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*.

²² Peter Uwe Hohendahl’s *Prismatic Thought* and Martin Jay’s “Adorno in America” offer full exegeses on this point.

copies, while *Interventions* appeared with an initial run of 18,000 copies; by 1969 the former was in its third edition and the latter had 33,000 copies" (Goehr viii).

German university students held Adorno in great esteem, lauding him as a revolutionary (although they were disappointed by his unwillingness to take up their cause in 1968 – 1969 riots²³). Furthermore, Adorno was very involved in radio and television broadcasts, not to mention public lectures, feeding into an image of Adorno as a public intellectual in Germany. (In fact, in his radio broadcasts Adorno was very aware of his lay audience and tailored his work in such a way as to make it as comprehensible as possible.) However, inverse to his cult-like status in post-war Germany, Adorno was a rather obscure figure in the Anglophone world up until the late 1960s. According to Martin Jay, "The only translation of his writings on cultural themes then available was *Prisms*, which a small British publisher had brought out in 1967 and failed to distribute in America. Not a single philosophical work was accessible to readers unable to take on the challenge of Adorno's formidable German" ("Adorno" 158). Adorno's keystone texts, such as *Aesthetic Theory* (translated by Christian Lenhardt), did not become available in English until 1984, almost 15 years after its publication in German. Undoubtedly the interest in translating Adorno (belated as it may have been) is indebted to the efforts of academics versed in German who alerted or reminded their Anglophone colleagues of Adorno's presence: the publication of an essay entitled "Adorno: or, Historical

²³ See footnote 32.

Tropes" by Fredric Jameson in the journal *Salmagundi* appeared in the same year, 1967, as George Steiner's critically acclaimed *Language and Silence* that suggested the omission of Adorno from the Anglo-American critical scene (and certainly within the American New Left) to be an absolute travesty (Jay, "Adorno" 167). In fact, from 1967 onwards, and especially following Adorno's sudden death in 1969, the number of evaluations and studies of Adorno's work grew. This, coupled with the Anglophone journal *Telos*'s decision to commit itself to the dissemination of theory of a decidedly Marxist slant, did much to embed Adorno in the Anglophone critical landscape (Jay, "Adorno" 168–9). The 1980s interest in poststructuralism gave Adorno a further airing (Jay "Adorno" 168), but it was not until the 1990s when translations (or updated translations) of some of Adorno's key works (such as Robert Hullot-Kentor's excellent translation of *Aesthetic Theory* that came to trump the Lenhardt translation) that Adorno became available to a much wider audience, and secured him a place in the Anglophone critical establishment.

Despite a hostility (or at least, dismissiveness) towards Adorno, which has impacted on the use of his work for literature, there is no doubt that he has been acknowledged by major critics within British and American academia, who recognise his importance as an individual theorist and philosopher beyond the context of the Frankfurt School. Some studies are decidedly Marxist in character (Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson come to mind); others markedly philosophical (Simon Jarvis, Gillian Rose, and Robert Hullot-Kentor are key figures here) or historically-located (Martin Jay). Studies, such as *Adorno and Literature* (2006), a

collection of essays edited by David Cunningham, concerned with how Adorno may be applied to various literary forms, questions, and texts are a relatively new phenomenon and have been somewhat limited in their dissemination.

Rather than trying to align Adorno with an ideological perspective or brand of philosophy (which could potentially become an entire thesis in itself)²⁴ I take individual concepts – the non-identical, truth content, the particular – from Adorno’s work and use them in relation to specific literary texts that, as mentioned earlier, appear estranged from the fraught political situations of racial segregation, war, or dictatorship from which they emerge. In their various ways these complicated Adornian concepts unlock a liberatory potential from the text, showing it to function beyond its explicit and manifest content, much in the same way that Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) reads the dream’s manifest symbols through the elusive associative links at play in the mind’s unconscious to unlock a meaning not initially obvious. Through Adorno the text that appears to be blind to politics shows itself to harbour a complex set of social and historical factors charged with a political energy.

Instead of simply replicating Adorno’s essays on literature, which despite their multiple merits pose specific problems for academic scholars – the lack of a

²⁴ Individual literary critics have appropriated Adorno for their own political or ideological agendas. Eagleton and Jameson have created important studies on Adorno, but paint Adorno as the quintessential Marxist, which he blatantly is not. In particular Jameson’s reading of Adorno in *Marxism and Form* (1971) and *Late Marxism* (1990) problematically reduces Adorno’s aesthetic vision by conflating modernism and postmodernism.

straightforward or systematic methodology,²⁵ highly subjective Eurocentric interests, an uninterest in readings of definitive authorities (as previously noted) – what is more appropriate is to take what is useful from Adorno’s work to study specific texts, and thereby push Adorno into new conceptual territory. Certainly, an Adornian analysis of a Beckettian-type text seems perfectly logical given Adorno’s admiration for Beckett’s modernist aesthetics, but it is by no means surprising. What *is* surprising is thinking about a literary text written under the Greek military dictatorship in Adornian terms; reading Karapanou’s *Kassandra* in terms of its truth content – how history is imbedded within the text and points in the direction of a utopian moment that eludes full realisation. The internal personal monologue of the child Kassandra, her meditation on transsexuals, cross-dressing, and strict gender binaries speaks to a societal discomfort with the patriarchal gender politics of the Greek military junta. Contained in this discomfort is the longing for a world that is otherwise.²⁶ In short, my thesis intends to be a two way process asking: “What can Adorno’s concepts give to certain literary texts?”, and reciprocally, “What can those texts give to our traditional understanding of Adorno and his applicability?” This thesis is an act of rethinking the literary in Adornian terms, and rethinking Adorno through the literary.

²⁵ The complexity of an immanent interpretative approach and the manner in which it should be applied is never adequately explained by Adorno. However, in the Chapter 1 I show that this interpretative approach can be used effectively for literary analysis. See footnote 6 and pages 79–81.

²⁶ Van Dyck in *Kassandra and the Censors* makes a similar point suggesting that the novel’s subversion of traditional gender identities parodies the rigidity of gender roles propagated by the junta, and points to a non-prescriptive vision of society.

In this sense, the aims of my thesis are not entirely disconnected from Cunningham's collection *Adorno and Literature* (2006), which contains essays on literature focused on relating Adorno to authors with which he is not traditionally associated – the poetry of Wordsworth, and the novels of V.S. Naipaul, among others. This is done by looking at Adorno's own readings of literary works, and his thought on a more general, grander scale. *Adorno and Literature* is revolutionary, for (as mentioned earlier) when we ordinarily think (if we think of it at all) of Adorno's applicability to literature, he is almost always placed in relation to the usual suspects: post-Holocaust literature, high European art, and modernism. However, my project differs from Cunningham's in that it takes aspects of Adorno's thought that are useful and places them in relation to specific texts that emerge from situations of political extremity to show that despite various misconceptions they actually have political value. Cunningham certainly sees that Adorno acknowledges that "art and literature must be taken..., in all their aspects, to be *essentially* historical" (3). He notes that texts are laden with a truth content, "generated, not by authorial intention alone, but by the artwork's own singular configuration of its materials; materials which have forms of historical experience 'sedimented' in them" (Cunningham 3), but he does not realise that engaging with the innate historicity of texts allows access to their political complexity and emancipatory potential.

Isobel Armstrong's *Radical Aesthetics* (2000) also offers a conceptual springboard to my project. Part of a wider trend within literary studies placing

emphasis on the aesthetic as an area of study, Armstrong's book is an attempt to politicise the "aesthetic". Although Derek Attridge in his essay "A Return to Form?" understands Armstrong's use of the term as somewhat interchangeable with "form" (564), very much in line with other literary critics, such as George Levine, Armstrong's definition appears wider, more encompassing. She states, drawing on Eagleton, "It is viscous enough as a concept already: the process of creation, the art object, the experience of its reception, the theorising of it as a concept and praxis – all these are comprehended in the term aesthetic" (30). Armstrong asserts that over time the "concept of the aesthetic has been steadily emptied of content" (2). She asserts the need to ultimately rethink the concept of the aesthetic, not simply reconfiguring the nineteenth century idealist aesthetic "stemming from Kant and Hegel" (2), but rethinking "deconstructive gestures of exposure that fail to address the democratic and radical potential of aesthetic discourse. These [deconstructive] strategies effectively undermine aesthetic discourse but refuse to remake it" (2). The overall "result is culturally impoverishing and politically disabling" (2).

Armstrong thereby enlists a number of theorists to "renew aesthetic discourse" (3), of whom Adorno is one. Adorno is Armstrong's perfect candidate for re-imbuing the aesthetic with its "emancipatory possibility" (178), owing to the fact that unlike other theorists who use the conceptual apparatus of traditional aesthetic philosophy but disown the political aspects of the aesthetics, Adorno actively connects the two by understanding the aesthetic as a testament to suffering, an accumulation and imbedding of history (178). The political and the historical inhere

within the “context of aesthetic experience” (2). However, where Armstrong’s reading lacks a clear case study that would put her interpretation into action, each individual chapter of my thesis offers an example of the way that the political potential of the individual artwork may be unleashed through Adorno.

Acknowledging that it is formal properties that make the artwork an artwork, I look towards the language and narrative construction of the chosen literary texts in order to engage with the political substance of the text. For example, looking at the stutter and garbled speech of Karapanou’s child narrator offers us an instance where form intersects with the political. The narrator’s non-sequiturs and verbal tics act as a disruptive and destabilising counter-force to the junta’s highly literal use of language as a means of communicating domination, and feed into Adorno’s reading of language as something permeated by historical forces and events, a point explicated in a number of his works ranging from the early “Theses on the Language of the Philosopher” (circa 1930) to his later lectures in *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (1965). However, it is important to note that I am cautious of the notion that Adorno’s conception of the aesthetic should be understood in purely formalist terms. Adorno by no means pits form over content in his engagement with the artwork, as becomes apparent in the “Commitment” essay where he finds Brecht’s reduction of the artwork to pure form just as problematic as Jean Paul Sartre’s plays which are understood as the epitome of pure content (180). In the “Commitment” essay (which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter) Adorno makes it clear that the two, like much else in his conceptual universe, must be looked at

dialectically. Similarly, Derek Attridge in an article in George Levine's *Aesthetics and Ideology* (1994) refuses to accept the idea of the aesthetic in terms of a facile binary of form and content. He states, "[T]he opposition of form and content, which sets formal properties apart from any connection the work has to ethical, historical, and social issues, produces, a highly reductive operation of these properties" (245).

This meditation on form and content makes an appearance in **Chapter One** of the thesis in my discussion of the committed artwork. However, at the core of this chapter is Adorno's concept of commitment. This concept comes to the fore strongly in *Aesthetic Theory* and *Notes to Literature* and theoretically underpins and frames my entire thesis. For Adorno the committed artwork is not an investigation of the world with scope for critical analysis on the part of the individual, but a simplistic one-dimensional judgement of the world. I intend to show that Adorno believes that the even works that manifestly appear to be silent to politics harbour a political content. I place this concept in relation to Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*. Through Adorno the political aspect of this text – a text deliberately constructed by Coetzee to be discursively ambiguous – becomes apparent. I then move from the "silence" of this Adornian version of commitment to exploring the political valency of the socio-historical silence of Coetzee's characters in the next chapter.

Chapter Two shows that by drawing on Adorno's *Prisms* (1955), *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (1965) and "Theses on the Language of the Philosopher" (circa 1930), Adorno's understanding of language as saturated by historical and material forces allows for a reading of the emancipatory potential of silence. This chapter will

set Adorno's conception of silence against Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974) and *Foe* (1986) to show how certain texts may benefit from Adorno's formulation. Coetzee's use of silence is highly contested, with critics like Benita Parry feeling that it plays into "exclusionary colonialist practices" (151) both on a structural and textual level, whereas critics such as Derek Attridge, David Attwell and Gayatri Spivak (among others) refute such a claim. I then turn in the next chapter to the Adornian concept of truth content – showing how texts manifestly "silent" to politics may in fact be harbouring a political content.

In **Chapter Three** I show that for Adorno artworks are not "merely decorative or entertaining", but have a truth content (Jarvis 12). For Adorno, truth content – at the centre of *Aesthetic Theory* – does not mean that the text explicitly expounds upon a specific historical moment or event, but rather relates to how history is intrinsically embedded within the text. Owing to this historical authenticity, the text may inadvertently or unconsciously express a political viewpoint or perspective quite distinct from the author's explicit intention, or the text's manifest content, both of which may appear politically indifferent. I argue that Karapanou's *Kassandra and the Wolf* offers an example of writing that complicates our understanding of what constitutes political literature. I suggest that Karapanou's "apolitical" novel's fixation with gender and wordplay point to the text's underlying truth content that is deeply conscious of the political situation of the military junta. Notably, truth content, enigmatic and resistant to interpretation in character (thereby embodying

the ideals and impulses of Adorno's non-identical), has not been used to explore seemingly ahistorical or apolitical texts.

Chapter Four asserts that Adorno's category of the non-identical (discussed in *Negative Dialectics*) is relevant to texts that emerge from situations defined by sectarian politics. Adorno's non-identical counterpoints "pure identity" – totalising concepts or categories that subsume difference and heterogeneity. For Adorno, genocide is the logical culmination point of pure identity, as the individual is conflated (via a dire lack of critical thinking) with ethnic essentialisms. Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* in its multifaceted and dynamic representation and analysis of individual identity within a complicated situation of identitarian politics undermines totalising narratives of nationality, ethnicity, and gender, to speak coherently to Adorno's construction of non-identity. The rough symmetry between Ondaatje's and Adorno's visions suggests that the critique by literary critics of Ondaatje as pro-Sinhala or apolitical is entirely undeserved, and fails to observe the richness of Ondaatje's rendering of human identity in the face of suffering.

In the **Conclusion** I note that key themes and ideas discussed in the thesis could have significant implications for the worlds of postcolonial literary criticism and the study of aesthetics. Noting that Adorno is hardly used in postcolonial literary studies, even after Asha Varadharajan's ground-breaking text, *Exotic Parodies* (1995), I suggest that Adorno's theory, particularly the concept of enigmaticalness, can be used as a means of maintaining the conceptual integrity of the postcolonial (aesthetic) object against the destructive and reductive forces of identity thinking. In

the aesthetic realm, I assert that Adorno's interrogation of the subject/object dichotomy, complicated by an intractable truth content, allows for a dialectical thinking that recalibrates and energises methods or forms of aesthetic interpretation via the subject.

Certainly, Adorno, in his analysis of culture, both as a redemptive force bathed in a messianic light but also as the great betrayer of humanity (high culture was complicit in the Holocaust), offers a set of conceptual and theoretical tools to fulfil (however tenuously) the imperative that he demands of the modern individual – that “[p]erspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal[ing] it to be with its rifts and crevices”, even when the very act of critical thinking is “also the utterly impossible thing” (*Minima* 247). Adorno impels us to gain new and different literary perspectives of the “damaged life”, mired as we are in the muddy waters of the administered world. Adorno “turn[s] toward art as a kind of dynamic refuge from formal politics, invoking specific aesthetic energies – negative, suspensive, dedicated to difficulty – to reorient moral and political thought” (Anderson 436–7). It is with this in mind that we turn to the first chapter of this thesis.

**“Trying to Understand *Endgame* Coetzee”: Constructing an Alternative View of
Political Commitment**

‘A picture of myself!’ he repeated, in derision. ‘Wissen Sie, gnädige Frau, that is a Kunstwerk, a work of art. It is a work of art, it is a picture of nothing, of absolutely nothing. It has nothing to do with anything but itself, it has no relation with the everyday world of this and other, there is no connection between them, absolutely none, they are two different and distinct planes of existence, and to translate one into the other is worse than foolish, it is a darkening of all counsel, a making confusion everywhere. Do you see, you must not confuse the relative work of action, with the absolute world of art. That you must not do.’

‘That is quite true,’ cried Gudrun, let loose in a sort of rhapsody. ‘The two things are quite and permanently apart, they have nothing to do with one another. I and my art, they have nothing to do with each other. My art stands in another world, I am in this world.’

— D.H. Lawrence *Sons and Lovers* 430–431

Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work, it is enough that it be politically correct. The more fists and spears and guns, the better.

— Albie Sachs “Preparing” 239

In his 1989 paper “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”, developed for an ANC in-house seminar on culture, the esteemed anti-apartheid political activist Albie Sachs discusses the role of the arts in post-apartheid South Africa. Sachs makes a

number of points that emphasise the need for culture to draw away from being a mere functionary of political agenda. He states, rather controversially, of the ANC – “our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle” (239). Even more surprisingly, he places a time frame on this injunction, saying that the ANC should refrain from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle for at least five years (239). Interestingly, Sachs’s injunction is vastly different from the position that he adopted during the apartheid struggle itself in which he felt that art needed to function in the service of freedom and liberation. The reasons for Sachs’s shift are wide-ranging and complex. Firstly, he asserts that “artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work, it is enough that it be politically correct” (239). In other words: the production of committed literature undermines the quality of the work. Secondly, he argues that there is no place for intimate human moments when the themes of the artwork are inevitably “narrowed” to a range of political issues. He laments the fact that committed art completely shuts out “ambiguity and contradiction” (240). He notes, “In the case of a real instrument of struggle, there is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose” (240). For Sachs the impoverishment of culture in this way has the effect of “impoverish[ing] the struggle itself” (241). He is adamant that “[c]ulture is not something separate from the general struggle, an artifact that is brought in from time to time to mobilize the people or else to prove to the world that after all we are civilized” (241) but a vital aspect of the fabric of a new nation.

Sachs's complaints echo earlier complaints made by various writers during the apartheid period. For example, Njabulo Ndebele, the literary critic and author, complains of apartheid protest literature, "Subtlety is deliberately unintended. What is intended is spectacular demonstration *at all costs*. What matters is what is seen. Thinking is secondary to seeing. Subtlety is secondary to obviousness" (my italics, 147). J.M. Coetzee, in his interviews with David Attwell, makes related statements of the predicament of the South African writer. He laments the impossibility of the South African writer's ability to escape History, which ultimately leads to a curtailing of the creative imagination. He states, "In Africa the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation; what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one's face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history. 'The only address one can imagine' – an admission of defeat" (*Doubling* 68). He reiterates this claim in his Jerusalem Prize Speech: "In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (*Doubling* 99). Under the burdensome weight of history, David Attwell notes that the "productive freedom of the act of writing is at best qualified, or provisional" (*Doubling* 66) for Coetzee.

However, contrary to what these statements may imply, Coetzee (much like Ndebele) does not choose to forgo the political. As much as Coetzee wistfully admires Milan Kundera's 1985 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech that speaks of Cervantes and *Don Quixote* rather than of the Czech political situation, Coetzee acknowledges the impossibility of following in his footsteps. He states, "I can't do

what Kundera does (or, to be fair to him, what he says he is doing)" (*Doubling* 67).

Referring to Kundera's remarks, "Today, when politics have become a religion, I see the novel as one of the last forms of atheism", Coetzee laments, "There is a part of me too that longs to be an atheist *à la* Kundera. I too would like to be able to go to Jerusalem and talk about Cervantes" (*Doubling* 66). He elaborates, "Not because I see Kundera or indeed Cervantes as a socially irresponsible person. On the contrary, I would like to be able to say that proof of their deep social and historical responsibility lies in the penetration with which, in their different ways and to their different degrees, they reflect on the nature and the crisis of fiction, of fictionalising, in their respective ages" (*Doubling* 67).

Coetzee's emphasis on the need for imagination within the literary and his wariness of History with a capital "H" quite clearly functions beyond the ambit of a cut and dried view of the political. Coetzee's statements present us with a duality – a scepticism of how politics may viably translate into aesthetics, but also an acknowledgement of an ethical or social obligation towards politics that he cannot quite embody. In short, Coetzee's statements and, indeed, his very literary works force us to rethink what constitutes protest, and to imagine literary commitment in more generous, widely encompassing terms. In this chapter, I argue that there are alternative ways of understanding political commitment, a way of thinking about commitment that extends beyond simplistic binaries of apolitical versus political, non-committal versus committed. I aim to show that texts that appear to be apolitical hold a dynamic political value, and garner their energy and vitality through their

supposed silence, through ambiguity and nuance, and an ability to debate and question – all elements that are dismissed as counter-revolutionary or superfluous by traditional protest literature. Coetzee’s seemingly most apolitical novels – most significantly, his early work written during apartheid, and some of his more recent novels, such as *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) – offer us a surprising avenue for investigation when paired up with Adorno, a theorist who meditates heavily on the nature of aesthetic commitment and provides us with an alternative model of the text that speaks politically. There couldn’t be a better fit – an author who asserts his politicisation time and time again without ever writing the quintessential apartheid protest novel (whatever that may be), and a theorist who thinks of how artists are to respond to complicated historical events without ever expecting that art brandish the banner of ideological sentiment or rhetoric.

Of course, Coetzee’s interrogation of culture is entirely natural in the context of political extremity. In almost all societies fraught by oppression, suffering, and injustice, the stakes of what cultural production entails are high, and the nature and function of culture is inevitably questioned. In these societies the same inevitable searching questions pervade: How is culture to assume an ethical stance toward suffering? Is it complicit in suffering? Who has the authorial right to describe historical events? What are the limits of fact and fiction? Is suffering specific to geographical or historical context? Sam Durrant in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (2004) notes the disparate historical and political events of the Holocaust and colonialism. While acknowledging the historical and political specificity of the

Holocaust and colonialism (a point of crucial importance, for to suggest that they are one and the same strips either one of their enormity) Durrant asserts that these events generate similar “problems of memorialisation” (3) and function on similar conceptual or social premises. In both instances the impact of the Holocaust and colonialism extends beyond its immediate temporal frame producing an analogous “disturbed, belated chronology of trauma” (3). Durrant continues that slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust, bound together in part by their explicit racism, all embody a “violence to the individual and the collective imagination” (4), a refusal to acknowledge the “humanity of the other” (4) beyond superficial ethnic or racial criteria.²⁷ He concludes, “To rename the postmodern from the perspective of the postcolonial (Bhabha 175) is perhaps simply to recognise that colonialism, apartheid, slavery, and the Holocaust are, for all their historical differences, nevertheless part of the same ‘single catastrophe’ to which the [Benjaminian] Angelus Novus bears witness (‘Theses’ 257–58)” (7).

If we were pushed to choose a phrase that most clearly encapsulates the anxiety attached to the creation and propagation of culture after a heinous political

²⁷ We are by no means attempting to conflate various political experiences: they are not analogous events. However, correlations emerge from disparate historical events. André Brink, who thinks about apartheid literature through the paradigm of the Holocaust, puts the issue somewhat differently: “The Holocaust undoubtedly represents an extreme of human experience; but does it differ from other horrors in quantity or in quality? If in quantity, where does one draw the line? Would the Holocaust be ‘permissible’ as a subject for literature if a million Jews were murdered rather than six million? Or a hundred thousand? Or a thousand?... If there is a difference in quality, how could this difference be defined in relation to, say, the exploits of the conquistadores in the New World?; the ravages of the Black Death?; the genocides of Biafra, the Congo, Chechnya, Burundi?” (*Interrogating* 20).

event, it would be Adorno's infamous declaration "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Cultural" 37). Literary critics, who fail to acknowledge that the dictum appears in a multiplicity of Adorno's texts with different meanings and implications from when it made its first appearance in the "Cultural Criticism and Society" essay (1955), have wildly misinterpreted the phrase, assuming that it calls for a cessation of literary production after the Holocaust.²⁸ Yet, as I will go on to show, Adorno is greatly concerned with the continuation of culture after the Holocaust, and his comments offer us a valuable way of thinking about artistic practice and production in the grip of political extremity.

There are complex reasons for Adorno making the statement "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Cultural" 37). The dictum is partly related to the manner in which he envisages history: For Adorno, the Holocaust is an event that exists both within and outside of history. Auschwitz is part of the continuum of history, which is characterised by constant antagonism.²⁹ Adorno contends, "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to megaton bomb" (*Negative* 320). Mark Rothberg, in response, points out that "The domination of nature and humanity – epitomised in the Nazi genocide and the threat of nuclear annihilation – 'is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history...History is the

²⁸ See Elaine Martin's "Re-reading Adorno" and Mark Rothberg's "After Adorno" for various misinterpretations.

²⁹ Also see Chapter 2, pages 126–127.

unity of the discontinuity” (72). The movement of history is not constituted as fluid linear progression or advancement towards a utopian ideal, but rather as a chronological sequence of disruptions that perpetuate social and material crisis. Within this paradigm, Auschwitz was an historical inevitability, not an interruption nor an anomaly. Even within the supposed totality of capitalism, Auschwitz is not simply a manifestation of the process of reification³⁰: it is a logical expression of a history’s antagonistic energies. However, it is dangerous to assume that Auschwitz was simply part of the continuum of history for this nullifies the very magnitude of the episode. It deflates the moral and ethical significance of the event, and its consequent effect not only on European Jewry but humanity as a whole. It is imperative then that Auschwitz is cognitively processed in a dialectical manner: simultaneously a manifestation of the “inalienable heritage” (*Negative* 367) of bourgeois culture and history, but also an aberration within history.

Adorno is concerned with “the production and reception of culture in a context where rupture and continuity coexist – where, in other words, layers of different conceptions of space and time can cluster around a single name, Auschwitz” (Rothberg 67). The two understandings of history serve to balance each other out, but the possible foregrounding of either understanding does not necessarily skew the demands made of culture in the post-Holocaust paradigm. Both

³⁰ Simply put, reification relates to the process in which human beings are objectified through material relations based on exchange value. For an extended discussion of reification refer to Chapter 2, pages 120–122.

interpretations suggest the inadequacy of uncomprehending modern cultural production in preventing the Holocaust, and point to the necessity for a new form of cultural production after the Holocaust.³¹

Adorno makes it very clear in his lectures in *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (1965), which prefigure *Negative Dialectics* (1966), that culture cannot exist in the way that it did prior to the Holocaust. In these lectures, Adorno unequivocally states, “[I]t can be said that Auschwitz and the world of Auschwitz have made clear something which was not a surprise to those who were not positivists but had a deep, speculative turn of mind: that culture has failed to its very core” (*Metaphysics* 118). As a result, he asserts in *Negative Dialectics*, “Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be” (367). Adorno presents us with a double bind: on the one hand, the individual cannot demand the preservation of the culture that ultimately led up to the Holocaust, but on the other hand, to call for the eradication of culture is equally problematic. Auschwitz may have “demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed” (*Negative* 366), but its abrogation is by no means the solution to its ineffectuality. Culture must ultimately be reconstituted, acknowledging the full implications of the atrocity of the Holocaust. Culture must not under any

³¹ Even if Auschwitz “subscribe[s] to a notion of history as the inverse of progress – a theoretical position which appear[s] to leave no room for the possible redirection of social tendencies” (Rothberg 72), Adorno is wary of a world where cultural production ceases to exist.

circumstances function as a “resurrected culture, a culture...rehashing its traditional values of truth, beauty and goodness as if nothing had happened” (*Metaphysics* 119).

Adorno is emphatic that culture must continue, albeit in a different form from the culture that preceded the Holocaust. In fact, Adorno never questions the redemptive power of culture. He comments, “I believe [culture] essential in liberating human beings from the veil of ideology” (*Metaphysics* 119).

Adorno envisages the modern art of Beckett, Kafka and Schoenberg – technically innovative in their approach towards both content and form – as the way to counter the historical impetus that led to the Holocaust. He particularly endorses a view of the autonomous artwork, the artwork that, in simplistic terms, could be understood as free from “religious, political, and other social roles” (Zuidervaart, *Adorno's* 32). This conception of the autonomous artwork makes Adorno deeply wary of the committed artwork, the artwork that exists to explicitly espouse a specific political agenda. It is important to note that Adorno does not actively reject the term “commitment”, but his definition is unique, riven from the idea of traditional Marxist praxis. Although praxis in the orthodox Marxist sense aims to amalgamate contemplative theory and practical action for the end goal of revolutionary activity, the Institute for Social Research, of which Adorno was a member (together with a number of other individuals of different academic stripes that eventually came to be known as the Frankfurt School), questioned such a thesis. Initially the Institute, established in 1923, was interested in the “ultimate unity of critical theory and revolutionary practice”, but by the 1940s this attitude had

changed substantially and it “began to have serious doubts about the feasibility of these syntheses” (Jay, *Dialectical* 253). The “meditations [of the Frankfurt School] between its theory and both empirical research and political praxis grew increasingly problematical” (Jay, *Dialectical* 253).

Adorno – much like Horkheimer – expresses an active hostility towards the translation of philosophy into political praxis. Horkheimer states: “Is activism, then, especially political activism, the sole means of fulfilment, as just defined? I hesitate to say so. The age needs no added stimulus to action. Philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, even for the best possible purpose” (qtd. in Jay, *Dialectical* 266).

Adorno, in 1969 – the year of his death – expresses his attitude towards the role of philosophy as implicated in praxis in the striking statement: “[W]hen I made my theoretical model, I could not have guessed that people would try to realize it with Molotov cocktails” (qtd. in Jay, *Dialectical* 279).³² Although Adorno would appreciate a state of consciousness in which theory and praxis are “produced [in a way] that neither divides the two such that theory becomes powerless and praxis becomes

³² Although Adorno’s hostility towards political praxis was part of the Frankfurt School’s general uninterest in translating philosophy into action, his refusal seems to have sparked a sense of massive disappointment in those individuals, particularly students, who valued Adorno’s revolutionary thought. His refusal to support student protests in the 1968–69 riots (even calling the police on students at the University of Frankfurt, where he held a position) left his reputation as a Critical Theorist in Europe irrevocably damaged. The distribution of leaflets by students, four months prior to his death, stating, “[A]s an institution, Adorno is dead”, is particularly telling. Martin Jay suggests that Adorno’s refusal to perpetuate a pro-active response to revolutionary movements did not compromise his position in America. Jay recalls only one incident where Adorno was referred to as “a betrayer of the revolution” by student activists. He states that “this attitude rarely surfaced in the American New Left’s reception of his work, such as it was” (“Adorno” 166). However, certainly Adorno’s political reticence could be shored up against the animated praxis of, say, Derrida and Marcuse.

arbitrary" ("Marginalia" 261), he takes the view that praxis is ultimately linked to the ossification or petrification of thought because it inevitably submits to the identity-thinking that accompanies integration into a collective movement or ideology (points I will explore shortly). Adorno declares, "The consolation that thinking improves in the context of collective action is deceptive: thinking, as a mere instrument of activist actions, atrophies like all instrumental reason ("Resignation" 292). As Hohendahl succinctly puts it: "The individual activist, far from being an autonomous [thinking] subject, has given up autonomy for membership in a collective that enables him or her to act" (*Prismatic* 67). Praxis, in the traditional sense, is a "prohibition on thinking" (Adorno, "Resignation" 290); it subsumes difference, subsumes the heterogeneity of thought, and forces the individual to think in terms of totalising categories, what Adorno terms identitarian thinking. For Adorno, as mentioned previously, to think in terms of universal concepts and categories (all-encompassing identity), rather than the particular or individual (synonymous with non-identity), can only culminate in violence and oppression. (In Chapter 4 of this thesis in which I analyse Ondaatje's relationship to the non-identical, I engage substantially with Adorno's dictum "pure identity as death" (*Negative* 362), that directly connects identity thinking with the violence of fascism and war.)

Adorno's definition of commitment explicitly veers away from political agitation and largely functions in exploratory meditative or contemplative terms.³³ In his essay "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" he explicitly states, "Thinking is a form of doing, theory a form of praxis; already the ideology of the purity of thinking deceives about this. Thinking has a double character: it is immanently determined and rigorous, and yet an inalienably real mode of behaviour in the midst of reality" (261). In fact, when Adorno is thinking about art as praxis, he comments, "Committed art in its proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions – like earlier propagandist plays against syphilis, duels, abortion laws or borstals – but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes" ("Commitment" 180). True committed art does not generate change in a visible concrete sense, which would ultimately reduce it to a form of propaganda – and indeed, as noted by Susan Buck-Morss, compromise its legitimacy as a rational truth (25) – but dialectically explores and engages with issues or concepts that may only possibly result in a change of consciousness on the part of the audience.³⁴ Put differently, in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno presents us with the definition of art *as* praxis, a cultivation of social consciousness, but it ironically only achieves this aim by *not* employing the techniques ordinarily associated with

³³ Also see pages 211–213.

³⁴ Zuidervaart comments, "Although Adorno rightly indicates that philosophy and art need not be directly 'useful' to be worthwhile, and that philosophy and art must challenge the standards implied by the demand for 'usefulness', his view of philosophy and art assumes that genuine praxis is primarily contemplative, and that non-contemplative praxis is not genuine" (*Adorno's* 148).

propaganda: “Art itself is objectively praxis as the cultivation of consciousness; but it only becomes this by renouncing persuasion” (243). According to Adorno, Zuidervaat asserts, “artworks are ‘less and more than praxis’” (*Adorno’s* 140). He elaborates, “Less, because, in their opposition to ordinary praxis, they avoid or prevent what must be done for the sake of a changed humanity. More, because they denounce the misguidance of praxis in a deformed world and anticipate the enlightened humanity that would constitute itself while it changes the world” (*Adorno’s* 140).

Adorno’s understanding of art and the concept of commitment and its various implications comes to the fore most strongly in the “Commitment” essay (1962) and in its conceptual interlocutor *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).³⁵ In both texts, Adorno takes a vehement stance against two writers in particular: Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, playwright and novelist, and Bertolt Brecht, the German theatre practitioner and poet. Both individuals were vocal on the intersection between politics and aesthetics, and aimed to create artworks in tune with particular

³⁵ This connection between the writer and the political environment is a concern that has occupied aesthetic criticism and theory (certainly of a Marxist strain) from at least the 19th century onwards, as Raymond Williams shows in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Williams notes that Marx and Engels both expressed an interest in committed literature, what they termed “tendency” literature. Although they never questioned the need for literature’s commitment, their discussion of Lassalle’s play *Franz von Sickingen* “stressed the need for a profound understanding of social and historical crisis, as against reduced or simplifying treatments” (qtd. in Williams 201). The question of commitment was further interrogated within Marxist circles during episodes of “open revolutionary practice”, such as the Russian and Chinese revolutions (Williams 202). The rise of fascism during the 1930s, and the fraught politics of World War II Europe, placed the question of “the necessity of the engagement of the intellectual” (Schalk 7) firmly at the centre of an intellectual discourse that was partly defined (and given a metaphysical element) by individuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre (of whom, as I intend to show, Adorno had much to say).

ideological affiliations or sympathies. For Adorno the literary works of these specific writers encapsulate the problems of committed art more widely, and serve as explanatory models or case studies for “bad art” (“Commitment” 187).³⁶

Adorno’s “Commitment” essay is a direct response to Sartre’s *What is Literature* (1948), the war-time polemic that advocates the writer “tak[e] up a position” (214). At the centre of Sartre’s *What is Literature?* is a commitment to freedom, which he sees as an active principle: a concept deeply enmeshed in a communal reciprocity and sharedness. For Sartre, writing during the turmoil and turbulence of World War II, “one man’s freedom depended on the freedom of others, on the creation of a society from which exploitation and oppression had been eradicated” (Caute x).³⁷ He unequivocally demands that writers (and in this he is clear: novelists rather than poets³⁸) use their powers to write in the service of freedom: “the book is not, like the tool, a means for any end whatever; the end to

³⁶ Using these authors in all their specificity to discuss his reservations regarding committed literature plays into Adorno’s interest in using the particular to explain general or universal concerns.

³⁷ Sartre’s definition of freedom changed over time with it moving towards a greater acknowledgement of the impact of social and material relations upon the agency of the individual. However, at the time of Sartre’s writing *What is Literature?* his definition of freedom is constructed in rather simple and straightforward terms.

³⁸ Sartre sets up this dubious dichotomy by saying, “It is true that the prose-writer and poet both write. But there is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters.” For Sartre, poets use language in a markedly different way to prose writers: “Prose is, in essence, utilitarian. I would readily define the prose-writer as a man who *makes use of words*. M. Jourdan made prose to ask for his slippers and Hitler to declare war on Poland. The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates...The art of prose is employed in discourse; its substance is by nature significative; that is, the words are first of all not objects”(11). Poets, in contrast, supposedly engage with language as an end in and of itself: “In so far as the writer of prose exhibits feelings, he illustrates them; whereas, if the poet injects his feelings into his poem, he ceases to recognise them: the words take hold of them, penetrate them, and metamorphose them; they do not signify them, even in his eyes” (10).

which it offers itself is the reader's freedom" (34). A more prescriptive utilitarian reading of the writer's purpose defies imagination. And indeed, such a vision is reiterated time and again through *What is Literature?* Sartre declares, "We want the man and the artist to work their salvation together, we want the work to be at the same time an act; we want it to be explicitly conceived as a weapon in the struggle that men wage against evil" (245). Sartre's literature is explicitly a literature of praxis that has at its heart the "propos[al of]...a concrete liberation on the basis of a specific situation" (Caute x). It is simultaneously "an essential condition for action", but also a "moment of reflective consciousness" (Sartre 123), finely tuned to the times.

Of course, Sartre's vision of freedom is imbued with an allegiance to a socialist humanism, or at least a personalised version of Marxism. He expects literature to function with a consciousness of the proletariat, which "might constitute for the writer a revolutionary public" (193).³⁹ However, Sartre acknowledges that writing with a socialist-Marxist objective in mind may push writing into the realm of dogma and propaganda. He suggests that the writer attempt to maintain an objective critical faculty, rather than blindly following party lines. He states, "[the writer] must, in all domains, both reject solutions which are not rigorously inspired by socialist principles and, at the same time, stand off from all the doctrines and movements which consider socialism an absolute end" (214–5). Sartre goes as far as to say that the writer should refuse to actively align himself with a cadre culture: "If

³⁹ His interest in writing for the proletariat is not all that dissimilar from Benjamin. See Benjamin's "The Author as Producer" (1937) essay.

it should be asked whether the writer, in order to reach the masses, should offer his services to the Communist Party, I answer no. The politics of Stalinist Communism is incompatible in France with the honest practice of the literary craft" (197). He elaborates, "If I could so, I would bury literature with my own hands rather than make it serve ends which utilise it" (203).

Yet, as the saying goes, one cannot have one's cake and eat it too: Sartre's utilitarian vision of literature inevitably spirals into propaganda because its priority, however potentially noble, is to promote a specific ideology. It is, therefore, not all that dissimilar from the propaganda against which he rails that actively bolsters a particular ideological viewpoint. Indeed, Adorno dryly comments, "The flaw in Sartre's conception of commitment strikes at the very cause to which he commits himself" ("Commitment" 182). More importantly though, Adorno takes issue with Sartre's obsession with individual choice and freedom, asserting that "[w]ithin a predetermined reality, freedom becomes an empty claim" ("Commitment" 180). Sartre's emphasis on the ability to react against the economic and social machinery, which not only limits but defines the actions and choices of the individual, fundamentally ignores an objective Marxian truth of the opposite view.

But Adorno, in a belated response to Walter Benjamin's "Author as Producer" essay (1937)⁴⁰, reserves his greatest criticism for Brecht, despite describing him as

⁴⁰ This essay was "formulated under the strong influence of Brecht, in the context of Soviet discussions about the task and function of literature in a socialist society or socialist movement" (Arato 254).

“more consistent than Sartre and a greater artist” (“Commitment” 183). Brecht’s plays are *Lehrstücke*, didactic or educational plays, focused not on entertainment, but upon espousing a Marxist message through various theatrical conventions derived in part from the agitprop theatre of Erwin Piscator and wider more eclectic influences, such as classical Greek and Oriental theatre. In contrast to the despotic Wagnerian totality that dominates German theatre, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, Brecht’s theatre fragments the artwork – the play is split up into its industrial parts – a pastiche of slogans, placards, music, and highly stylised acting that function to constantly remind the audience that they are watching a play. These constant reminders aim to evoke a “productive consciousness”, an awareness of the objective reality of material and social relations, in the audience. (This is known as *Verfremdungseffekt* or “alienation effect”.) In short, Brecht’s theatre is self-consciously anti-illusionistic: a theatre that exposes itself *as theatre*.

Benjamin viewed this approach to theatre in laudatory terms, linked in part to his understanding of the artist’s role under modernity. Benjamin denies the Romantic preconception of the artist as a whimsical figure, driven by the nine Muses, existing in an ivory tower alienated from the material and social realities of the time. Instead, Benjamin envisages an individual creating an artwork (with a savage materialist emphasis on the term “work” as opposed to “art”) conscious of the modes of production. He asserts, “the rigid isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations” (87). The artwork must be put to “work” – it is not enough that it merely exists, it

needs to ultimately connect with its historical context. More importantly, Benjamin conflates the two separate categories of artist and tradesman into one utilitarian whole. Consider, for example, Benjamin's statement, "we can be sure that such thinking, *in the writers that matter* – that is to say the best technicians in their particular branches of their trade – will sooner or later confirm very soberly their solidarity with the proletariat" (102). Art becomes a trade like any other, a functionary within a cash-economy nexus, in which the artist must "produce", must issue forth a "product" that serves a political end.⁴¹

Benjamin reads Brecht in terms of this unique conception of "artistry". He states that Brecht has "succeeded in altering the functional relationship between stage and audience, text and production, producer and actor" (99). Brecht has not only appropriated the aesthetic apparatus of the bourgeois, but has transformed it in a manner that serves a particular political objective – that of writing in the service of socialism, in "solidarity with the proletariat" (101). Benjamin declares defiantly, "I define a hack as a man who refuses on a matter of principle to improve the production apparatus and so prise it away from the ruling class for the benefit of Socialism" (94). Brecht then is anything but a hack: instead, he fulfils the most important demand made of writers "who matter" – the "demand to think, to reflect on [their] position in the process of production" (Benjamin 101) by manipulating traditional aesthetic forms. To Benjamin's thinking Brecht fulfils the crucial demands

⁴¹ Benjamin's comments in this essay speak to his thesis on how art under modernity is dislocated from its original ritual function, outlined in the essay, *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

made of art – that it be committed, *and* act as an instructive model for other writers – “[A] writer’s production must have the character of a model: it must instruct other writers in their production and, secondly, it must be able to place an improved apparatus at their disposal” (98). The appropriation and refunctioning of traditional bourgeois forms (what Brecht referred to as the process of *Umfunktionierung*⁴²) benefits the socialist movement by producing aesthetic forms which may be emulated for revolutionary purposes.

Unlike many of us, Benjamin sees Brecht’s prescriptive conception of art in no way at loggerheads with aesthetic integrity or power: there is no “either/or” in this regard, instead there is a direct convergence between the artwork with a “correct” political tendency and a “correct” aesthetic sensibility: the one does not undermine the other (86).⁴³ The problems attached to such a view are undoubtedly glaringly obvious: using the artwork as a vehicle of political ideology places the importance of fine craftsmanship or technical skill on the proverbial backburner. However, we must remember that Benjamin’s statement exists within a context in which aesthetic techniques were in a state of temperamental mutability. In a passage reminiscent of Marx’s famous line in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), “All that is solid melts into air,

⁴² Benjamin notes, “Brecht coined the phrase “functional transformation” (*Umfunktionierung*) to describe the transformation of forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia – an intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production and hence active in the class struggle (93).

⁴³ Benjamin thinks of tendency not as a purely external thing, but rather how social relations are manifested in the work itself.

all that is holy is profaned”(38), used to poetically describe the flux and changes intrinsic to capitalist modernity, Benjamin states,

Novels did not always exist in the past, nor must they necessarily always exist in the future; nor, always, tragedies, nor great epics. . . . All this to familiarise you with the idea that we are in the midst of a vast process in which literary forms are being melted down, a process in which many of the contrasts in terms of which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance (89).

The expectation that art continues in the form or shape of the past is entirely unrealistic – we must draw towards new forms that best express the current moment. This may mean understanding the “author as a producer” rather than as an artist: the act of creation is replaced with that of functional utility.

Although Adorno is able to appreciate Brecht’s attitude towards the use of modern aesthetic traditions – that they may be “dialectically transformed [‘refunctioned’ (*umfunktioniert*)] from bourgeois tools into revolutionary ones which bring about a critical consciousness of the nature of bourgeois society” (Buck-Morss 20) – Adorno finds Brecht’s aggressive commitment hard to stomach. As Adorno comments in *Aesthetic Theory*, Brecht’s plays “became constitutive; they made the drama anti-illusionary and contributed to the collapse of the unitary nexus of meaning. It is this, not commitment, that defines their quality, yet their quality is inseparable from the commitment in that it becomes their mimetic element. Brecht’s commitment... undermines [the work]” (247).⁴⁴ Adorno’s problem with committed

⁴⁴ The divergence in Adorno’s and Benjamin’s political outlook is consolidated by 1935.

literature is not necessarily that it compromises aesthetic quality (although he does complain that a political message “stains the aesthetic form”), but that commitment, in its eagerness to drive home its particular “message”, distorts the objective truth behind material and historical relations and is susceptible to fascism.

In Sartre’s work, Adorno sees the grafting of existential philosophy onto aesthetic form. The work is nothing more than a vessel of Sartre’s ideological sympathies and is thereby reduced to pure content. Sartre’s work presents the idea of unmediated human agency. Adorno complains that this philosophy lacks an awareness of a predetermined socio-economic machinery that interferes with human agency (“Commitment” 180). Although Sartre’s philosophical position is not fascist in and of itself, Adorno posits that fascism could pick up on this stance in an emphatic sense (“Commitment” 180). In contrast, Brecht’s political interests convert the work into pure form (“Commitment” 185). Brecht’s work is animated by a desire to alienate the audience through technical device. His work aims to ensure that the audience does not read the artwork passively. Brecht’s preoccupation with information leads to the “distort[ing of] real social problems in order to prove a thesis” (“Commitment” 186). Brecht’s work must – out of necessity – revert to stereotype, facile representation and inaccurate political insight to abstract a specific ideological position. Even though Sartre and Brecht are qualitatively different from each other, they share the belief in the monolithic and absolute meaning of their ideological commitments, engineering their work in such a manner as to elicit a specific interpretation from the audience. In the foregrounding of ideology over both

form and content, committed literature thus becomes a mode of propaganda. For Adorno, their art is not an investigation of the world with scope for critical analysis on the part of the individual, but a simplistic one-dimensional judgement of the world. With the voice of committed literature lacking the paradoxical intonations required of post-Auschwitz cultural production, the possibility of intellectually “speaking back” by the audience is effectively denigrated.⁴⁵

That committed literature is just another form of propaganda, substantively no different from fascist propaganda, despite its good intentions, is a point of vital importance. The only artwork that can maintain any sort of integrity in the post-Holocaust paradigm is the artwork that cannot be appropriated in any way by any ideological system, any “ism”: communism, socialism, humanism. The artwork that functions like propaganda feeds the gaping maw of impending genocide. This view may seem extreme, with Adorno pathologising “innocuous” cultural products by reading them in terms of their fascist potential, but it is precisely the fact that Adorno is able to draw such connections, and see the direct line between Sartre’s utterances on freedom and the Nazi’s slogan “only sacrifice makes us free” (“Commitment” 182), that constitutes Adorno’s unique theoretical value, especially within the context of the Frankfurt School who did not give the Holocaust as much conceptual weight in their thought, with the exception of perhaps Horkheimer

⁴⁵ “Yet the artistic principle of simplification not only purged politics of the illusionary distinctions projected by subjective reflection into social objectivity, as Brecht intended, but it also falsified the very objectivity which didactic drama aimed to distil” (Adorno, “Commitment” 185).

(Adorno's philosophical alter-ego). Adorno, in refusing to endorse any artworks that lend themselves to ideological impulses or premises, however "honourable", draws attention to our need to constitutively break from art that can only logically culminate in the gas ovens of Auschwitz. He refuses (and rightly so) to accept post-war committed art that replicates aspects of fascistic art, that is not a reconstituted culture, that does not demand that the individual think critically about social and material relations and thereby simply continues a culture where Auschwitz could be repeated.⁴⁶

In essence, the act of commitment undermines a nuance and sophistication of thought because the driving force behind commitment is, first and foremost, the expression of an ideological or political sympathy. The more committed the artwork, the greater the likelihood of it "getting things wrong". Adorno notes that "the more preoccupied Brecht becomes with information, and the less he looks for images, the more he misses the essence of capitalism which the parable is supposed to present" ("Commitment" 183). Adorno unequivocally states, the "process of aesthetic reduction that [Brecht] pursues for the sake of political truth, in fact gets in the way [of the objective truth]" ("Commitment" 183). He cites two specific examples of where Brecht has unwittingly savaged the objective truth. In the first instance, he

⁴⁶ Adorno expects the suffering of the individual to be at the centre of the artwork. However, even this should not become a dogma in and of itself as this would do nothing to contribute to a culture of critical thinking. He declares, "When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder" ("Commitment" 189).

looks at *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941) and notes that the analogies that Brecht sets up, comparing fascism to a “trivial” gangster organisation, the cabbage trust, results in a situation where “the true horror of fascism is conjured away” (“Commitment” 184). This analogy completely misunderstands the complex historical and psychological roots of fascism, and offers a deeply problematic false picture to the audience. In “Is Art Lighthearted?”, Adorno states, “The historical forces that produced the horror [of fascism] derive from the inherent nature of the social structure” (252). He continues, “They are not superficial forces, and they are much too powerful for anyone to have the prerogative of treating them as though he had world history behind him and the Führers actually were the clowns whose nonsense their murderous talk came to resemble only afterwards” (252). In his criticism of *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), Adorno takes issue, among other things, with the time within which the play is set. Adorno notes, “Because the society of the Thirty Years’ War was not the functional capitalist society of modern times, we cannot even poetically stipulate a closed functional system in which the lives and deaths of private individuals directly reveal economic laws” (“Commitment” 186–7). This concern may appear petty for in the literary realm there is no need for literary texts to remain firmly rooted in their own time to say something of our time, but for Adorno, this is simply a “false social model” (“Commitment” 187), a model which promotes a blatantly fallacious vision of society. For Adorno, individual elements within the artwork may endure – for example, the idea of the corrupting power or human avariciousness in Shakespeare’s

various plays (*Aesthetic* 255) – but to suggest that works written before the onset of bourgeois consciousness somehow may comment on class conflict not only misunderstands the complexity of capitalism and modernity, but also perpetuates a false knowledge that undermines our contemporary understanding of the system.⁴⁷

This is a crucial point, which Coetzee himself mentions in *The Novel Today* (1988), the written transcription of his public statement made at the Daily Mail Book Week in Cape Town. Coetzee's statement is a passionate defence of his own artistic practice. Certainly, by 1987, the year that the statement was made, Coetzee's hackles were up: he had already been accused by a number of literary critics of writing literature that was "either politically non-accountable or simply a local variety of global postmodernist fashion" (Pechey 67). Left-wing critics, in particular, Michael Vaughan, Paul Rich, and Peter Kohler, complained in varying degrees of Coetzee's historical inaccuracy (Kohler on *Dusklands*) and a "privileg[ing] an agonized consciousness over material forces" (Vaughan on *Dusklands*) (Attwell, "Problem" 593).⁴⁸ His fellow authors and compatriots, such as the likes of Nadine Gordimer, were no less disapproving, feeling that his novels failed to acknowledge their full responsibility towards the political situation (to be discussed in due course). Coetzee defends himself by complaining that the problem with committed literature is that it

⁴⁷ Adorno views the reduction of Shakespeare's plays to the history of class struggle with scathing disdain (*Aesthetic* 254–5). Adorno feels that although Shakespeare's plays show evidence of social antagonism, this is not the same as social upheaval in the way it would exist in a "market economy [where] a bourgeois society begins to take shape" (*Aesthetic* 255). He continues, "The interpretation of everything historical as class struggle has an anachronistic air" (*Aesthetic* 255).

⁴⁸ For a more detailed exegesis of this point see David Attwell's "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee", pages 593–4.

undermines the complexity of an issue, and nullifies meaning by reverting to the obvious, the prosaic. He states,

No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it is certainly possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed everything. (I parody the situation somewhat) a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus residue, the residue forming the subject matter of rhetoric or aesthetics or literary appreciation (4).

Here Coetzee is also parodying essentialist theories of literary language – as noted by Peter McDonald in *The Literature Police* (2009) – which views the novel in terms of, in Stanley Fish’s terminology, “message-plus” and “message-minus” (209).

“Message-plus” writing is more easily aligned with political commitment because it requires that works “reflect or support a propositional core” (McDonald, *Literature* 209). Coetzee is emphasising that the literary text is not simply addition and subtraction, not a “games handbook”, a mere reference guide to political issues. We simply cannot think of the literary artwork in prescriptive terms, as a rudimentary vehicle for political thought: it is inevitably *more* than its composite parts. It must be understood as an organic whole, an intricate web of overt commentary and metaphorical sublimated subtext.

Coetzee reiterates a similar point in an interview in *Doubling the Point*. When asked where his literary affinities lie, he states, “If I am closer to [Breyten] Breytenbach than to Gordimer..., it is, as you say, because Breytenbach accepts more easily than Gordimer that finally stories have to tell themselves, that the hand that

holds the pen is only the conduit of the signifying process" (341). Here Coetzee suggests that the process of writing is something greater and far more mystical than the writer himself. The writer cannot dictate the tale, cannot force a tale, cannot write something which is simply a "message with a covering". Coetzee's vision veers towards the idea of the artist as a vehicle of signification of which the artist may not even be consciously aware. To Coetzee's thinking, the writer puts the story, over which he does not have absolute control, to paper. He backs up this claim in another interview, commenting, "It is naive to think that writing is a simple two stage process: first you decide what you say, then you say it" (*Doubling* 18). He continues, "On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you wanted to say in the first place... That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us. Writing shows or creates (and we are not even sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was a moment ago" (*Doubling* 18).

We are forced to wonder if the story writes itself, does it also choose its audience? How is Coetzee's approach to writing mirrored in the reception of his fiction? Who *exactly* constitutes Coetzee's audience? White South African liberals agitating for political change? Die-hard Nationalist Party supporters that need to be shown the dark side of apartheid? International anti-apartheid activists? The black masses? We know for certain that the South African Censorship board saw Coetzee's work as far too highbrow and literary for it to ever appeal to a mass (black) South African audience (McDonald, *Literature* 303–320), and that, for the most part, his work was largely appreciated by an audience, both home and abroad, that no doubt

were already fully conscious of the ills and truths of apartheid. Coetzee himself comments (quoted in Dick Penner's *Countries of the Mind*) that his critical public is split in two. On the one hand, he has an American audience who "read [his] books in the general terms in which books are read by intelligent, mainly academic type of critics" (55). On the other hand, he has a South African audience "influenced by Marxism, by general Third World thinking" (55) who read his books asking the "primary question", "Where does this book fit into the political struggle?" (113). Although Coetzee identifies his audience, he does not necessarily assert that this is the audience for whom he explicitly writes. Coetzee never admits to whom he actively directs his work. In fact, he distances himself from his South African readership obsessed with Marxist praxis (a term discussed earlier). He says of this readership, "These are actually the people I live among. I don't want to disparage them at all. . . They are serious, intelligent people, but they are reading the books in a particular way" (Penner 55), diplomatically implying that despite this readership's "intelligence" their reading is limited by their Marxist interpretative framework. Certainly, Coetzee's scepticism of his South African readership's engagement with his novels in line with an agitative political model suggests that he thinks of reception not in terms of a "cause and effect". Whereas Marxist or committed authors write with a specific audience in mind, with a specific ideological purpose in which theory must be put into revolutionary practice by the audience, Coetzee thinks about reception in a far more equivocal way. This authorial obtuseness could suggest that Coetzee is less bound up in the reception of his texts than authors with a

more revolutionary or prescriptive prerogative, concerned with controlling the way that their audiences think. At this point it is useful to think about the reception of Coetzee's work in relation to Adorno.

When Adorno thinks of the social character of art he is uninterested in the idea of audience reception, which is essentially the driving force behind the committed artwork. Adorno is explicitly more concerned with the work's production, unlike empirical sociologies of art. Zuidervaart notes that Adorno locates art's "primary relation to society in the sphere of production (artistry and artworks) rather than in the sphere of consumption (reception), even though his emphasis on philosophical interpretation does not allow art's reception to be ignored" (*Adorno's* 102). Adorno's reaction to the narrative painting *Guernica* – Pablo Picasso's animated response to the destruction of the Basque village of Guernica by German forces during the Spanish Civil War – succinctly encapsulates his attitude towards the concepts of production and reception. Adorno states,

Expression reveals works to be lacerations inflicted by society; expression is the social ferment that is added to their autonomous shape. A telling example of this is Picasso's *Guernica*; it is wholly incompatible with criteria of realism, gaining expression through inhuman construction; eventually this expression takes on the...sharp contours of social protest. The socially critical dimensions of art works are those that hurt, those that bring to light...what is wrong with present social conditions...The public outcry evoked by works like *Guernica* is a response to that (qtd. in Zuidervaart, *Adorno's* 137–138).

Zuidervaart's response to this specific passage is worth quoting in full,

What is particularly instructive here is not so much what Adorno says as what he does not say. He does not ask who paid attention to Picasso's social

protest when *Guernica* was first displayed at the Spanish Pavilion of the Paris World Fair. He does not consider what impact this protest had on those who did pay attention...Adorno does not discount such questions, but the crucial point for him is that artworks have something important to present. The political relevance of their functions depends on the social significance of their import. Indeed, their political relevance lies in the functions of their artistic import: expression of suffering, broken promise of happiness, and the like (*Adorno's* 138).

An Adornian engagement with an artwork's political relevance places "political effectiveness" below the "interpretation of its truth content". Truth content is a complex Adornian concept (discussed in detail in Chapter 3⁴⁹) that relates to the manner in which history is embedded within the text. This truth content may not be ostensibly obvious, and is elicited through philosophical interpretation. The immanence of truth content suggests that the artwork should be assessed beyond its overt political impact or reception. Adorno elucidates this point by reference to Brecht, discussed earlier. Despite Adorno's misgivings about the aggressive commitment of Brecht's works, he focuses on "how Brecht's political commitment motivates dramaturgical innovations and thereby supports the aesthetic quality of his plays" (Zuidervaart, *Adorno's* 139). In other words, what is revolutionary in Brecht is his ability to "refunction" or manipulate bourgeois artforms into something new and technically innovative. Their "intrinsic quality" (their truth content – their connection to the historical moment in which they were forged) gives them political

⁴⁹ See pages 173–185.

relevance, rather than their explicit “political effectiveness” (Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s* 139).

There are various issues at play in Adorno’s wariness of overemphasising the importance of the reception of the artwork, as committed art tends to do. On the one hand, the audience of capitalist modernity suffers from a reified or alienated consciousness, which limits or distorts their understanding of their work. Adorno notes, rather drily, that “Campaigns to prevent the staging of Brecht’s plays in Western Germany belong to a relatively superficial layer of political consciousness” (“Commitment” 179). The censorship of his plays expresses a misunderstanding of the true issues at hand. On the other hand, reception functions as a null point – it may simply be a case of preaching to the choir, engaging with an audience that are sufficiently “conscious”. Zuidervaart elaborates upon this view, stating, “In order for [authentic autonomous] artworks to intervene [in social consciousness], there must be a consciousness that is sufficiently alienated from society to receive that intervention” (*Adorno’s* 140–1). He continues, “Hence art’s political impact depends on a circular process: autonomous art becomes politically effectual by calling for a consciousness that can let art have a political effect” (*Adorno’s* 141).

Although Adorno is wise not to overemphasise the reception of a particular work, his comments are not without problems. For instance, one could easily define an artwork as an object of technical skill invariably geared or directed towards an audience. An artwork may exist independently of an audience, but it is only animated through its relationship with an audience. This is especially true of theatre,

the medium that Adorno uses to explicate his views on the autonomous artwork. It could be said that when Adorno is thinking about the artwork he certainly has the concept of the audience in mind. The artwork cannot be an expression of suffering, a tribute to the victims of suffering, without the audience as an endpoint, as the ear to the eternal voice of suffering. However, thinking about the text as something somewhat separate to its formal reception allows us to engage with works, such as those by Coetzee, whose political reception may be ambiguous unless it is understood as a philosophical gesture towards an expression of suffering.⁵⁰

This is not to say that the audience is of absolutely no value to Adorno or Coetzee: in both instances it must be remembered that the artwork cannot be an expression of suffering, a tribute to the victims of suffering, without the audience as an gestural endpoint, as the ear to the eternal voice of suffering. Coetzee contemplates the manner in which suffering is to be described in his essay “Into the Dark Chamber” (1986). Here he analyses the relationship between the South African writer during apartheid and torture, noting that writers are drawn to torture for two reasons. Firstly, the intimacy and mystery of the gesture: only the torturer and the victim are privy to what actually happens inside the torture chamber. The

⁵⁰ Referring to the poet Paul Celan’s Bremen Speech (1958) may illuminate this point further. In the speech, Celan states, “A poem as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the — not always hopeful — belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps” (395). Celan metaphorically likens the Other to a “heartland” (the centre of a country) communicating that the poem is sent out to reach an emotional centre point within the territory of human cognition. Celan is clear that reaching the “place” of the Other is an uncertainty: the poem is more an irresolvable gesture towards the Other. The mere gesture, rather than its assured fulfilment, is sufficient a reaction to the Holocaust.

exclusivity and privacy of this experience excites the writer's imagination. Secondly, writers are attracted to torture because it offers a concise metaphor for the relationship between the oppressor and oppressed. However, Coetzee emphasises the need to guard against using torture in a manner which is disingenuous or affective. He particularly warns against its eroticisation or the poeticisation of suffering. (In fact, the Magistrate's sexualised engagement with the tortured barbarian girl in the 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* may be read as an ironic play upon this concern.) Coetzee realises that in societies where the status quo is marked by oppression, and torture is a very real aspect, it is impossible to offer a perspective on torture that does not result in the writer "either looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall [upon the victim] or turning one's eyes away" (368). For Coetzee, there is no resolution to this problem of representation, of how to negotiate suffering in the literary realm.

Certainly, Adorno's greatest criticism of committed art lies in its relationship to human suffering. By taking suffering and transforming it into art there is always the danger that suffering is degraded into mere entertainment or enjoyment.⁵¹

Adorno declares emphatically,

For these victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of the world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it.

⁵¹ Adorno also states, "The injustice committed by all cheerful art, especially by entertainment, is probably an injustice to the dead; to accumulated, speechless pain" (*Aesthetic* 40).

The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of the opposite ("Commitment" 189).

Instead of having a morally edifying effect on the audience, and thereby ensuring that suffering will not occur in the future, the aestheticisation of suffering feeds into a culture that desensitises individuals to the true horror of suffering. Even more disturbingly, "The aesthetic principle of stylisation, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed" ("Commitment" 189). By turning suffering into art, it becomes meaningful and consequential in its own right. Adorno rails against a simplistic portrayal of suffering, one that misunderstands the randomness and moral emptiness of violence. He enjoins that an acknowledgement and respect of suffering be the beating pulse, the conceptual core, of the modern artwork, and that this is achieved in a manner that refuses overlaying an objective meaning onto suffering.

The double-bind that the artwork finds itself in is apparent in Adorno's observation: "[The artwork's] aesthetic autonomy remains external to suffering, of which the work is an image and from which the work draws its seriousness. The artwork is not only an echo of suffering, it diminishes it; form, the organon [vehicle or instrument] of its seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization of suffering" (*Aesthetic* 39). In other words, the artwork as autonomous is detached from the administered world, and thereby embodies an objective distance from the suffering that arises from the processes of the

administered world. However, the artwork as a commodity of the administered world cannot help but embody suffering. For Adorno, the artwork is an artwork *because* of its form. Yet, by making an artwork an artwork there is always the danger of reducing suffering to mere form, and in this way neutralising suffering. Put differently, the form of the artwork becomes the organon – the vehicle – of its own simultaneous capacity for profundity and pettiness. Adorno continues, “The demand for complete responsibility on the part of the artworks increases the burden of their guilt; therefore the demand is to be set in counterpoint with the antithetical demand for responsibility” (*Aesthetic* 39). Adorno places the artwork in a precarious position – it must show a responsibility towards history, but this demand is highly problematical as the embeddedness of the artwork within history, its implication in past suffering (i.e. the Holocaust), cannot be expiated, nor simply erased.

But Adorno’s dissatisfaction with committed literature does not end there. He complains, “There is one nearly invariable characteristic of [committed] literature. It is that it implies, purposely or not, that even in so-called extreme situations, indeed, in them most of all, humanity flourishes” (“Commitment” 189). Committed literature then promotes an undue hope. Adorno brings this issue up in Lecture 15 of the *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* lectures. He recounts a conversation he had with a Jew, “one of the persecuted” (124), who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp during World War II. During the course of the conversation, the Jew expresses a violent distaste for Beckett’s writing – “If Beckett had been in a concentration camp he probably would not write these despairing things; he’d write

things that gave people courage”(124). For Adorno, the comment “throws light on the specific character which ideology has taken on saying that there are no atheists in the trenches; the old German proverb that danger teaches us to pray points in the same direction – and, fundamentally, this heroic man had argued in a very similar way”(124). He is not necessarily surprised by the Jew’s viewpoint – instead he views it as an example of “confusion” (124), an inability to process the truth behind the experience of the Holocaust – the utter meaninglessness of the event. Attributing hope to the Holocaust’s suffering is “attended by its own untruth” (124). For Adorno, we need to acknowledge that “even the worst is something which can be thought” (124), and in this acknowledgement lies a cold comfort, a comfort accompanied by truth (124).

At this point I suggest that we turn to Adorno’s “Lyric Poetry and Society” essay in *Notes to Literature* as it offers a means of thinking about a viable alternative to traditionally committed art, although Adorno does not overtly suggest that this is his prerogative in the essay. Adorno’s unique analysis allows us to broaden the interpretation of committed art to include art that may seem entirely apolitical.⁵² Adorno’s belief in the power of the lyric poem seems odd at first glance. The poem appears to lack a social or political element. Its focus on the subjective self or the natural world seems wholly disconnected from urban modernity. Yet the lyric poem is essentially a modern form, emerging as a response to the urbanization

⁵² See pages 176–177 for discussion of this essay in relation to truth content.

characteristic of capitalism. In the lyric poem stands the individual subject's yearning for a pastoral past, a pre-industrialised world. The lyric poem's longing for an earlier period of tranquillity and harmony must be construed as an individual act of resistance to the oppressive and hostile economic structure of modernity. Adorno observes that the "[modern] social condition impresses itself on the poetic form in a negative way: the more heavily social conditions weigh, the more unrelentingly the poem resists" ("Lyric" 215). The more the lyric poem laments the past, or revels in the poet's subjectivity, the more vitriolic the protest against modernity. The lyric poem silently references objective reality, and protests against the "overpowering force of material things" ("Lyric" 214). The seemingly apolitical or non-committal nature of the poem in fact comprises the social aspect of the poem.

Furthermore, the subjectivity expressed in the lyric poem represents the "quality of break or rupture", for it "defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective and the realm of objectivity" ("Lyric" 215–6). The poem's emphasis on the subjective self⁵³ may reference the larger experience of modernity; the collective despair felt by the modern subject, but it does so in a highly individualistic and subtle sense. In this manner it champions the particular over the totality of material relations. The lyric poem is not read as a representation of the universal, but as a means of accessing and contemplating greater material relations.

⁵³ To reiterate: Adorno believes that reification is a powerful force that operates in conjunction with culture to generate an apathetic critical consciousness in the individual. However, the individual subjectivity encapsulated in the lyric poem declares that it is possible to subvert the process of reification.

The poem's "silence" in relation to an external ideology is the very "voice" of the poem itself. Paradox is thereby built into the very structure of the poem. The poem must be processed in relation to both its explicit and implicit meanings (its spoken, and unspoken elements)⁵⁴, forcing the reader into a new method of aesthetic interpretation, a method of interpretation that functions immanently. Immanent criticism "accepts the presuppositions and terms of society at work. Such criticism judges a work by its own standards and ideals and confronts it with its own consequences" (Rose 151). Adorno states, "Social ideas should not be brought to works from without but should, instead, be created out of the complete organized view of things present in the works themselves" ("Lyric" 214). In contrast, transcendent criticism engages with the artwork through external concepts or standards, and is judged from a "particular standpoint" (Rose 151). Adorno takes issue with transcendent criticism, which tended to be the dominant form of critique in the Marxist Sociology of his day, stating, "In principle, the method succumbs to the very reification which is its critical theme" ("Cultural" 33).

In fact, Adorno developed and expressed the concept of immanence (with its Hegelian and Marxian roots) with "startling originality" (Jarvis 6) to ensure that artworks were engaged with using a critique that did not ignore the inherent complexity of the text in order to have it fit with the expectations imposed upon it by a potentially distorting external framework. Certainly, Adorno's championing of

⁵⁴ I pick up on this act of engaging with silence, the unspoken and spoken elements of a text, from a different angle in Chapter 2.

immanence as a key interpretative *modus operandi* not only allows us to remain alive to the contradictions inherent to the text, to think about the artwork in its own internal terms (such as its truth content), but also ensures that we forgo conceptual polarisations that conceive of literature in terms of committed versus non-committed (terms to which Marxist aestheticians are particularly prone). An immanent analysis demands that artworks are read not in terms of stark alternatives, but as complex products that have the dialectics of the socio-historical imbedded within them, irrespective of what they may suggest on the surface.

Of course, nowhere does Adorno explicate the manner in which immanent critique may be applied. Even in the “Lyric Poetry and Society” essay, where Adorno insists that “social hermeneutics has to proceed from within the text”, he “does not fully explain how the reader can recognize the social meaning without reference to the context: that is, without knowledge of the social system and its history” (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 154). This is by no means a minor point – for how is one to understand the social and historical significance or meaning of a text without some knowledge of the historical and social situation? Certainly in engaging the eclectic works of Coetzee, Ondaatje, and Karapanou ignoring the biographical, psychological or historical poses a stumbling block for it undermines not only what makes the novels unique but also what makes them inherently and robustly political. However, crucially for us, Hohendahl notes a loophole to Adorno’s immanent approach: “[I]f we think that the artwork contains a social meaning, we have to assume some sort of correlation between the social system and the system of

texts, some form of imprinting...or a form of dialogue among author, text, and readers in which the text is a conscious response to a specific historical situation" (*Prismatic* 150). Hohendahl elaborates, "[Adorno] did not however, give up the concepts of society and history as the codeterminants for the aesthetic realm. His criticism is filled with a strong sense of social history as the condition under which artworks are produced and consumed" (*Prismatic* 150).

Adorno's essay "Trying to Understand Endgame", a keystone text in the Adorno oeuvre, also gives us a very clear idea of how Adorno imagines a literary text may engage with a historical or political moment without explicit reference (in other words, immanently). Beckett's *Endgame* (1958) is a one act play with four characters – Hamm, Clov, Nagg, and Nell. To give a plot summary of the play would be entirely superfluous – much like the famous *Waiting for Godot* where "[N]othing happens. Twice." (Mercier 6), the play is largely a protracted conversation among the characters that feeds into motifs of endings and beginnings, light and dark. At no point in the play is the Holocaust actually mentioned,⁵⁵ although Adorno maintains that the play expresses an innate consciousness of the Holocaust. The characters are "flies twitching after the fly swatter [of the Holocaust] has half-squashed them" (Adorno "Trying" 251).

⁵⁵ Whether Beckett was actually writing with an awareness of the Holocaust is irrelevant when we consider that for Adorno the artwork exists independently of authorial intention, a receptacle of the motions of historical time.

For Adorno, what is important about Beckett's approach is the refusal to overlay a specific political message that would ultimately distort the intrinsic meaning of the artwork. He states, "Playing with elements of reality without any mirroring, taking no stand and finding pleasure in this freedom from prescribed activity, exposes more than would be taking a stand with the intent to expose" (Adorno, "Trying" 248–9). Through technical innovation⁵⁶ and a refusal to align himself with a specific ideological position, Beckett's work achieves more than the traditionally committed artwork.⁵⁷ For Adorno, the play does not simply interrogate human subjectivity in a post-Holocaust world: to categorise the play as "existential" misses the point entirely. The characters suffer from the collapse of subjectivity, and thereby have no "condition", not even an existential one. For Beckett, the play is not a showcase of the human condition "diluted to an idea and then illustrated" (Adorno, "Trying" 241). Adorno comments, "Beckett arouse[s] the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, [he] explode[s] from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance" ("Commitment" 191). He concludes, with force, "The

⁵⁶ Adorno takes specific issue with realism. He feels that it falsely reconciles a world that is not reconciled (still riven by social divisions and antagonisms). Realism "mimics reconciliation" and "does not grasp subjective experience" ("Trying" 250). Also see page 61 of this chapter on Adorno's reading of Lukács's interest in social realism.

⁵⁷ Kafka achieves something similar in Adorno's eyes: "Kafka, in whose work monopoly capitalism appears only distantly, codifies in the dregs of the administered world what becomes of a people under the total social spell more faithfully and powerfully than do any of the novels about corrupt industrial trusts" (*Aesthetic* 230)

inescapability of [Beckett's] work compels the change of attitude which committed artworks merely demand" ("Commitment" 191).

Whereas Brecht and Sartre affirm meaning in a positive sense and thereby ignore the true political, social, and material issues at play in the work, Beckett is wary of asserting meaning in a definitive sense. For Beckett, "Meaning nothing becomes the only meaning. The deadliest fear of the characters in the drama, if not of the parodied drama itself, is the fear, disguised as humour, that they might mean something" ("Trying" 261). The play's characters quip, "[W]e're not beginning to mean something, are we?". Adorno states, "[Endgame] is [Beckett's] non-polemical judgment on existential philosophy, which by means of evocations in the concept of meaning transfigures meaninglessness itself to meaning under the name of 'thrownness'" ("Trying" 251).

Beckett interrogates meaning itself, constantly gesturing towards the ineffectuality of language to express true catastrophe. Adorno notes, "Hamm asks, 'What do they talk about? What does anyone still have to talk about?'. The play lives up to that question" (Adorno, "Trying" 262). Dialogue does not progress to an end point of meaning, a logical conclusion, but accrues meaning through a series of free-standing sentences.⁵⁸ Adorno states, "The dialogue sounds as though the law of its progression were not the rationality of statement and rejoinder, nor even their

⁵⁸ Ben Morgan, taking a slightly different angle, notes, "If [the play's phrases] undermine linguistic sense, they nevertheless incessantly generate meanings, but these meanings never combine to produce an overall message" (274).

psychological interconnection, but rather a process of hearing something out, akin to the process of listening to music that is emancipated from preexisting forms" ("Trying" 264). Adorno states, "Beckett's dialogue rips up the tracks of conversation; the train no longer reaches the point where it starts to get light" ("Trying" 264). However, despite the play being "built on the foundation of a prohibition of language" it does not "divest itself of its semantic element, [does] not become purely mimetic or gestural" ("Trying" 262) and thereby disconnect itself from historical process.⁵⁹

Adorno is championing Beckett because his work cannot or, perhaps more accurately, will not betray the promise of a reconstituted art in a post-Holocaust World. Beckett's refusal to create an artwork with a clear-cut message ensures that our access to the meaning of the text is constantly frustrated. This is a good thing for it implies not that the text is without meaning, but rather that the audience is forced to think critically about meaning. Meaning that is precarious, mediated by language that is provisional, and a narrative that rewrites traditional conceptions of plot and character is democratic in its impulses. Meaning is not handed to the audience on a plate – they have to scavenge for it through the chaotic rubble of historical context, of non-sequiturs, of gesture, and tone. It is precisely through this scavenging that Beckett's writing keeps the integrity and sanctity of the post-Holocaust text intact: in being pure of doctrine and ideology the artwork remains open to critical

⁵⁹ For Adorno language is always connected to history. See the section "Configuring Silence" in Chapter 2, pages 116–117.

interpretation, but closed to appropriation by fascism and its cohorts. Indeed, the only “commitment” we see in *Endgame* is commitment to the hazy enigma (the full significance of that term will become apparent in due course) of the text.

It is not coincidental then that Beckett is Coetzee’s hero. In the “struggle culture” of South African apartheid where “meaning something” is taken so seriously, where the play on language is short circuited in favour of hectoring or lecturing, and where writers are only taken at their literal (political) word, Beckett’s complicated disruption and interrogation of meaning offers Coetzee a fascinating literary model. It is, for Coetzee, an alternative literary model of political commitment, at odds with the intense and restrictive demands of the apartheid arts scene that insisted that artworks had to be politically relevant and hard-hitting. Coetzee, of course, is vocal about Beckett’s stylistic influence upon him: “Beckett has meant a great deal to me in my own writing – that must be obvious. He is a clear influence on my prose” (*Doubling* 25). However, Coetzee’s desire to replicate Beckett’s minimalistic writing style also speaks to a desire to access Beckett’s “secret” – his ability to use the bare bones of style to develop complicated philosophical and discursive constructs already discussed. Coetzee comments, “The essays I wrote on Beckett’s style...were also attempts to get closer to that secret, a secret of Beckett’s that I wanted to make my own” (*Doubling* 25).⁶⁰ Beckett’s “secret” is an authorial receptivity (not passivity or indifference) to the possibility of being

⁶⁰ This is not to say that Coetzee does not express an ambivalence towards aspects of Beckett’s writing. He finds Beckett’s later writing “disembodied” (*Doubling* 23).

able to speak, to say something about history, politics, social relations, in a way that is entirely different from committed texts. Coetzee's respect for Beckett, much like Adorno's, points unequivocally towards a reverence for ambiguity, a provisionality and interrogation of meaning, a textual open-endedness (all tied to a historical moment) that he employs in his own writing, all points I will explore in the following section of this chapter.

Ambiguity in Action

Coetzee's early writing existed in a highly politicised context, a point that cannot be overestimated. By the 1980s "an increasingly coherent conception of culture and its role in the struggle was emerging across a wide range of forums within the ANC, including conferences, journal articles, speeches and interviews with both artists and leadership" (Gilbert 436). This conception of culture was clearly geared towards using culture in a highly utilitarian or functional manner. Gilbert describes the situation perfectly:

It was widely agreed that the ideal art was not elitist or exclusive, but was intimately connected with 'the people' [the oppressed black majority]. Its purpose was not only to portray their plight – according to artist Thami Mnyele, this in isolation was the theme of 'defeatist' township art – but to articulate their 'hopes and aspirations', to encourage commitment to the struggle and to promote the affirmative values of a democratic South Africa. The kind of art that provided mere entertainment for the masses was also considered unacceptable: truly revolutionary art served to educate, awaken political consciousness and galvanise people to action. Finally, art was a vehicle for condemning the regime and informing the world about apartheid.

In short, culture was emphatically promoted as 'a weapon in the struggle for national liberation and democracy in our country' (436).

The artist is clearly constructed as someone who has revolutionary priorities, reflecting the oppression and daily experience of the black working class. (This emphasis on portraying the plight of the black working class, in turn, excluded upper class and professional blacks artists as much as it alienated whites ones.)⁶¹

Within this hyper-political context, at the height of apartheid tensions, emerged Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). This novel, set in South Africa during a civil war, shows the central protagonist, Michael K attempting to take his dying mother to a farm in Prince Albert. She dies along the way, but Michael continues his journey nonetheless. He eventually takes up residence at a farm he presumes to be the one of his mother's remembrance, and plants pumpkins there. After encountering a defector from the war, who claims to be descended from the farm's owners, he flees. Later in the novel Michael spends time in an internment camp, and revisits the farm, before eventually returning to Sea Point in Cape Town. The novel's difficulty lies in that it does not offer a clear political message in relation to apartheid or race relations – Michael's race is never defined. His gestures –

⁶¹ Karen Press's study, "Towards a Revolutionary Artistic Practice in South Africa" (1990), notes that the entire arts scene of apartheid South Africa was mobilized around this idea of art as a purveyor of the struggle. Entities, such as the United Democratic Front, which was composed of a number of political organizations and affiliates, had a very clear cultural policy, which was known as the "People's Culture" campaign. This campaign's criteria of what constitutes art was very functionalist, and had no place for a more nuanced type of art. Furthermore, driven by the impetus of the Black Consciousness movement were a number of local cultural initiatives that aimed at consciousness-raising among the black masses. As a source of inspiration the Black Consciousness Movement resulted in many black artists moving away from a solipsistic or individually-minded artistic practice to a more communally-minded practice.

particularly the planting of the pumpkin seeds – prove to be intractable. Some critics, such as Susan VanZanten Gallagher, see the text as a direct response to the turbulence of the 1980s and firmly locate it within the context of apartheid, although for the most part critics have read the work as a political “cop-out”, a terse refusal to take an energetic stance in relation to apartheid. Nadine Gordimer’s review “The Idea of Gardening” (1984) in the *New York Times Review of Books* best encapsulates the scepticism with which the novel was largely received.⁶² It is not necessarily that Gordimer finds Coetzee apolitical – indeed, she comments that she finds the text “implicitly and highly political”, referring in part to the “harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother” as mirror of the “experience, in 1984, of hundreds of thousands of black people in South African squatter towns and ‘resettlement’ camps” – but she questions whether Coetzee is really doing justice to the apartheid cause. She fixates on the fact that Michael seems to lack agency (unlike the protagonists of her novels that are very aware of their role in history⁶³). She states, “[Coetzee] does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves”. She notes

⁶² Gordimer’s review locks into another review in the *African Communist* entitled “Much Ado about Nobody” (1984). The review echoes many of Gordimer’s complaints, evident in statements such as, “The absence of any meaningful relationship between Michael K and anybody else...means that in fact we are dealing not with a human spirit but an amoeba, from whose life we can draw neither example nor warning because it is too far removed from the norm, unnatural, almost inhuman.” The review continues, with emphatic force, “Certainly those interested in understanding or transforming South African society can learn little from the *Life & Times of Michael K*” (qtd. in Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee* 92).

⁶³ Rosa Burger of *Burger’s Daughter* (1979) best exemplifies this claim. The novel looks at the character of Rosa Burger, the daughter of two white South African anti-apartheid activists. Initially disaffected and unwilling to enter the rough-and-tumble world of political resistance, Rosa eventually experiences a change of consciousness that results in her following in the footsteps of her parents.

that the characters appear oblivious to their role within history, the unwillingness (rather than inability) to change the status quo and rebel against the forces that define their respective lives. She declares, "Yet the unique and controversial aspect of this work is that while it is implicitly and highly political, Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it." In fact, Gordimer comments that the dire lack of political purpose to Coetzee's characters, who are representative of the oppressed, is echoed in the apathy of the oppressors themselves: "No one in this novel has any sense of taking part in determining that course; no one is shown to believe he knows what that course should be. The sense is of the ultimate malaise: of destruction. Not even the oppressor really believes in what he is doing, anymore, let alone the revolutionary."

Coetzee appears to anticipate and address this very criticism through Michael's strange relationship with the doctor at the internment camp. When Michael declares to the doctor that he stands outside of the processes of war and history: "I am not in the war" (138), the ordinarily calm doctor responds with irritation: "You are not in the war? Of course you are in the war, man, whether you like it or not! This is a camp, not a holiday resort, not a convalescent home: it is a camp where we rehabilitate people like you and make you work!" (138). The doctor demands that Michael acknowledge the impossibility of his existence outside of history in this war-torn and volatile country – he demands that Michael recognise that the very geographical spaces he inhabits, the limitation on his movements, his incarceration, people's wariness of him, are all products of a political system that

views his innocuous presence as a concrete threat. The state feels impelled to control his movements and harness his labour so that he cannot partake in the war.

However, while the doctor reprimands Michael's inability to see himself as subject to historical forces, he does suggest that his obliviousness is not necessarily unusual or surprising – in fact, it is a rather typical response. The doctor's observations of Felicity, a nurse at the hospital, point to this sentiment: "Still it occurred to me to wonder whether Felicity, to name only Felicity, thought of herself as living in a state of suspension, alive but not alive, while history hesitated over what course it would take" (158). He mulls over whether Felicity is sensitive to historical processes, the flux and torsions of power, and whether she is truly conscious and aware of historical developments. He reiterates, "I doubt that Felicity pictures to herself currents of time swirling and eddying all around us, on the battlefields and in the military headquarters, in the factories and on the streets, in boardrooms and cabinet chambers, murkily at first, yet tending ever towards a moment of transfiguration in which pattern is born from chaos and history manifests itself in all its triumphant meaning" (158). History, for the doctor, is all pervasive – flowing like an invisible river around the bastions of industry and the top echelons of government. It surges forward, blindly at first, before crystallising into something coherent. Individuals in the midst of this murky river cannot see it nor feel it, cannot truly be alive to it, although at some point its meaning and full force becomes glaringly apparent. This point is all too clear in Michael's musings in the Jakkalsdrif camp, where he senses the hand of history, but cannot quite articulate it: "He had a

presentiment of a single meaning upon which they were converging or threatening to converge, though he did not yet know what that may be" (89). Felicity is no different from Michael, who "with his fantasy of making the desert bloom with pumpkin flowers is another of those too busy, too stupid, too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history" (159). Felicity eats, sleeps, works, cleans: is immersed in her daily routine – there is no time to dwell on the grinding and moving of the political machine, that is until the presence of history becomes too strong to be ignored, until it clearly manifests itself.

The majority of people, caught up in the rigours of everyday existence, are simply acted upon by history. That individuals are oblivious to history, make no grand gestures against the laws and decisions that are made beyond them, laws and decisions that cause them misery, may suggest a hopelessness on the part of Coetzee. However, this is far from the case. If individuals have any agency (and perhaps agency is not even quite the right word), any way of asserting themselves within oppressive political systems, it is not in revolts and riots, but in the smallest of gestures – in Michael's case, the refusal to speak, the decision to farm, to cultivate, to be a steward of the earth. The small gestures (what Adorno would term "minima moralia") may not appear to impact on the great political events, but they *do* have a value in that they express the sanctity and dignity of the individual in a culture where the individual is disregarded. As Robert complains to Michael in the camp, using an image that eerily evokes the victims of the Auschwitz gas ovens – "If we just grew thin and turned into paper and then into ash and floated away, they [the

state, the government, the camp officials] wouldn't give a stuff for us" (88). The image of the teaspoon that brings the novel full circle is crucial to understanding this concept.

The novel opens with Michael's birth. His cleft palate – "the lip curled like a snail's foot, the left nostril gap[ing]" (3) – is immediately apparent, as is his inability to feed properly. Despite the fact that Anna K is disgusted by the child, she does her best to mother it. Realising that the baby is unable to suckle, she starts feeding him with a bottle. However, when even this is unsuccessful, she resorts to the smallest of gestures – feeding him with a teaspoon (3). This tiny gesture sustains him, and despite being slow and small, is crucial to baby Michael's survival. The intimacy and importance of this gesture suggests an ethical consciousness that overcomes Anna K's initial feelings of revulsion for Michael. Importantly, the novel ends with a similar image – that of Michael sustaining an imaginary old man at the bombed Visagie farm by using a teaspoon and some string to collect water. Michael imagines that "[h]e would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live" (183-4). Within this minimal action, that cannot in any way be said to be exploitative or disrespectful of the earth's resources, Michael shows himself to reaching out to another individual, to be revering and venerating the individual.

Gordimer's emphasis on agency is problematic because Michael's "living in a state of suspension" (the exact same phrase that the doctor uses in relation to Felicity) is precisely what aligns him with Beckett's Hamm and Clov, who bear out the psycho-spiritual repercussions of a political extremity that they cannot name. Their agency is a makeshift provisional agency, an agency constructed from the splinters of history. Michael's explanation of his gardening, "[E]nough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening" (109) suggests that his cultivation of pumpkins should not be read as an act of political foreclosure. It is all at once a "fertility ritual" (Kosew 143–144), a fulfillment of "maternal love, self-determination, and transcendence" (Gallagher 158), "the opposite of...[a] corrosive notion of power" (Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee* 95). Gordimer clearly misunderstands the importance of Michael's quiet tilling of the earth, the slow and purposeful agency of an act which speaks to a form of politics that lauds nurturing and gentle cultivation over agitation and violence. In fact, she obviously does not heed possibly the most important lines in the book, Michael's observation: "There was a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the earth and must be cut. It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again" (65–66).

Michael's tender relationship with the earth is wholly different from those who colonise or occupy the land. For example, when Michael is accosted at the dam and accused of aiding the guerrilla fighters, the state's soldiers blow up the Visagie

house and then place explosives into the soil around the dam in the hope that they will kill the returning guerrillas. The soldiers' planting mines rather than seeds significantly agitates Michael (125) because it desecrates the sanctity of the earth. Crucially, Michael's decision to till the earth at the Visagie farm suggests an inversion of history, in which typically colonists settle in a new place owing to its fertility and fecundity, and upon cultivating this new land, stake a claim to it. Michael is completely uninterested in setting himself up as the owner or occupier of the farm, in making a claim to the land. He makes a shelter that will wash away, and uses utensils that will biodegrade and disappear over time. When he first arrives at the Visagie farm he actively refuses to inhabit the abandoned house, or to transport materials from the house to his makeshift shelter: "The worst mistake, he told himself, would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam. Even his tools should be of wood and leather and gut, materials the insects would eat when one day he no longer needed them"(104). He asserts, "I am not building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations" (101). In refusing to set up a rival line, he refuses to partake in an assertion of power and in a vision that is not symbiotic with the earth. Michael demands that his lifestyle is provisional, transitional, ephemeral – the antithesis of cementing a legacy, establishing a place for posterity and future generations. Michael thinks to himself: "Every grain of this earth will be washed clean by the rain...and dried by the sun and scoured by the wind, before the seasons turn again. There will be not a grain left bearing my marks" (124). Michael's only interest is in establishing a relationship

with the earth that is neither abusive nor hierarchal, much in the same way that he expects his human relationships to function.⁶⁴ The food that is produced is not his (despite his describing it as his children), but the earth's. He states variously of his pumpkins, "They weren't mine. They came from the earth" (139), and "What grows is for all of us. We are all the children of the earth" (139).

Gordimer's disdain for small tender gestures and her naïve belief in agency irrespective of circumstance is located within a Lukácsian social realist discourse, a discourse that demands, as stated in Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1955), that the novel "must represent the struggle of different classes, strata, parties and trends" (164). Even where Gordimer notes that Coetzee's text acknowledges the injustice perpetuated against blacks by the white minority, it denies the "indefatigable and undefeatable persistence [that exists] among the black people of South Africa — Michael K's people". What Gordimer is getting at in this statement is not only that Coetzee is ignoring how passionately and steadfastly black South Africans actively battle against apartheid (i.e. are agents of their own fate), but that Coetzee is not taking his cue (if Michael K is *actually* black⁶⁵) from events occurring in reality. Gordimer is not just taking issue with the subject matter of *Michael K* — that the novel's protagonist is supposedly insipid and pathetic, but that the very representation of that protagonist is anti-realistic.

⁶⁴ Michael's rejection of living "peacefully" with the Visagie grandson on the farm may seem surprising. However, Michael is all too conscious that this will not be a relationship of equality: he will be treated as a servant by the Visagie grandson.

⁶⁵ To be discussed shortly.

It is not my intention to suggest that Coetzee is a modernist or postmodernist here – that is quite irrelevant (it is quite enough to say that Coetzee is not a social realist). Rather what I aim to highlight is that Gordimer is adopting a classically Lukácsian position in viewing literature that is not drawing directly from reality, and not replicating this reality, as invalid or pointless (a position that, naturally, Adorno was entirely averse towards). For Lukács, realism is always to be elevated over modernism because it exposes the reality of the totality of social and material relations in a way that highly subjective modernist literature is unable. Lukács mentions in his essay “Realism in the Balance” (1938) that modernist writers who dwell on subjective experience are problematic for they see the world (objective reality) “as it manifests itself to [them] and the characters [they] create” (36). The writer “fails to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them” (Lukács, “Realism” 36–7). Adorno responds to Lukács’s *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1955), which plays on themes present in “Realism in the Balance”, with the overtly polemical “Reconciliation under Duress” (1958)⁶⁶ that explains that it is impossible to simply correlate social reality with realistic representation as social reality is more complex than it what it overtly appears to be. Only modernist literature is able to speak with an aesthetic truth because it does not rely on the

⁶⁶ It is important to note though that Adorno does not take issue with Lukács’s early work, particularly *The Theory of the Novel* (1916).

passive acceptance of reality through mimicry. Lukács and Adorno, much like Gordimer and Coetzee, stand at separate poles of this aesthetic debate.

For Gordimer, Coetzee commits a fatal *faux pas* by ignoring the value of a Lukácsian approach that aims to highlight social and material relations at play in society. She states, “[T]he organicism that George Lukács defines as the integral relation between private and social destiny is distorted here [*Michael K*] more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer”. Gordimer is suggesting that the symbiotic relationship between the fate of the individual and social context is distorted. This distortion skews the text, “more than is allowed for” from a Lukácsian perspective, towards individual subjectivity or consciousness, precisely what Lukács deems problematic about modernist literature.

Coetzee is all too conscious that Lukács’s position “carries a great deal of power, political and moral, in South Africa today [1990]: one’s first duty as a writer is to represent social and historical processes; drawing the procedures of representation into question is time-wasting; and so forth” (*Doubling* 202). However, Coetzee distances himself from Lukács, and in response to questioning by David Attwell, states, “I happen to think Lukács’ judgement wrong, conditioned by more than a moralistic prejudice” (*Doubling* 202).⁶⁷ It is therefore unsurprising that

⁶⁷ Coetzee’s “Man’s Fate in the Novels of Alex La Guma” (1974) in *Doubling the Point* should not be read with Lukács in mind. Coetzee says of this essay, “I am not happy with the La Guma essay. Save for the moment or two (for instance, in the discussion of Alan Paton) it lacks intellectual urgency. It is academic in a bad sense of the word. I was wrong to make my case for La Guma rest on Lucács [sic]” (338).

Coetzee and Gordimer would butt heads over what constitutes an “appropriate” apartheid novel.

Undeniably, there is the possibility that Coetzee was actually aiming to be provocative. The novel’s extended interest in gardening and farming may speak to the mood pervasive in apartheid South Africa that there are “legitimate” themes and styles of writing. It is interesting to consider the specific images or content matter that was pinpointed by authors and poets during apartheid as unworthy for contemplation. Note, for instance, that statement made by the anti-apartheid activist and poet, Lesego Rampolokeng, in an interview for *New Coin* in 1999, where he discusses his aesthetic practice under apartheid:

I at some point in my life said I wasn't going to write about flowers. ... [A]nd I said I wasn't going to write love songs or love poems. But there are people in my life who I love – I love my son, I love other people as well, I can't put that aside as being secondary now, and seek to define this great and glorified concept that we call THE STRUGGLE. Because it's a struggle for myself to grow up in this world, I walk down the street and see beauty: people in love, people kissing – I can't wish that away (31).

Rampolokeng is suggesting that he had made an active decision during apartheid not to write about “frivolous” things (love and flowers), things that do not directly speak of the apartheid struggle. His attitude changed over time, and he came to acknowledge the importance of writing about aspects of everyday life, but the fact remains that love and flowers were automatically associated with being politically apathetic. A somewhat similar point, with identical imagery, is made by James

Matthews, also an anti-apartheid activist, in his poetry collection, *Cry Rage*, published in 1972:

It is said
that poets write of beauty
of form, of flowers and of love
but the words I write
are of pain and rage (qtd. in McDonald, *Literature* 292)

Matthews sets up a very clear binary between expressing injustice, the “pain and rage” of apartheid, and the mundane and politically indifferent subject matter – again, flowers and love – of much traditional poetry. Perhaps then, in a culture that considers these specific subjects taboo, *Michael K* is a tongue-in-cheek response, choosing to write about gardening and the stewardship of the earth, knowing full well it will be pooh-poohed by virulent supporters of protest writing. Coetzee is at his most whimsical, most frustrating, and perhaps most sarcastic, when he refers to Michael’s meditation on seeds – “plenty of seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket: pumpkin seeds, marrow seeds, beans, carrot seeds, beetroot seeds, onion seeds, tomato seeds, spinach seeds” (182) – when he knows he “should” be writing about “pain and rage” if he wants to write a political novel.

Coetzee acknowledges, referring specifically to Gordimer, but addressing all those individuals that expect literature to function as a mouthpiece of political ideology, that “To a reader taking this line, much of the text of *Michael K* is just one fancy evasion after another of an overriding political question: how shall the tyranny of apartheid be ended?” (*Doubling* 207). He asserts,

One writes books one wants to write. One doesn't write the books one doesn't want to write. The emphasis falls not on *one* but on the word *want* in all its own resistance to being known. The book about going off with the guerrillas, the book in the heroic tradition, is not a book I wanted-to-write, wanted enough to be able to bring off, however much I might have wanted to have written it – that is to say, wanted to be the person who had successfully brought off the writing of it.

What, then, do I want-to-write? A question to prospect, to open up, perhaps in the present dialogue, but not to mine, to exploit: too much of the fictional enterprise depends on it. Just as it is not productive to discover the answer to the question of why one desires: the answer threatens the end of desire, the end of the production of desire (*Doubling* 207–8)

Impelled by “want” rather than “need” or “duty”, Coetzee seem flippant, almost petulant. However, on closer inspection, Coetzee's response demonstrates a higher faculty, an awareness of the problematic aspect of politicised literature that locks into his views chronicled in *The Novel Today* (discussed earlier). His aesthetic project is based on dialogue, on exploration (not necessarily of alternative political strategies), but certainly a refusal to limit narratives to set political tropes or motifs, or, preconceived notions.

For Coetzee, “duty can be of two kinds: it can be an obligation imposed on the writer by society, by the soul of society in its hopes and dreams; or it can be something constitutional to the writer, what one might loosely call conscience but what [he] would tentatively prefer to call an imperative, a transcendental imperative” (*Doubling* 340). He emphatically states, “I would not want to favour the first definition unhesitatingly over the second” (*Doubling* 340). For Coetzee, the subjective impulses of the writer should not necessarily defer to the imperatives

imposed by society at large. This is not to say that Coetzee ignores the obligations of writing under situations of political extremity. David Attwell notes that although Coetzee's work "declin[es] the role of herald to a reconstructed social order, it also seems to project, at a much deeper level, a certain faith in the idea, or the possibility of an ethical community" (*Doubling* 340)⁶⁸, a view that Coetzee himself espouses: "I think you will find the contest of interpretations I have sketched here – the political versus the ethical – played out again and again in my novels" (*Doubling* 338).

Coetzee, much like Beckett, does not unequivocally commit himself towards a reductive political vision but rather points towards the complex concept of a "just life" (Adorno, "Commitment" 194), the portrayal of the dilemma of humanity in the wake of political catastrophe.

Certainly, as mentioned earlier, there is a Beckettian element to *Michael K.*

Michael's arrival at the Visagie farm is imbued with a sense of Beckettian desolation. Take for example, the account, "From horizon to horizon the landscape was empty...I could live here forever, he thought, or till I die. Nothing would happen, every day would be the same as the one before, there would be nothing to say" (46). Although his time at the farm is free of the "anxiety that belonged to the time on the road" (46), the discomfort of living there is blatantly clear. He arrives at the empty farmhouse so ravenously hungry that he is driven to kill a goat for food. After killing the goat in cold wet mud he "stamp[s] about in his wet clothes, his teeth chattering"

⁶⁸ This idea of ethical community is an important aspect of current Coetzee criticism.

(54), before eventually becoming ill and delirious (57). He is stripped of even the most basic of comforts – proper shelter, food, warmth. Adorno’s description of Beckett’s characters as “Subjects thrown completely back on their own resources, wordlessness become flesh, they consist of nothing but the wretched realities of the world, which has shriveled to bare necessity” (“Trying” 251) – appears entirely applicable to the mute Michael who must survive with whatever bodily strength and wits he has. Here Coetzee does a fine job of speaking to the physical discomfort and psychological distress associated with apartheid under which various laws were developed to curtail the free movement and the dignity of non-whites without explicitly referencing such laws, the institution of apartheid itself, or indeed, Michael K’s race.⁶⁹

This ambiguity attached to Michael’s race should not be underestimated. In the context of apartheid race was obviously absolutely crucial. Laws existed to regulate miscegenation, labour, social mobility across the various races, and thereby affected all aspects of the South African individual’s identity, sex life, work, and, in certain instances, class. By ascribing a race to Michael K we immediately politicise

⁶⁹ However, it should be noted that Coetzee’s vision is by no means as nihilistic as Beckett’s. As David Attwell notes, “Unlike Beckett...Coetzee does not allow the skeptic’s reconstruction of the *cogito* to lead to an empty space where form must register pure doubt and where all attempts to produce meaning appear clownish or vacuous; in Coetzee the process is taken in the direction of seeing the founding philosophical moments in world-historical terms” (*J.M. Coetzee* 37). In a similar vein, Patrick Hayes recognises that although Coetzee is “deeply indebted to Beckett’s prose, [he] has had the ‘imaginative courage’ to move it beyond his solipsism, and reinterpret it in terms of the dynamics of embodied life: the life that has had to confront not only the otherness of the self, but the otherness of the beings that one lives alongside, and thus the political question of what it is to live in a community” (36).

the novel, make it a traditional protest novel. Nadine Gordimer ascribes a race to Michael to align the novel with her expectations of what apartheid novels “should” do. Instead of seeing the “K” as a literary reference to Kafka – as many critics tend to do, and something which Coetzee himself deems questionable – Gordimer suggests that the K stands for Kotze or Koekemoer, traditional Coloured⁷⁰ surnames. By making K stand for Koekemoer, various aspects of the novel would fall into place nicely – K’s mother’s position as a domestic worker would connect easily with the lived reality of hundreds of thousands of black women in apartheid South Africa, as would K’s position as a gardener. K’s inability to receive a permit to travel, and his placement in an internment camp would all make perfect sense in the context of apartheid laws which controlled the free movement of non-whites. However, such a reading entirely strips the text of its ambiguity. By maintaining ambiguity Coetzee moves the text away from being understood merely as an allegorical tale of black life under apartheid to an expression of the oppressed under any situation of political extremity.⁷¹ The text resonates beyond strict geographical and temporal confines. More importantly, the novel defies straightforward interpretation, and the possibility of the text being appropriated by reductive metanarratives. It maintains

⁷⁰ A term used to refer to the mixed race population of South Africa. It is not regarded as derogatory.

⁷¹ In this sense it speaks to Coetzee’s emphasis that he is less a South African writer, and more a writer of the world. In an interview with Tony Morphet, Coetzee points out that the reading of his identity and political consciousness in narrowly South African terms is something imposed upon him by external entities: “I sometimes wonder whether it isn’t simply the vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a ‘South African novelist’” (64). Also see footnote 11.

its political integrity, its social aspect, without lending itself to a version of politics that degrades its complexity and nuance.⁷²

However, perhaps the most effective way that Coetzee maintains the ambiguity and complexity of Michael lies in his obstinate silence, both subject to the dominant discourse but resistant to it.⁷³ Michael refuses to yield the story of his life to various figures, such as the doctor and his colleagues at the internment camp, and to a lesser degree the Jakkalsdrift inmates. He states, “I am more like an earthworm...[w]hich is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence” (182). As a consequence these figures attempt to classify Michael – impose a story on him that will reconcile him with the way that they interpret history, politics, or human identity. For example, when captured, the (white) authorities impose the identity of a soldier or activist upon him, even though it is quite clear from his physical condition that he is not. Noël reports to Michael’s doctor, “According to [the register]...Michaels is an arsonist...running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local

⁷² Peter McDonald’s reading of Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* (1999) is not altogether dissimilar from this argument. McDonald suggests that if we stop reading the novel as an allegory of white-black relations in post-apartheid South Africa, the locus of the novel shifts to highlight questions of gender and sexuality. McDonald states, “If we resist the strong temptation to read the novel as a story that bears witness to history, we would need to understand key events functionally, rather than expressively or mimetically” (“Disgrace Effects” 327). He continues, “On this sort of reading the rape, for instance, would feature not as a sign of the ‘realities of South African life’ – however horrific its rape statistics may be – nor as a manifestation of ‘white fears’. Its justification would lie primarily in its narrative function measured in part by its impact on the novel’s central characters” (“Disgrace Effects” 327). It is this acknowledgement that ambiguity may be a viable form of political discourse in artworks that are not traditionally “committed” that is truly revolutionary.

⁷³ Silence and agency are also discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis in the “Agents of Withholding” section.

guerrilla population" (131). The doctor is particularly concerned with reconciling or "healing" the aporias in Michael's narrative and begs him to speak and dispel the confusion about his life and political commitments. During the interrogation scene, he says, "*Talk, Michaels...Now talk...You want to live, don't you? Well then, talk, make your voice heard, tell your story!*" (140).⁷⁴

Through his persistent silence Michael remains "a human soul above and beneath classification" (151). As Coetzee comments in his interview with Dick Penner: "Other people can think of him [Michael] what they want. The important thing is that he doesn't [classify himself]" (qtd. in Kossew 146). And certainly, as anxious as the doctor is to classify Michael, he also acknowledges that this "soul blessedly untouched by doctrine" (152) is worthy of veneration owing to his intractable silence. The doctor confesses in a stance perhaps not all that dissimilar from Coetzee's himself: "As time passed, however, I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered" (163). He lauds the value of Michael's silence: "We ought to value you and celebrate you, we ought to put your clothes on a maquette in a museum, your clothes and your packet of pumpkin seeds too, with a label; there ought to be a plaque nailed to the racetrack wall commemorating your stay here" (152). He continues, "You are precious, Michaels, in your way" (152).

⁷⁴ In order to ensure that Michael is not tortured by officials, the doctor and Noël fabricate a report, thereby imposing a story of Michael as aid to the guerrillas upon Michael. The doctor addresses Michael, "So Michaels, the long and the short of it is that by my eloquence I saved you. We will make up a story to satisfy the police, and instead of travelling back to Prince Albert handcuffed in the back of a van in a pool of urine you can lie in clean sheets listening to the cooing of doves in the trees, dozing, thinking your own thoughts. I hope you will be grateful one day" (142).

Yet, during a civil war that demands the construction of clear-cut identities (good versus bad; soldier versus terrorist), Michael will not be honoured, but dismissed and forgotten. The doctor laments, “The truth is that you [Michael] are going to perish in obscurity and be buried in a nameless hole in a corner of the racecourse, transport to the acres of Woltemade being out of the question nowadays, and no one is going to remember you but me, unless you yield and at last open your mouth. I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!*” (152). This is precisely how Michael’s silence will be read in the aesthetic culture of apartheid, in a culture that puts a premium on the “right” types of stories, and is obsessed with political sloganeering and manifestos. The value of Michael’s perplexing silence will be entirely discarded.

In fact, the text embodies what Adorno refers to as an “enigmaticalness” (a concept I will touch upon again in later chapters⁷⁵). For Adorno, the autonomous artwork is an enigma, a puzzle. He asserts, “Every artwork is a picture puzzle, a puzzle to be solved, but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that it remains a vexation” (*Aesthetic* 121). The autonomous artwork, coded and mysterious, frustrates the impulse towards decoding, despite gesturing towards it. As Lorraine Markotic notes, “Artworks are like riddles, and riddles call for solutions—even if we never learn them” (295). Adorno makes it clear that the artwork’s inner meaning can never be resolved, or fully understood: “The better an artwork is understood, the more it is unpuzzled on one level and the more obscure its constitutive enigmaticalness

⁷⁵ See pages 141–142; 177–179.

becomes" (*Aesthetic* 121). Decoding the puzzle of the artwork does not involve full comprehension – an aspect of the work will continue to defy interpretation. Put differently, Adorno asserts, "If a work opens itself completely, it reveals itself as a question and demands reflection; then the work vanishes into the distance, only to return to those who thought they understood it, overwhelming them for a second time with the question 'What is it?'" (*Aesthetic* 121). The artwork's "enigmaticalness outlives the interpretation that arrives at the answer" (Adorno, *Aesthetic* 125). It is important to note that despite autonomous artworks being elusive and enigmatic, they still "indicate a truth – even if this truth cannot be established" (Markotic 295). This inner core to the artwork is its truth content, something roughly equivalent with the historicity of the text, and significantly more complex than the text's ostensible meaning, a concept I will discuss thoroughly in Chapter 3 with reference to Margarita Karapanou. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection (Adorno, *Aesthetic* 128).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ At this point it may be useful to focus our attention on Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012). In this text, Ngai offers us a new set of aesthetic categories – the interesting, the zany, and the cute – better suited to describe contemporary capitalism, a capitalism that is "hypercommodified, information-saturated, [and] performance-driven"(1). In her critique of the interesting, Ngai notes that the power of the interesting lies in its discursiveness, its distinctive ability to promote and develop discussion. In fact, she states that in the post-war media economy, the value of any artwork "becomes defined above all by its power to generate discourse about [itself]" (37). This does not necessarily mean that the artwork is of any intellectual substance or merit – indeed, Ngai states that the "interesting might be described as an aesthetic without content", more concerned with being novel (120), but it is certainly possible to say that the artwork which is complex or contradictory offers more "food for thought" in terms of conceptual dialogue. And with its obsession with dialogue, the interesting shows itself to function as a category of atemporality, a constant reaching towards (but never quite achieving) a discursive endpoint. This type of work has the "capacity to produce new knowledge" (171), to expand intellectual horizons.

In opposition to traditional political literature that offers us the “final say” on a specific topic, whose discursiveness terminates with a slogan, literature such as Coetzee’s forces us to negotiate meaning, to sift through layers of meaning to become a version of the political quite unlike that of its apartheid contemporaries. Whereas traditional political literature is concerned with information, Coetzee is concerned with knowledge. Of course, Coetzee himself would never suggest that he ascribes to Adorno’s aesthetic theory of “enigmaticalness”, but he is certainly invested in maintaining the ambiguity and open-endedness of the text. He explicitly commits himself to the codedness of his work, the puzzling aporias that stand at the centre of his work. As Attwell notes of Coetzee in an interview, rather than explaining parts of *Michael K* deemed problematic, its “furthering the liberal fantasy of the politics of innocence”, Coetzee asserts, “I have no wish to enter the lists as a defender of Michael K. If war is the father of all things, let the objection you voice go to war with the book, which has now had its say, and let us see who wins” (*J.M. Coetzee* 100).

Taking a different view, Palumbo-Liu refers to literature less as a means of informing the reader, but as an exploratory space in which the “systems” of “economics, choice theory, healthcare, biomedicine, advertising, information, media” (xii), and so on, are described. These descriptions “from a [literary] point outside [these] system[s offer] another way of conceiving of those relations between people in those delivery systems” (xii). The act of reading, of imagining, becomes a form of political or ideological understanding. Palumbo-Liu suggests that “Rather

than focusing entirely on meaning-making, and *whether we get it or not*, we should think of how literature engenders a space for imagining our relation to others and thinking through why and how ...[certain] relation[s] exist[], historically, politically, ideologically” (my italics, 14). For Palumbo-Liu, in short, “we read to open ourselves to experiences that are not ours and will most likely never be ours, but by acknowledging that otherness as otherness, we both see its difference from us and are thereby enriched, and we also appreciate the complexity of the world” (14).⁷⁷

Moving away from Coetzee’s apartheid work to his recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), Coetzee’s discursive ambiguity shows itself to be as pronounced as ever. The novel presents us with Simón, a middle-aged man, who has taken a young child, David, under his wing while on a sea journey to Novilla. Novilla is a city without social hierarchies, passion, and salt, and seemingly a haven for a host of migrants. Once in Novilla Simón commits himself to finding David’s mother even though David has lost the letter that would have offered information regarding her identity or whereabouts. The absence of this letter that would accurately identify the child’s mother results in Simón choosing Inés (a 30-year-old “virgin” he sees playing tennis with her brothers at La Residencia) purely on intuition. Simón says, “I arrived in this land bare of everything save one rock-solid conviction: that I would know the boy’s mother when I saw her. And the moment I

⁷⁷ “In each of these pronouncements we are led to the same conclusion — great works of literature deliver difference, otherness, that which is nonsimilar to us, all with the effect of making us better, richer, more moral, more tolerant, more sensitive to the world and the lives it contains” (Palumbo-Liu 12).

beheld Inés I knew it was she” (84). When reproached for following mere intuition, he retorts, “[It was m]ore than that. A conviction” (85). The rest of the novel revolves around this makeshift familial dynamic between Inés, Simón, and the child.

Using *The Childhood of Jesus’s* title as an explanatory key, we engage with the novel as a retelling of the childhood of Christ. Owing to the title, we search out correlates: Inés’s and Simón’s strange pairing is roughly symmetrical with Christ’s family structure (Inés plays the role of the “virgin” mother and Simón the biologically unrelated Joseph figure); David’s obvious intelligence speaks to Christ’s singularity, and his injuries (supposedly from the barbed wire at Punto Arenas) refer to Christ’s stigmata following the crucifixion. Even David’s misbehaviour may be read with an awareness that Christ himself was “no angel” (to use a colloquialism) – like all children, Christ misbehaved and worried his parents at times. But perhaps the novel’s title is a red herring, a playful Coetzeen quip purposely aimed at teasing its readers? Stripped of its title, the novel certainly leaves us at a significant loss: David simply becomes a clever but over-indulged child. Is Coetzee then interrogating the manner in which the individual reader searches for meaning? Certainly when Simón asks if there is a master key to open a room in Building C, the response “*Llave maestra. There is no such thing as a llave universal. If we had a llave universal all our troubles would be over*” (4) seems to be a loaded statement, pointing to how we would like to easily unlock meaning. In offering us the title *The Childhood of Jesus* is Coetzee suggesting that when confronted with a mere hint of a metanarrative our impulse as readers is to draw connections, to align aspects of the

tale with what may seem “factually” appropriate? If this is the case, Coetzee consistently frustrates such an impulse, leaving us with no definitive answers.

Alternatively, the novel, as a tale of migration, undoubtedly strikes an odd chord in a world increasingly globalised, constantly made smaller through air travel and sophisticated communications technology, yet highly nationalised. Ethnic and national conflicts continue to abound, with no less than 127 civil wars and 25 interstate wars between 1945 and 1999 (Fearon 75). Illegal migration from trouble hotspots into safer (but socially hostile) European countries are common. (At the moment of writing over 300 African migrants drowned off the coast of Italian Lampedusa, shortly after a similar incident with fewer casualties – mostly from the Middle East – just a week earlier in Maltese waters.) Yet, Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus* is strangely devoid of the ethically-oriented or nationalised narratives associated with the act of migration. We never learn of Simón’s and the child’s former country, and although the inhabitants of Novilla express a satisfaction in living in Novilla, this is certainly not expressed in anything but the blandest and most dispassionate of terms. In fact, the novel’s meaning (particularly when the novel’s title is taken into account) entirely eludes us. Is this a rewriting of that biblical story in which a man and a pregnant woman arrive in Bethlehem – friendless and penniless, like many a migrant – to be housed in a stable? Is it the story of the 20th century with countless men and women travelling to the colonies of North and South America, Africa, and Australasia to build their lives anew? Or is it a political commentary on the here and now, where, to paraphrase Joseph Muscat

(the Maltese PM) in the wake of the Lampedusa disaster, the Mediterranean is becoming a watery grave, a cemetery for the politically desperate? Or perhaps, it is a meditation on praxis vs theory, if one were to see the socialist utopia that is Novilla as an active embodiment of Marxist ideals set up against the contemplative Platonism taught in Novilla's Institute and used in everyday discussions (including that infamous scatological discussion between Simón and David on the "poo-ness of poo")? *Childhood* may even be a meditation on the viability of socialist utopias in which migrants are given access to various amenities – identity documents, shelter, transport, health care (all free of charge) – by state-run institutions, but remain dissatisfied (if Simón is considered a gauge of happiness) because biological instincts – sexual urges in particular – that may interfere with the running of such a system are repressed or dismissed? Within this discursive ambiguity, we are confronted *not* by a displacement of political narratives, but by an over-proliferation of political possibilities, of various political narratives.

It is this acknowledgement that ambiguity may be a viable form of political discourse that is truly revolutionary, truly liberating. As Nigel Mapp notes, "The more that artworks resist discursive filleting while still calling out for interpretation and response, the more likely the claim of particularity, the limits of identity thinking" (161). In other words, artworks that resist clear-cut interpretation push up against the destructive tendencies of identity thinking that ossifies thought through a system of totalising and homogenising concepts and categories. Artworks that resist "discursive filleting" are able to "rebuff attempts [at] assimiliat[ion]...because

they point towards a meaning we cannot grasp. Such artworks' significance is not separable and portable; they demand to be seen, heard, felt in the flesh" (Mapp 161). In fact, Adorno himself comments that when it comes to artworks, "it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended" (*Aesthetic* 181).⁷⁸ Indeed, through such works we are confronted with an alternative manner of thinking about political commitment in a way that champions authors who refuse to kowtow to spurious political rhetoric. Adorno's conception of the artwork that values complexity, and alludes to history or politics beyond the explicit or overt content (its manifestly articulated or more silent elements), champions authors such as Margarita Karapanou and Michael Ondaatje (to be discussed in due course) that are not traditionally considered political by the critical establishment or the reading public. These authors become politically significant, are given a status previously denied them. Here we have a literary-philosophical model, far less likely of being coopted by the forces of political propaganda, a model amenable to critical thought, and if that is not something commendable, what is?

⁷⁸ Adorno states, "Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks" (*Aesthetic* 121). This discussion of enigmaticalness of the artwork in *Aesthetic Theory* is couched within a larger discussion of "What is Art?"

“Spoken Only in Silence”: Adorno’s and Coetzee’s Quiet Politics

Art is complicitous with ideology in that it feigns the factual existence of reconciliation. By their own apriori, or, if one will, according to their own idea, artworks become entangled in the nexus of guilt. Whereas each artwork that succeeds transcends this nexus, each must atone for this transcendence, and therefore its language seeks to withdraw into silence: An artwork is, as Beckett wrote, *a desecration of silence*.

— Adorno, *Aesthetic* 134

The name of the catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence.

— Adorno, “Trying” 249

On the 11th of September 2012, Judith Butler, the philosopher and academic, was awarded the prestigious Adorno Prize by the city of Frankfurt. The Prize is given to individuals that continue the tradition of critical theory in the intellectual spirit of Adorno. That year the Prize’s award was marked by considerable controversy: Frankfurt’s German-Jewish community complained vehemently that Butler’s political stance on Israel is anti-Semitic, and that she expresses support for Hamas and Hezbollah, Islamic organisations associated with terrorist activity in Israel. Butler is certainly not pro-Israel, feeling that a virulent form of Zionism rather than Judaism is the driving force behind Israel’s oppressive politics and human rights abuses against the Palestinian people. Equally, she does not support Hamas

and Hezbollah although she believes that their political demands should be acknowledged. She views them as expressions of the Global Left articulating a resistance to Israeli imperialism and occupation. Despite the German-Jewish community's insistence that the Prize's committee reconsider Butler's award, the committee held to its decision. What is significant about the controversy attached to that year's Prize, is that it refers to key issues of Adorno's oeuvre itself: the violent domination of human beings by others, social injustice, and anti-Semitism. It also speaks of the right to expression in the face of human suffering. Revoking the Prize would have heralded a moment of censorship (a smothering of a voice concerned with the position of a subjugated people), completely antithetical to Adorno's critical ethos.

Interestingly, some of the issues at play in the Adorno Prize controversy – coercive socio-political structures, suffering, the silencing of the individual – engage with aspects of this chapter, which sets Adorno's conception of silence against Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974) and *Foe* (1986). Coetzee's use of silence is highly contested, with critics like Benita Parry feeling that it plays into "exclusionary colonialist practices" (151) both on a structural and textual level, whereas critics such as Derek Attridge, David Attwell and Gayatri Spivak (among others) refute such a claim. Through Adorno, the emancipatory potential of the various dimensions of Coetzee's silence, which explore issues of the Other's historical silencing and suffering under imperial and colonial rule, is evoked.

Configuring Silence

It is certainly possible to say that Adorno's interest in language begins in the early 1930s with his essay "Theses on the Language of the Philosopher" and continues all the way into his later works such *Negative Dialectics* (1966) as well as the unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). It is important to note though that Adorno does not provide us with an overriding or comprehensive philosophy of language. Instead, we gain an understanding of his philosophy of language through his discussion of various other issues or concerns. It is clear that Adorno makes a distinction between different types of language: communicative or poetic language. Hohendahl offers a succinct and accurate definition of each: the language of communication "facilitates understanding (the exchange of meaning)" whereas poetic language "requires careful reading procedures" (*Prismatic* 99).

Communicative language is often viewed as a functionary of "social domination and control" (Palamarek 44). However, the differences between the two types of language should not be overstressed for they are by no means "absolute opposites, but like all of Adorno's dialectical pairs, reciprocally mediated" (Palamarek 44).

Furthermore, it appears that the differences between the two are quite clear in certain works, but not as apparent in others. Hohendahl observes that in *Aesthetic Theory* [Adorno]...differentiate[s] two aspects of the concept of language that were not separated in the ["On Lyric Poetry and Society"] essay: language as a means of communication, and language as artistic expression" (*Prismatic* 236).

What is significant about Adorno's theory of language is that he is uninterested in interpretations of language that do not acknowledge the "historical moment" of language (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 225). Adorno believes that "language is more than a system of signs at the disposal of cognitive functions" (Düttmann 1). For Adorno, language is socially and historically imbedded. Words are "never mere signifiers for what can be conceptualized; rather words are penetrated by as well as filled with history" (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 223). Therefore, Adorno struggles to identify with both ontological and formalist-semiotic approaches to language, which strip language of a substantial connection or relationship with history (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 225).

Adorno's connecting language and history has particular implications for language used in relation to the Holocaust. Adorno acknowledges the compromised status of language in its ability to direct the staging of Auschwitz, and believes, much like George Steiner – the esteemed literary critic – in his oft-cited quotation, that:

Languages have great reserves of life. They can absorb masses of hysteria, illiteracy, and cheapness....But there comes a breaking point. Use a language to conceive, organise and justify Belsen; use it to make specifications for gas ovens; use it dehumanise man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it (101).

Language is clearly a living organism imbued with historical process and transition. It not only reflects national shifts from peace to war, from humanity to inhumanity but actually changes in a substantive or integral sense according to its use. Adorno

clearly asserts this point in Lecture Sixteen of *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (1965) and views it as a significant problem considering that Auschwitz can only be thought about through words. Of course, Adorno casts grave doubt on the efficacy of words – particularly theological words – to express the enormity of the Holocaust. He believes that “lofty” words after Auschwitz have become “simply incommensurable with experience” – there can be no direct correlation between the lived event and the expression of that event, but this appears to be of secondary importance to the fact that evil “appropriates the most noble and elevated words for its own use” (*Metaphysics* 123).⁷⁹

For Adorno, post-Holocaust language must undergo change and be purged of its compromised status before it can be utilised for cultural production, although a “[r]etreat to a prehistorical realm of linguistic purity is impossible” (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 224) because all language under modernity suffers from reification and disintegration, concepts that will be discussed in due course. Adorno advocates that “after Auschwitz there is no word tinged from on high, not even a theological one, that has any right to exist unless it underwent a transformation” (*Negative* 367). However, that language is able to absorb change is precisely its redemptive quality: if it could be used to construct and employ violence (even euphemistically); similarly, it can be used to articulate or counteract its after-effects. Adorno’s quotation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is crucial: “Even though it is true that there is

⁷⁹ The appropriation of language by evil is “characteristic of evil *today*” (*Metaphysics* 123; my italics), with “today” referring to a world where totalitarianism exists.

no word which could not ultimately be used by the lie, the word's temper never gleams in the lie but only in the thought hardened in the fight against power" (181–2). Adorno observes that language can be appropriated by the forces of domination and oppression, but it is through its revolutionary gesture that it "gleams" or shines with the light of the utopian ideal.⁸⁰

Adorno's analysis of the Chandos letter – a fictive letter written by Hugo van Hofmannsthal to Francis Bacon in 1902 in which he pretends to be Lord Chandos lamenting the state of language and its ability to communicate effectively – functions as a manifesto of how to read his entire oeuvre, and offers a sense of his attitude towards language, silence, and key Marxist concepts.⁸¹ Adorno's "George and Hofmannsthal" (1942) essay discusses the relationship between Stefan George, an influential German literary figure, and his younger protégé, Hugo van

⁸⁰ The optimism of this statement should be understood in terms of the fact that all philosophy "practiced in the face of despair" must be read from the "standpoint of redemption" (Adorno, *Minima* 247), a point reiterated by various critics (see Thomson and Eagleton). Eagleton clearly states: "Adorno's historical pessimism is always tempered by a vision, however ragged and threadbare, of the just society" (359).

⁸¹ The postscript to Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a rewriting of Van Hofmannsthal's letter, elaborates on Coetzee's complicated relationship with language. Coetzee's version is written from the perspective of Lord Chandos's wife, who shares a first name with *Elizabeth Costello*'s central protagonist, thereby reinforcing the connection between the postscript and the novel's main body. The postscript's importance is obvious, with Stephen Mulhall asserting, "We should...take seriously that this apparently supplementary text could also be the heart of the matter" (231). Through the postscript Coetzee alerts us to language's inadequacy, unable to describe fully the various horrors of human and animal suffering. Coetzee's Lady Chandos states, "Always it is not what I say but something else...[W]ords give way beneath your feet like rotting boards" (228). It is through the use of words that "the beyondness of reality to language is made manifest" (Mulhall 234). Yet, the irony that Lady Chandos is able to express the incommunicability of language through language is obvious and the claim towards the ineffectuality of language is undermined. Clearly, Coetzee acknowledges the language's power in representing reality. However, this power makes Coetzee wary of language, leading him to emphatically assert that he is "ill at ease with language that lays down the law, that is not provisional, that does not as one of its habitual motions glance back sceptically at its premises" (*Doubling* 394).

Hofmannsthal, and makes specific reference to the Chandos letter.⁸² Adorno sees the Chandos letter “not [as] mere theatrics” (Buck-Morss 175), but built upon “an extremely real insight that language no longer allows anything to be said as it is experienced” (204). He continues that language is “either reified and banal, the sign of commodities, falsifying thought from the start; or...install[ing] itself, ceremonious without ceremony, as the mighty without power, ensconced by its own force” (204-205). In the first of Adorno’s two comments, he points to the very real disjuncture between language and substantive expression. (He does not appear to differentiate between the types of language, communicative or poetic.) In the second instance Adorno is clearly referencing the Marxist implication of language with material relations, which sees language not as autonomous, but as a feature of social domination, and in thrall to the ideas of the dominant class (Radics 282). For the quintessential Marxist language and ideas are inseparable and the hegemonic ideologies of the ruling class “extends to the use of language” (Radics 282). The implications of such a conception are clear: independent human thinking is undermined and language functions as “a form of social control” (Nicholsen 67), something which is especially true of communicative language.

For Adorno the reification of language is of particular importance. Adorno’s understanding of reification⁸³ – a term that he often uses interchangeably with

⁸² Adorno refers to the Chandos letter again over twenty years later in his *Metaphysics* lectures. See *Metaphysics*, page 123.

⁸³ One of Adorno’s great strengths is his use of Marxist terminology and concepts without necessarily aligning himself with a dogmatic Marxist position (or any doctrine). After the end of World War II,

objectification – is heavily indebted to that of Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist and intellectual. Lukács defines reification as “the structural process whereby the commodity form permeates life in capitalist society” (Zuidervaart, *Adorno's* 76). In other words, reification relates to the process in which human beings are objectified through material relations based on exchange value. Zuidervaart observes that Lukács was especially concerned with how reification makes human beings “seem like mere things obeying the inexorable laws of the marketplace” (*Adorno's* 76). This reification impacts upon human consciousness and undermines the individual’s ability to process consciously the totality of material relations. The reification of consciousness lead Adorno and Horkheimer to comment that “[a]ll reification is a forgetting” (*Dialectic* 274). However, it is necessary to note that the reification of language is linked to its progressive demise. It is clear from Adorno’s pre-World War II essay “Theses on the Language of the Philosopher”(circa 1930) that this process precedes the Holocaust as he openly states: “*Today* the philosopher confronts disintegrated language”(My italics; 45). The disintegration of language is not solely a result of corruption by the Holocaust, although it certainly exacerbated the process. Instead, Nicholzen, pointing to Adorno’s “Borchardt” essay, describes the forces implicit to the development of capitalism – “social domination, the market [and]

Adorno and his colleagues at the Frankfurt School made it clear that they refused to accept Marxism without questioning its applicability and relevancy to a “new social reality [which] had emerged”(Jay, *Dialectical* 254). In other words, Adorno and the Frankfurt School remained committed not to Marxism as a “closed body of received truths”, but to innovative “theoretical constructions” that accurately and honestly responded to an ever-shifting social reality (Jay, *Dialectical* 254).

exchange” as responsible for both communicative and poetic language’s “historical process of deterioration” (qtd. in Nicholse 66).⁸⁴

According to Adorno, the job of both the philosopher and the writer is to acknowledge the reification and disintegration of language and from that point attempt to establish a semblance of the truth, itself a difficult “variable” concept linked to historicity (Thomson 121). (Hohendahl views truth as the injection of history in the word: “Words are penetrated by as well as filled by history, and truth is the result of this fusion” (*Prismatic* 223).) Adorno though, quite characteristically, does not offer any concrete solutions as to how the philosopher should ultimately address reified disintegrated language. As Palamarek laments:

Nowhere is Adorno explicit as to the way that philosophical language is to achieve a relation between word and thing that conserves an orientation to truth. What kind of language, philosophical or otherwise, offers a counter to reification, or indeed might even escape it? Moreover, how is it possible for language to become reified, yet also function as a critique of itself as reified, as well as of reification *in toto*?(51)

Adorno’s suggestion that reified language critique itself suggests that he is thinking in terms of an immanent interpretative framework (discussed in Chapter 1⁸⁵), the idea that concepts should be appraised in a self-contained manner, not through an imposed transcendental system. The problem behind such an approach (though not specific to it) lies in the fact that if all human consciousness is affected by reification, how can reification even be ascertained? Palamarek is quite correct in suggesting

⁸⁴ Palamarek opines that Adorno does not offer a root cause behind the disintegration of language.

⁸⁵ See pages 79–81.

that the reification of human consciousness perpetuates further reification and consequently an incisive critique of reification would be extremely difficult.

Reification must be overcome in order for societal reconciliation to take place (Palamarek 44), and the importance of working against reification should not be under-estimated. In fact, in “Theses” Adorno offers us the idea of “configurational” language – a concept that asserts that if philosophical language wants to retain an interest in the truth, and respond to the situation of linguistic decay and reification, it is necessary to arrange or order words differently. This idea clearly expresses Benjamin’s influence upon Adorno; Adorno is speaking to Benjamin’s image of the constellation presented in his 1928 text, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, that envisages, simply put, the construction and investigation of a generalised concept through a non-hierarchical system⁸⁶ in which various particular concepts gather and juxtapose each other, much like stars clustered together in the night sky to form a constellatory image. (This concept is explored thoroughly in the discussion of Adorno’s non-identical in Chapter 4.⁸⁷) Benjamin’s development of the constellation to engage with philosophical concepts, in response to the Heideggerian premise that “a radical reorientation of philosophy permitted, even necessitated, a new philosophical vocabulary” (Buck-Morss 93), clearly asserted that “the introduction

⁸⁶ In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin characterised the nonhierarchy of particulars functioning with ‘perfect independence and unimpaired’ (qtd in Buck-Morss 94). Adorno finds Benjamin’s constellation appealing because it rejects a “‘pseudo-logical continuum’ between the particular and the general, proceeded by classification and systematisation” (Buck-Morss 94) that feeds into the totalising energies of capitalist modernity.

⁸⁷ See pages 218–220.

of new terms' was a 'dubious' procedure, the old language ought to be 'renewed'" (Benjamin qtd. in Buck-Morss 93). Adorno comments, "In order to posit a new truth, there remains for [the philosopher] no hope other than to place the words in a new configuration, which would itself yield such a new truth" ("Theses" 38). Hohendahl sees this process of configuration, the constellatory clustering of words around the truth as resulting in a situation where a "new" truth – a truth "appropriate to the current historical moment"⁸⁸ (Nicholsen 90) – is elicited. Nicholsen pushes her interpretation of configuration even further, suggesting that configuration refers to a contextual understanding of language in which the individual word, initially "indeterminate", releases its truth when placed in relation to other words. The word "begin[s] to 'decipher [itself] through the abundance of combinations in which they appear.' This method of language study...allows for a fuller grasp of the word's [true] substance" (Nicholsen 61–62).

Configurational language does not refer to the replacement of old words with new ones. Adorno blatantly states, "[The philosopher] is as little permitted to think the word as pre-given as to invent a word" ("Theses" 37). Instead the philosopher should reinvigorate old words through their being placed in "tension with the thing and their own historical content" (Palamarek 49). The creation of new words would suggest an inherent integrity to words – something that Adorno quite obviously

⁸⁸ Susan Buck-Morss reiterates, "It followed that in constructing ideas it was continuously necessary to return to the phenomena themselves, the more so as the ideas were not eternal but historically specific constellations" (94).

wishes to avoid (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 242). As Hohendahl elaborates, quoting Adorno's comments in "Theses": "The procedure is not to be identified with the intention to 'explain' new truths with conventional words; on the contrary, configurative language will have to avoid entirely the explicit procedure that presupposes the unspoken dignity of words (GS 1:369)"⁸⁹(*Prismatic* 224). NicholSEN elaborates that this configurative language effectively alters the words used, creating a "unity of concept and thing that is dialectically intertwined and cannot be disentangled through explication" (91).

At this point it should be apparent that Adorno, despite his reservations about language, still sees it as a vehicle to express thought. In fact, if we turn once more to the "Hofmannsthal and Stefan George" essay Adorno shows quite clearly that he does not offer us the option of renouncing language, a point deftly explored by Buck-Morss. Adorno asserts that to "renounce communication is better than to adjust" (225), but qualifies this statement with the belief that there exists a better alternative to renunciation – a "more courageous choice than Hofmannsthal's" (Buck-Morss 175) – to use a language which is critically aware of material relations. Adorno lauds the "passionate attempt to express oneself in language which shuns banality like a taboo, is the attempt, however hopeless, to distance experience from its deadly enemy, one which grows stronger in late bourgeois society: oblivion" (224-5). Buck-Morss notes that central to Adorno's project is the notion that "[i]f

⁸⁹ For Palamarek's translation of this passage from "Theses" see page 38.

language could no longer presume to rectify reality, it should not abandon its more modest power, the critical power to call reality by its right name, making manifest the truth within appearance" (175).

Adorno's conception of history more fully explains why he never considers silence as an option. As mentioned previously in Chapter 1, Adorno adopts a teleological approach to history in which the Holocaust is both a predetermined product of history but also an anomaly within it. Undermining the traditional view of history as characterised by a linear temporal progression informed by the Enlightenment's values, Adorno clearly articulates that history is marred by episodes of barbarism and violence, which should simultaneously be understood as aberrations (thereby maintaining the integrity of individual suffering), but also as inevitabilities. He clearly states, "The task of a dialectical philosophy of history, then, is to keep both these conceptions in mind – that of discontinuity and that of universal history. This means that we should not think in terms of alternatives: we should not say that history is continuity or history is discontinuity. We must say instead that history is highly continuous in discontinuity" (*History* 92). Adorno, in fact, feels that Benjamin's description of the Angel of History, the Angelus Novus, "His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (*History* 92), aptly embodies the "permanence of catastrophe" (*History* 92), the "union of the continuity and discontinuity of history" (*History* 92).

This expression of history cannot be disrupted or halted by silence, only by culture. As discussed thoroughly in the thesis's first chapter, for Adorno, "Auschwitz irrefutably demonstrated the failure of culture" (*Negative* 362) and therefore, any individual who calls for the "maintenance" of pre-Holocaust culture becomes an "accomplice" of this culture (*Negative* 367). However, he demands that "unfree humanity...arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself" (*Negative* 365). He calls for the creation of a reconstituted culture – one in which language resists reification and is imbued with a historical consciousness of "perennial suffering [that] has as much a right to expression as the tortured person has to scream" (*Negative* 362).⁹⁰ Palamarek, drawing on *Dialectic*, reminds us that language has a crucial role in this commitment to suffering for "[i]f there is a driving force behind Adorno's philosophy, it is the need for language to 'lend a voice to suffering'" (44).

Adorno seems to have two singular problems with silence. Firstly, he believes that "[i]n silence we simply use the objective truth to rationalise our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie" (*Negative* 367). He thereby suggests that through silence individuals rationalise their inability to express incidents that must be expressed. This point is made explicit in Lecture 15 in *Metaphysics*, in a passage strikingly close to one that features in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno

⁹⁰ Refer to Chapter 1 for a discussion on Adorno's declaration "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Cultural" 34) that appears to demand the cessation of cultural production to respect the Holocaust's enormity.

defines “subjective incapacity” as an “incapacity to say what needs to be said”(119), a folding to the “temptation” to “say nothing at all” (119) because of the harshness of the objective truth. Secondly, in silence lies the danger of forgetting the extreme suffering which “tolerates no forgetting” (“Commitment” 188). For Adorno, the greatest service individuals may offer the victims of atrocity is “not to forget them” (*Metaphysics* 124). It may be possible to say then that silence may be used as an alternative to language provided it fulfils Adorno’s stringent criteria regarding the use of language – a resistance to the reification of the administered world, and a resolute commitment to truth, history, and suffering. Furthermore, in situations where language has been tainted by political injustice and by cruelty, silence gains ethical “authority”. This is not the same as saying that silence gains primacy over language but rather that silence becomes a feasible means of communication. In short, “silence is an alternative” (Steiner 54) if it is conscious of material and historical relations.

In the next few parts of this essay, I draw on the work of J.M. Coetzee to show how Adorno’s conception of silence may be applied to the analysis of literary texts. I contextualise my reading by considering the different critical positions on one of the key debates revolving around Coetzee’s fiction – that of silence – before moving on to show how Adorno enhances or contributes to these existing readings.

Surveying Silence

In his 1991 lecture “What is a Classic?” that speaks to T.S. Eliot’s lecture of the same name, given during World War II, Coetzee refers to an experience of total adolescent rapture. Coetzee, at the age of fifteen, mulling around his Cape Town garden, heard Bach’s music – the Harpsichord piece, *Well-Tempered Clavier* – for the first time. He describes this moment as one of revelation, a “formative” episode (14), that firmly aligned his future aesthetic endeavours to the vaunted ideal of the Western classic. It is precisely this idea of election with which Benita Parry takes issue. Even though she is willing to concede that Coetzee’s novels “interrogate colonialism’s discursive power” (151), she finds them silent to a “polyphonic score” (152). She asserts that Coetzee’s “even hieratic prose” (151) does not resonate with the multiple voices of South Africa’s vernacular Englishes and exhibits a reliance on Western literary tradition and international trends to the exclusion of indigenous South African narrative modes or traditions. Stylistically and thematically, there appears to be a prioritisation of specific Western knowledge systems and styles (150).

Parry also points to the fact that a number of Coetzee’s characters that represent the Other are silent. Indeed, in Coetzee’s novel *Foe*, the black character of Friday supposedly does not speak and expresses himself through dance, music and drawing – modes of communication that are ambiguous and open to interpretation. Susan Barton is told by the castaway Foe that Friday does not have a tongue – a fact that remains unverified for when Foe shows Susan that Friday’s mouth is empty, she

comments that it is too dark to see (22). In a similar vein, the harelipped Michael K of *Life & Times of Michael K* has the ability to speak but struggles to tell “stories” about himself. He defines himself as a “mole” that “does not tell stories because it lives in silence” (182). Parry finds the silence of these characters problematic. Although she rightly acknowledges that Coetzee’s use of silence “might signify [his] refusal to exercise the authority of the dominant culture to represent other and subjugated cultures, and might be construed as registering his understanding that agency is not something that is his to give or withhold through representation” (151), she feels that the object of representation is stripped of the historical right to speak. For Parry, Coetzee’s fiction “inadvertently repeats the exclusionary colonialist gestures which the novels also criticise” (151). The characters that represent the Other are “muted by those who have the power to name and depict them” (151).⁹¹

There are a number of critics that do not agree with Parry’s view. Derek Attridge in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* discusses that Coetzee’s entry into the literary canon is certainly linked to his adoption of Western forms. He states that Coetzee’s novels “appear to locate themselves within an established literary culture, rather than presenting themselves as an assault on that culture” (68). He continues, “Moreover that literary culture is predominately European, and clearly high” (68).⁹²

⁹¹ Parry rightly notes that the (male) Coetzee has no qualms in speaking in an “identification of feminism” (158). Both *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Foe* have female narrators. However, Parry’s commentary lacks a sustained analysis on Coetzee’s success or ethics in mimicking the female voice. See Laura Wright’s “Displacing the Voice: South African Feminism and J.M. Coetzee’s Female Narrators” for a detailed discussion of this issue.

⁹² In his post-apartheid novel *Disgrace* (1999) Coetzee explores the theme of engaging with vernacular and indigenous forms in relation to both aesthetics and politics. In *Disgrace* we see the ageing

Attridge acknowledges that referencing the high literary canon aligns Coetzee's novels with "universal moral and aesthetic values" (71), rather than the potentially "contingent and propagandist" (71) values of the South African political situation.⁹³ However, Attridge feels that Coetzee's appropriation of the canon is revisionist in its aims: he simultaneously positions himself within the canon while "thematiz[ing] the role of race, class and gender" (71). His work manages to "participat[e] in the struggle to achieve a voice for those that have been silenced, even if it d[oes] so by literary means that have traditionally been celebrated as characterising canonic art" (72). In other words, Coetzee does not simply accept the canonical texts in their uncorrupted form, but consciously manipulates them to engage issues of historical marginality and social difference. He uses canonical texts to reclaim the voices lost or obscured in the original texts.

This position is endorsed by David Attwell who notes that although Coetzee's use of the Western canon makes him vulnerable to the "accusation of complicity in a history of domination" (*J.M. Coetzee* 4) he manages to use it in way that is highly self-

academic David Lurie teaching the Romantics to a group of uninterested university students. His European literary interests are wholly out of place in post-apartheid South Africa. Later when Lurie is attacked and his daughter raped on her smallholding, Lurie acknowledges the irony of his being able to speak the European languages of French and Italian but none of the indigenous ones that would have been helpful to ameliorating the attack (95). After this traumatic incident, Lurie begins a process of transformation, which is never resolved. (He lives in an ongoing state of "disgrace".) Part of the transformation manifests in his aesthetic production: he begins to integrate African instruments – a tinny guitar and banjo – into the opera (a quintessentially Western art form) that he has been working on for years. The integration of indigenous forms speaks to a post-apartheid vision based on the idea of reconciliation and multi-culturalism.

⁹³ McDonald notes that under apartheid Coetzee viewed his "metropolitan 'affiliations'" as a way of developing his work unhindered by nation-bound interpretations of literature and the Lukácsian demands of critical realism (*Literature* 306).

reflexive, conscious of his authorial limitations. In fact, Attwell, referring to *Foe*, comments that the intractability of Friday's silence ensures that it is read as "an act of authorial deference on Coetzee's part" (5) and represents Coetzee's "unwillingness to receive the canon as the natural breath of life" (5). Friday's silence is "the mark of history...in the text of a novel that scrupulously acknowledges its own limited authority" (5).

Furthermore, Parry does not take into account Spivak's argument regarding the voice of the subaltern. In her widely-cited essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988), Spivak discusses whether it is possible to speak for the voiceless and disenfranchised of society. She assesses the implications of speaking for the Other, referred to as the "subaltern". She states, making specific reference to Ranajit Guha's "Subaltern Studies" group, that speaking for the Other is a perilous venture for a number of reasons. The subaltern is not a homogeneous group, and yet the dominant discourse reduces alterity to a version of the same. The intellectual's response is "not to abstain from representation" (80) but rather to have the subaltern assert his/her own voice. However, even this endeavour is problematic, for "With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?" (80). Spivak also notes that the subaltern is placed in a precarious situation in which they are dependent on (Western) intellectuals who speak for them. Yet Spivak does offer Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, a young girl who committed suicide in 1926, as a complicated example of

the possibility of the subaltern speaking, although the aberrant relationship to reference comes in the way of speech intercepted in time.⁹⁴

Coetzee's work presents us with "an alterity that makes demands on us not by entering into dialogue with us – something which is ruled out in advance – but by the very presence of its unignorable being-there" (Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee* 13). The figures of alterity may not "speak" in a literal sense but they are able to communicate a specific view of colonialism and its ethics through their mere presence, which Spivak calls "voice consciousness". Friday is a case in point. Attridge's view is that Coetzee's refusal to speak for Friday is ethically conscious, a refusal, on his part as the author, to engage the dominant discourse of colonialism. Instead of risking a potentially offensive mimicking of the Other, he steps back and allows silence to speak. However, the silence is also an amplification of the historical silence that has been imposed upon the Other. Friday's silence is important "not because there is an inviolable core of silence to which the dominant discourse can never penetrate, but because the most fundamental silence is itself produced by – at the same time as it makes possible – the dominant discourse" (Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee* 82). Friday's silence is dialectical: inaccessible to the dominant discourse – Crusoe himself explains that no-one will ever know the "truth" behind Friday's silence (23)

⁹⁴ Bhuvanewari is involved with a militant group agitating for India's independence from colonial rule. Yet, unable to fulfil their political demands, she resolves to kill herself. She knows full well that her death will be seen as the consequence of an illicit love affair that has resulted in an unwanted pregnancy and so she decides to wait until she is menstruating to kill herself. In this way she expresses that her death had nothing to do with the "shame" of an illicit pregnancy. Her dead body thereby speaks even if it does not speak using words. Also see page 140.

– but also a product of the dominant discourse. Crucially, Attridge points out that if Friday were actually able to speak he would be placed in a position of marginality, asserting, “Foe suggests that, even with the faculty of speech, he might join one of London’s strolling Negro bands” (*J.M. Coetzee* 86).

Attridge’s argument relates to a point made by Ankhi Mukherjee in her essay “Death of the Novel and Two Postcolonial Writers” (2008). Mukherjee rightly notes that Susan is fixated on Friday’s silence, “compelled to ‘open Friday’s mouth and see what it holds’ (142)” (546). She observes that Susan attempts to access Friday’s “cultural memory and transfigure it from a storing place to a story” (547). However, she never manages to gain access to his consciousness. His drawings and dancing are undecipherable. Susan is “choked instead by [Friday’s] silence, a native’s silence inscribed negatively within the scope of a Eurocentric novel as a mark of barrenness, darkness, psychic damage and defeat, and mulish resistance” (547). Importantly, Mukherjee does not dismiss the potency of Friday’s silence, a force that dislocates and disrupts the hegemonic voice of the dominant (authorial) discourse, while itself being a product of this discourse. She asserts, “Assuming powerlessness, Coetzee shows, is a viable mode of discrediting discourses of power. This postcolonial rewriting of a fable of bourgeois triumphalism seems to say that aesthetic intervention happens even when writing is compared to diving into the wreck” (548). To Mukherjee it is precisely through his silence that Friday acts as an active force – an agent – against particular aesthetic modes and against the formation of specific narratives. Friday is able to assert a level of power over the dominant discourse, over

the authorial tendency to dictate a tale. She states, “Coetzee allows Friday’s silence to halt the cogs of signification and bring forth instead ‘the same story over and over, in version after version, stillborn every time’ (151)” (548).

Sue Kossew’s interpretation of Michael K’s silence as a reflection of his politically “silenced” position in society is relatable to Attridge’s viewpoint. For Kossew, Coetzee sees Michael as “silenced by his position in society as well as by his harelip” (139). She correctly notes that in instances where Michael does speak, his voice proves ineffectual in relation to the state structure (142). She cites examples where Michael is “fobbed off by bureaucratic delays and negative responses” (142), such as Michael’s time in the hospital during his mother’s death. Certainly, Coetzee “sees [Michael] as having a voice, and regards the literary text as engaging in dialogue with that authentic voice – wary of imposing meaning upon it, colonising it, yet acknowledging its independent existence” (Kossew 139).

Despite the validity of these interpretations, using Adorno deepens our understanding of Coetzee’s practice and relationship to silence, owing to Coetzee’s deep investment in theory. Since the 1980s at least, Coetzee’s work has been read through Lacan, Levinas, Blanchot, Derrida, and Saussure. Attwell astutely comments that “there is a tendency in the criticism of [Coetzee’s] fiction to approach it as allegorized theory” (*Doubling* 245). Coetzee is quick to remind readers that he is not a philosopher, blatantly stating, “I am not a trained philosopher (and contemporary criticism has become very much a variety of philosophizing)” (*Doubling* 245). He is “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" (*Doubling* 246). When questioned by Attwell on the "resourcefulness of theory to [his] writing fiction", Coetzee states, "It would be pointless for me to try to rethink Dostoevsky in Derridean terms or – what would interest me more – rethink Derrida in Dostoevskian terms, because I don't have the mind for it, to say nothing of the philosophical equipment" (*Doubling* 246). However, Coetzee's novels resonate with the multiple voices of critical theory, and rewrite the "theoretical" through the "literary". As Attwell notes, deconstruction is a very real presence in his work: "[I]n *Barbarians*, the unstable and inconclusive features of signification feature prominently; Michael K is himself a kind of Derridean trace (refusing to occupy a fixed place in the system); and in *Foe*, most pertinently, the tongueless Friday is a guardian of a significant silence or absence" (*Doubling* 245).

Coetzee admits to his indebtedness to theory, even in instances where a particular theorist has not featured in his extensive literary essays. Attwell states of Coetzee's relationship with Foucault: "Certainly one could read fruitfully from *Discipline and Punish* to *Michael K*, or from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to *Barbarians*. In *Foe* the Foucault of 'What is an Author?' is apposite, especially in Susan's struggle with the author-function, with *Foe* as Other" (*Doubling* 246). The absence of Foucault in his earlier literary essays does not go unnoticed by Attwell, stating, "It is curious that there is little significant reference to Foucault in your nonfiction, since Foucauldian themes seem prominent in the novels" (*Doubling* 246). Coetzee's response is crucial, pointing to the fact that his critical essays are neither an all-

encompassing manifesto of his aesthetic project, nor a map of his entire knowledge base. His answer to Attwell is unequivocal:

Foucault's shadow lies quite heavily over my essays about colonial South Africa (I think in particular of the essay on anthropological writings about the Hottentots that forms part of *White Writing*). He is also very much a presence behind the essays on censorship I have been working on recently. But no, there is not much evidence of Foucault in my strictly literary essays (*Doubling* 247).

Much in the same way that Foucault is a pervasive but "silent" presence in Coetzee's work, the spectre of Adorno looms large over Coetzee's fiction.⁹⁵

Adorno shows us that the silence of Coetzee's non-white characters is "resolutely material and historical [in] character" (Palamarek 44). Their silence "does not merely recount history" (Palamarek 44) but actively critiques colonialism and the status quo. Indeed, neither Friday nor Michael K's potent silence is neutralized by the dominant discourse, thereby ensuring that the integrity of their Otherness is maintained, while in *Dusklands* Klawer's silence reminds us of the victims of imperialism. In the "Enlightenment and Domination" section of this essay Adorno's understanding of modernity suggests that the silent photographic images of the Vietnamese in all the Conradian "attitudes of pain" is another (although somewhat darker and complicated) example of Coetzee maintaining the integrity of the Other.

⁹⁵ Even if there is no strict evidence for Coetzee having read Adorno, their literary interests and influences correlate to a high degree – Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and Walter Benjamin (among others). See Adorno's *Notes to Literature* and *Prisms*, and Coetzee's *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986–1999* and *Inner Workings: Literary Essays, 2000–2005*.

Adorno's conception of silence enhances various dimensions of the same problem as those discussed by Coetzee's critics, but functions somewhat differently in that he imbues silence with an emancipatory potential – not in the Marxian sense of praxis – but in that his reading “lends a voice to suffering” (*Negative* 17).

Agents of Withholding

The figure of Friday in Coetzee's *Foe* most clearly embodies Adorno's conception of silence as an act of resistance to the compromised status of language and hegemonic discourse. These claims are made clearer in a particularly important incident in the novel where Susan notices that Friday is drawing pictures on the slate board on which she has been teaching him to write. Friday draws images of open eyes on top of human feet – “walking eyes” (147). When Susan tries to show these images to Foe, Friday rubs the slate clean (147). The drawings could possibly inscribe Friday's “watchfulness” over Susan and Foe (an inversion of the colonial gaze) or it could hint at a primeval interiority, images or memories from Friday's youth. Whichever interpretation we adopt, Friday's silence – the ambiguity of the images – refuses to allow the text into a state of full reconciliation. His silence leaves significant gaps in the narrative and contributes to the dislocation of a reconciled narrative. Susan Barton complains obsessively about Friday's silence and demands, “What is the truth of Friday?” (121). Rosemary Jolly suggests that Susan Barton is looking to “fix” her narrative: “eliminating all elements of controversy or doubt surrounding [the events]” (7).

Spivak makes an interesting and important claim in regard to this episode in her essay "Theory in the Margin" (1991). She states, "Are those walking eyes rebuses, hieroglyphs, ideograms, or is their secret that they hold no secret at all?" (171). According to Spivak the images that Friday presents us with are cryptic, but that does not necessarily preclude the prospect that deciphering the images may leave us with no answer at all – there is a "possibility that they are nothing" (172). Spivak then mentions Susan Barton tries to control her story and thereby assert her agency. Susan claims, "it is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold" (qtd. in *Theory* 172). However, Spivak is adamant that it is Friday, rather than Susan, who is "the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text" (172). Spivak continues, "For every territorial space that is value coded by colonialism and every command of metropolitan anticolonialism for the native to yield his 'voice', there is a space of withholding, marked by a secret that may not be a secret but cannot be unlocked" (172). What is significant is that Friday manages to maintain his secret, he asserts a "space of withholding" within the greater geography or architecture of colonialism. Despite the "command" by colonizing forces, to give, to "yield", his voice, Friday is able to resist. She continues, "'The native', whatever that may mean, is not only a victim, he or she is also an agent. He or she is the curious guardian at the margin" (172). In this way Friday occupies a duality: he is both subject to the dominant discourse, but also simultaneously resistant to it.

However, Friday's silence may imply a political impasse or deadlock in the sense that his silence's refusal to offer singular meaning may result in an

interpretation by the dominant discourse that completely evacuates or enervates his silence of any meaning at all: if Friday cannot mean one thing, he must mean nothing. Alternatively, the enigma attached to Friday's silence may still result in a total appropriation by the dominant discourse, as can be seen in Spivak's discussion of Bhuvaneshwari, briefly mentioned earlier, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?".

Bhuvaneshwari does everything in her power to ensure that her death is not understood as the shame of an unwanted pregnancy, but the act is nonetheless read by her nieces as motivated by an illicit love affair. Bhuvaneshwari's attempt to use her dead body as a form of interventionist politics fall flat, not because of her will and dedication to speaking (albeit in a mysterious and muted way), but because those that respond to the action cannot see it for what it is. The problem is with the structure of seeing; the way that the body is received by the viewer, rather than with Bhuvaneshwari's complicated action.

Spivak's reading of *Foe* is enhanced when we consider that Friday's tongue may not actually be mutilated at all. If Friday has the ability to speak the idea of agency is enhanced because he may very well be *choosing* not to speak. Of course, there exists the possibility that Friday was actually mutilated by slave-traders: this would suggest that his silence is a badge of oppression, rather than subversion. However, even if Friday was mutilated, this does not detract from the fact that he appears resistant to attempts to teach him to communicate in other ways, a point not lost on Susan. She makes the statement, "I began to recognize that it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up in himself, nor the accident of the loss of his

tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me" (98). Friday's mind is lucid enough to understand commands such as "wood" issued by Crusoe.

It is this agency that ensures that Friday (much like Michael of *Michael K*) does not speak with the "voice" of "subjective incapacity" (Adorno, *Negative* 367), a concept defined earlier as a personal surrender or capitulation to the horror of the objective truth by "say[ing] nothing at all" (Adorno, *Metaphysics* 119). Friday's silence is not the silence of "subjective incapacity". "Subjective incapacity" fails the truth, whereas Friday's resolute silence, his refusal to perpetuate the voice of the dominant discourse, ensures that he does not "degrad[e the] truth [of his Otherness] into a lie" (Adorno, *Negative* 367).⁹⁶ The potent complexity of his Otherness remains intact through his silence.

Furthermore, Friday's silence speaks to Adorno's theory of the "enigmaticalness" of the artwork⁹⁷ that emphasises the sphinx-like character of the autonomous artwork. Although the autonomous artwork may motion towards its decoding, its solution, in fact, no such decoding is possible. For the artwork to be fully reconciled or understood would be a complete betrayal of the artwork as an artwork. For Adorno, "Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without

⁹⁶ The diegetic narrative used in *Foe* and *Michael K* is meant to ensure that the voiceless are safeguarded against the imposition of a facile or reductive understanding of their experience.

⁹⁷ See pages 106–107; 177–179.

any remainder are not artworks" (*Aesthetic* 121).⁹⁸ For Adorno, "Understanding is itself a problematic category in the face of art's enigmaticalness" (*Aesthetic* 121). The resolution of ambiguity, the "unpuzzl[ing]" (*Aesthetic* 121) of one aspect or level of the artwork, will not result in resolving the artwork's "constitutive enigmaticalness" (*Aesthetic* 121). Indeed, the resolution of the artwork's puzzle would make it a functionary of identity-thinking, a coercive cognitive process that rails against dialectical conceptual and categorical freedom, against the value of heterogeneity. (See Chapter 4 for a more sustained discussion of the identity thinking.)

However, the obscure reason behind Friday's silence also points to Coetzee's real wariness of metanarratives, and his need to disrupt an entirely cohesive interpretation of the truth.⁹⁹ Coetzee himself, in an interview with Tony Morphet, answers the question "Friday has no tongue. Why?" with the statement: "Nobody seems to have sufficient authority to say for sure how it is that Friday has no tongue" (462). He continues, seemingly exasperated, "Your questions again and again drive me into a position I do not want to occupy....By accepting your implication, I would produce a master narrative for a set of texts that claim to deny all master narratives" (462). Clearly, Coetzee wishes us to engage the novel as a

⁹⁸ Adorno reiterates, "Artworks, especially those of the highest dignity, await their interpretation. The claim that there is nothing to interpret in them, that they simply exist, would erase the demarcation line between art and nonart" (*Aesthetic* 128).

⁹⁹ It also has the effect of reminding us of the atrocities that do not permit "forgetting" (Adorno "Commitment" 188).

series of stories, a set of absences, gestures, questions and words, set in juxtaposition to each other.

Klawer's Quiet

Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* (1974) deals with two narratives "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee". The first narrative, which will be dealt with shortly, is set in twentieth-century America and deals with the character of Eugene Dawn, a military analyst in the process of writing a report on the Vietnam War. The second narrative presents the story of Jacobus Coetzee – an eighteenth-century frontiersman on an expedition to hunt elephants. Although the two narratives may seem disconnected, they are both stories of imperial occupation, and Coetzee incites us to read the modern narrative in terms of historically-located colonial impulses. The novel has traditionally been analysed in relation to the concept of history and historical mythologizing.¹⁰⁰ Although I fully support this interpretation of the novel, as will become apparent in my reading of "The Vietnam Project", it appears that the concept of silence has often been ignored in this work. In "The Vietnam Project" the silence of the Vietnamese has been noted, but the devaluation of language in an Adornian sense has not been explored. In "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" the silence of the character, Klawer, has garnered no

¹⁰⁰ See Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee* and Gallagher's *A Story of South Africa*.

critical attention whatsoever. Certainly his silence is less dynamic or disruptive than Friday's, but it is imbued with history and awareness of suffering nonetheless.

Jacobus's expedition from the Cape Colony includes a wagon, various provisions, and six "Hottentot" servants. Jacobus describes the characteristics of the indigenous ethnic groups of South Africa, such as the Bushmen, before discussing the differences between "tame" Hottentots, such as his servants, and "wild" ones, such as the individuals that they encounter in the country's interior. Jacobus comments that the "wild" Hottentot is a figure to be admired, in conversation with nature (65). Despite his obvious lack of critical awareness regarding the devastating force of colonialism he does manage to discern the "civilisation" of the "wild" Hottentot as degrading their natural "assurance" and strength, turning them into "false creatures". He states,

No longer can you get a truthful answer to a simple question, his only study is in how to placate you, and that means little more than telling you what he thinks he wants you to hear. He does not smile first but waits until you smile. He becomes a false creature. I say this of all tame Hottentots, good ones like Klawer and spoiled ones like Dikkop (65).

The "tame" hottentot is understood as an individual who been co-opted into labour and servitude, although only the "good" Hottentot willingly accepts his or her position of servitude. Indeed, Jan Klawer is Jacobus's oldest and most reliable servant who serves Jacobus without the least of complaint or defiance: he fiercely guards Jacobus's possessions, nurses him throughout his illness, and accompanies

him when he is banished from the Nama village. Jacobus describes Klauer as a breed “now dying, of the old farm Hottentot” (67).

Klauer is presented by Jacobus as a figure of terminal silence. Klauer only speaks in response to a question directed at him or in order to follow Jacobus’s instructions. For example, when the ill Jacobus is banished to the menstruation hut across the river, Jacobus interrogates Klauer:

I asked him why my other men had not come to see me. He said that they had come, but I had been too sick. I told him he lied. If they had come they would have been in my nightmares. I told him to try again. He said they were afraid of my sickness. I told him he was lying. Yes master he said. I told him to try again. He said that the Hottentots had made them afraid of these huts (the huts across the stream) (81).

Klauer may actually be answering Jacobus truthfully, but because Jacobus is only interested in hearing what he believes, or wishes to believe, Klauer’s voice is essentially nullified. His voice is nothing more than an echo of Jacobus’s, yet the latter needs this parodic repetition.

Klauer’s silence should not be read as a sign of his insipid obsequiousness to Jacobus, but rather should be read in terms of the danger the Other experiences as a speaking subject, a concept wholly apparent in the character of Plaatje. Weak and feverish, Klauer attends to Jacobus by nursing his carbuncle and bringing food to his hut. Yet, after a night of revelry, Klauer does not fulfil his daily duty and Jacobus “ravenously hungry” (86) crosses the river and enters the village. Jacobus finally finds his servants grouped together in a hut, sleeping off the night-long festivities together with the village women. Klauer lies embracing a village woman and a

child. When Jacobus wakes Klawer and commands him to fetch his breakfast, Klawer “sigh[s]” but gets out of bed in order to fulfil Jacobus’s command. However, the servant Plaatje interferes and demands to know “Why doesn’t master let us sleep?” (87). Although Jacobus shows his irritation, Plaatje persists, “If master wants breakfast master must perhaps find it himself” (88). He continues, “Master is a sick man....Master must lie down and get his strength back. Later, when we get up, we will send something to master. Master lives over there on the other side of the water, doesn’t master?” (88). Jacobus, extremely agitated by Plaatje’s taunts, considers kicking him but when Plaatje shows him that he is armed, he backs down completely. A short while later, when Jacobus is exiled from the Nama village for biting a child’s ear who had stolen his clothes in a prank, Plaatje infuriates Jacobus with his insolent parting words: “Master can go....Master and master’s tame hotnot. We say goodbye master, goodbye, good luck. Only master watch out who you hit next time” (92). He then proceeds to “lightly chuck” Jacobus under the chin with his finger and states, “Watch out master, see?” (92). Jacobus responds to Plaatje’s insolence by dubbing him “the newly articulate” (92) and specifically targets him when he returns to massacre the village, as related in the “Second Journey to the land of the Great Namaqua”. On Jacobus’s vengeful and bloodthirsty return, Plaatje knows he will be shown no mercy. Jacobus notes, “Plaatje looked at me, he knew he was dead, he did not bother to plead” (101).

Klawer quite clearly registers the danger of speaking and when Plaatje first begins asserting his voice, Klawer steps to his rescue and attempts to defend him

against Jacobus's wrath. Jacobus remarks: "Abjectly [Klawer] apologised for Plaatje: he did not know what he was doing, he was only showing off, he was only a boy, he was over-excited, he had drunk too much, these people were leading him into bad ways, and so on" (88). Inherent in Klawer's defeated silence is the consciousness of perpetual servitude. In a way Klawer's silence is aligned with that of Friday's in that we are forced to acknowledge the role of history in the silence of Other. Both of their silences are historically conscious and encoded, relaying their complicated victim-status and indicative of a past in which violence is linked or equated with the voice.

In fact, the validity of Klawer's position as historically silenced in the narrative is enhanced by two different issues: Klawer's double death scene and Coetzee's re-writing of actual historical narratives. In the first of Klawer's two death scenes, Klawer mistakenly steps in a hippopotamus hole and then gets washed away by the river. Terrified, Klawer begins "shouting broken pleas for help" (94). Jacobus calmly observes that this is the first time he has ever heard Klawer's voice raised (94). In the second death scene Klawer gets extremely ill and is eventually forced to tell Jacobus to continue the journey without him: he must be abandoned. However, even in this conversation, Klawer's interiority never comes to the fore. The second death scene, and by extension the conversation, gains a fabricated air, as if imagined by Jacobus.

Although recent criticism does not acknowledge the double death scenes at all¹⁰¹ and some older criticism¹⁰² only perfunctorily notes their significance, Attridge and Gallagher rightly acknowledge their importance. Yet, where Attridge's analysis speaks to how Coetzee interrupts and "disturb[s]...the [novel's] hitherto relatively smooth operation of the reality effect" (*J.M. Coetzee* 20) thereby feeding into the wider project of literary modernism, Gallagher sees the two scenes as indicative of the way that colonial history is written. She asserts that the two death scenes play into the overall idea of myth making, how colonial history is "effaced" in official accounts and how Jacobus creates his own narratives and myths – "Jacobus both writes and is written from a heroic perspective" (76). Gallagher's analysis is clearly pointing us in the direction that the death scenes inscribe a hegemonic discourse – one which glamorises or valorises the master. In other words, Klauer is the non-enunciating subject who cannot even control the way his life and death are described. There is no respite for Klauer – in the repeat of historical events, he is doomed to silence, to a lack of enunciation.

Klauer's historical silence also comes to the fore in that one of the original primary sources of Coetzee's narrative, *The Relaaas of Jacobus Coetsé Janse* (1790), actually hides a true act of violence. The original story chronicles the elephant hunting expedition of Jacobus Coetsé Janse – one of Coetzee's distant forebears –

¹⁰¹ See Ken Barris's "The Politics of Originality: Reading Ivan Vladislavić through J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction" and Michael Titlestad's "Unsettled Whiteness: The Limits of Allegory in Three South African Novels."

¹⁰² See David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee*, pages 52–3.

and his journey into the land of the Great Amacquas. The tale was narrated by Coetsé to the Political Secretariat at the Castle of Good Hope in 1790 (Gallagher 73). In his narrative Coetsé relates that the indigenous people he met had mentioned an encounter with a group of fair-skinned individuals with long hair and dressed in cotton clothing. An exploratory expedition was thereafter sent from the Cape to investigate these claims. On this second expedition, run by Captain Henrik Hop, a mentally disturbed Dutchman murdered a servant who would not obey his orders. The expedition was chronicled in the journals of one of the members of the expedition, Carel Frederick Brink (Gallagher 75). Gallagher notes Knox-Shaw's observation that the journals are free of incidents of racial tension despite the fact that a servant had been murdered (76). The sanitised Brink journal clearly shows how "official accounts may have effaced incidents of colonial brutality and murder" (76).

Therefore, when Coetzee actively inserts a violent aspect into a tale that originally chronicles the peaceful interaction between the white man and the native Nama people he attempts to convey the systematic and systemic violence of colonial occupation that have been expunged from official historical records. Coetzee's narrative excludes episodes such as the exchange of gifts between the Nama and Coetsé and the fact that one of the Great Amacqua decided to accompany the expedition on their return to the Cape (Gallagher 74). Gallagher very astutely observes that Coetzee discards the Relaas's comments: "The narrator found this nation, particularly those members living deepest inland, of a friendly

disposition....[T]hey allowed him to journey through their country without any trouble, and return in a like fashion”(285).

Various critics have responded negatively to Coetzee’s insertion of violence. Attwell posits that “Knox-Shaw...indicts Coetzee on humanist grounds for merely re-enacting ‘true savagery’ [in the massacre scene] and thereby furthering its claims”(54). However, Attwell asserts that the massacre points to Jacobus’s functioning as a “tool in the hands of history” (55) in addition to remaining a potent “social fact that readers have and will continue to give witness to”(55). Attwell believes that “Coetzee is taking on, in a combative sense, the legacy of colonialism and its discourses”(55). The massacre demonstrates that the system of colonialism revolves around the perpetuation of physical violence, which resounds in the smothering of the colonised subject’s voice. Furthermore, the massacre’s violence echoes the Vietnam war’s violence in “The Vietnam Project”, and suggests that violence and social domination is as much a feature of pre-modernity as modernity, a point noted in Adorno’s critique of the Enlightenment – an issue that will be dealt with in the next section of this essay.

Enlightenment and Domination

In “The Vietnam Project” Coetzee shows how the use and manipulation of myths¹⁰³ serve the project of the social domination of Vietnam, and contribute to the

¹⁰³ Many critics, such as Gallagher and Jolly, expound upon this aspect of the novel, however, none locate this reading within an Adornian critique of enlightenment modernity.

devaluation of language. Through this devaluation, silence comes to testify to the Other's experience of suffering. In order to more fully understand these claims it is necessary to investigate Adorno and Horkheimer's views in *Dialectic* – a keystone text of the Frankfurt School. In *Dialectic* Adorno and Horkheimer state that despite humanity's apparent progress in the spheres of science, medicine and industry, modernity is plagued by the persistence of oppressive (fascistic) ideological structures and the perpetuation of various acts of violence (Zuidervaart, "Theodor"). As they comment, "The wholly enlightened earth radiates under the sign of disaster triumphant" (*Dialectic* 1). They continue, rather pessimistically, "What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to wholly dominate it and other men. That is the only aim" (4). This domination is a threefold affair – human beings violently and brutally assert themselves over other human beings, the natural world, and their own individual human subjectivity.¹⁰⁴ At the nexus of this reading of modernity is the belief that "reason itself has become irrational" (Zuidervaart, "Theodor"), with Adorno commenting explicitly,

The absurdity of a state of affairs in which the enforced power of the system over men grows with every step that takes it out of the power of nature, denounces the rationality of the rational society as obsolete. Its necessity is illusive, no less than the freedom of the entrepreneurs who ultimately reveal their compulsive nature in their inevitable wars and contracts. This illusion, in which a wholly enlightened mankind has lost itself, cannot be dissolved by a

¹⁰⁴ Adorno states, "It is not merely that the domination is paid for by the alienation of men from the objects dominated: with the objectification of spirit, the very relations of men – even those of the individual to himself – [are] bewitched. The individual is reduced to the nodal point of the conventional responses and modes of operation expected of him" (*Dialectic* 28).

philosophy which, as the organ of domination, has to choose between command and obedience (*Dialectic* 38–39).

Clearly, the system of domination is not only perpetuated by the irrationality of reason, but is actually a symptom of this very irrationality. Furthermore, Adorno asserts that the suggestion that rationality exists in an unmediated or uncorrupted form is “illusionary” under the economic system of late capitalism, and that rationality has been left with no hope of redemption. On the one hand, rationality orchestrates domination: it “commands” it, and on the other hand, it acquiesces to or “obeys” it.

Integral to the system of domination is the process of mythmaking. In order to understand the role of myth in *Dialectic*, we should consider Adorno’s statement, “Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology” (*Dialectic* xviii). To paraphrase Zuidervaart’s explanation: myth – in the form of religion, ritual and philosophy – contributed to the process of enlightenment. However, with the increasing secularisation and rationalisation of modernity – what Weber would refer to as the disenchantment of modernity – religion, ritual and philosophy, came to be seen as obsolete. Zuidervaart continues that Adorno does not discount the intrinsic value of these forms, which lies precisely in their ability to pinpoint “ideological and destructive tendencies within modern forces of secularisation” (“Theodor”). Yet Adorno’s dialectical manner of thinking reminds us that religion, ritual and philosophy also have “ideological and destructive” tendencies, and secularisation has “progressive and enlightening” aspects (Zuidervaart, “Theodor”).

Buck-Morss takes a slightly different (and perhaps more accurate) approach feeling that within the “historical dialectic of reason, [enlightenment] originating in the negation of myth, ... reverse[s again] in modern times into myth itself” (59). In other words, the “enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude” (27). She reiterates, “Under the pressure of domination human labour has always led away from myth – but under domination always returns to the jurisdiction of myth” (32). For Adorno, “The latest ideologies are only versions of the most ancient, and revert beyond those previously known only to the same extent that the development of class society belies the previously sanctioned ideologies” (*Dialectic* 53). Therefore, the myths of enlightenment are not necessarily a reversion to previous older myths, but variations of them. Most importantly though, *Dialectic* endeavours to “dismantle the myth of history as progress” (Buck-Morss 60), as a linear process in which humanity advances towards the ultimate culmination point of “a rational social order” (Buck-Morss 61). Instead Adorno views history (both pre-modernity and modernity) as a constellation of events characterized by constant antagonism (a point discussed at length earlier in this chapter). Therefore, pre-modernity is not constructed as an idyllic prelapsarian space, somehow insulated from or preceding modernity, but exists in dialectical dialogue with it.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ The fact that Adorno uses the classical Homeric figure of Odysseus as the prototype or quintessential bourgeois modern subject further serves to suggest that modernity and pre-modernity speak to each other. In “The Vietnam Project” Coetzee echoes this image by linking to the eighteenth century Jacobus and twentieth century Eugene Dawn. Dawn states, “Had I lived two hundred years ago I would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open it to colonisation” (31–2).

In “The Vietnam Project” Eugene Dawn is not a soldier, but a military specialist who focuses on “mythography” – an “open field like philosophy or criticism” (31). Eugene submits his report noting that in order for the war to be won by the Americans it is necessary to attack the Vietnamese’s foundational myths, and all the national variations of thereof (25). He fixates particularly on a myth that deals with the “rebellion of sons against a father who uses them as hinds. The sons come of age, rebel, mutilate the father, and divide the patrimony” (25).¹⁰⁶ Dawn believes that the danger of such a myth lies in the fact that it establishes itself in Vietnamese consciousness, and definite parallels may be drawn between the mythical figures and modern actors of the American-Vietnamese war. On reading the myth, Dawn links the “old order of power” (25), the myth’s “father figure” (25), with the “foreign empire, the US” (25), and the “sons of the land” (25) with the Vietnamese themselves. Dawn notes that this myth about overthrowing the established order “portrays the father as vulnerable, liable to wither under a single well-directed radical blow” (25). The “initiat[ion] of a new fraternal order” (25) is central to the story, and must be “combated” (25) by the Americans. Dawn asserts that “The answer to the myth of force is not necessarily counterforce, for if the myth predicts counterforce, counterforce reinforces the myth. The science of mythography teaches us that a subtler counter is to subvert and revise myth. The highest propaganda is the

¹⁰⁶ This is reminiscent of a passage in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* “[O]ne day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually” (164).

propagation of a new mythology" (24–25). He acknowledges that the "more deeply rooted and universal a myth, the more difficult it is to combat. The myths of a tribe are the fictions it coins to maintain its powers" (24), and therefore, the only way forward is to alter existing myths in way that feed into and aid American interests.¹⁰⁷

Coetzee, like Adorno, links mythmaking and the project of domination to technological and scientific advancements, a point reiterated by Zuidervaat: "The all-consuming engine driving this process [of domination] is an ever-expanding capitalist economy, fed by scientific research and the latest technologies" ("Theodor"). The final sentence of "The Vietnam Project" – "In my cell in the heart of America, with my private toilet in the corner, I ponder and ponder. I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am" (49) – ironically highlights America's sophisticated technological advancements. This observation plays off Coetzee's earlier meditation on destructive communications technology. Early on in the novel, Dawn sets up a comparison between print media and the radio. He states, "I respond to the voice [of the radio]...as I do not to print" (14), stressing that the information broadcast is of little importance. Instead he responds to the "plump incontrovertible voice" (14). He continues, "Radio information, I ought to know from practise, is pure authority" (14). Dawn reiterates this view when discussing the viability of using the radio in the mythmaking campaign in Vietnam. The radio's voice is understood to be the voice of the "father". He comments, "The father is

¹⁰⁷ Jolly's makes similar observations before continuing with a discussion of the radio propaganda. (See her *Colonisation*, pages 112–113.)

authority, infallibility, ubiquity. He does not persuade, he commands. That which he fortells happens" (21). This voice changes: "In times of war this father exhorts his children to patriotic sacrifice, in times of peace to greater production" (21). Dawn expects to harness the voice, believing that there is "no reason why [the Americans] should not ride the radio waves with [the] equal devastation [of the B-52 bombers]" (21). Adorno's voice – "The instruments of domination...encompass all – language, weapons, and finally machines" (*Dialectic* 37) – echoes in the background of Dawn's comments. Implicit in the American appropriation of the radio waves is the degradation of language. For Adorno, "Propaganda makes language an instrument, a lever, a machine" (*Dialectic* 255).

Language's submission to the forces of domination and mythmaking is foregrounded most strongly in Dawn's writing of the report, which is monitored by the bureaucrat, Coetzee (hereafter referred to as the "bureaucrat"). Rather than being given free rein to write what and as he likes, Dawn must get his report approved by the bureaucrat. It must fit a model appropriate to the bureaucratic machinery. The bureaucrat instructs Dawn, "If you haven't seen Kidman's little book on Central America, look at it" (4). The bureaucrat meditates heavily on the language of Dawn's report, "So what I would like you to do, first of all, before we talk over anything else, is to set to work revising the tone of your argument. I want you to rewrite your proposals so that people in the military can entertain them without losing self-respect" (3–4). He continues that Dawn should position himself as a "mere[...]functionary with a narrow if significant specialism"(4) so that the

“proposal[] will get a hearing”(4). He asks Dawn to simplify the document for a “ruder crew” (4). It must be written in a way in which Dawn “explain[s] in words of one syllable the kind of procedure [he] follow[s] – how myths operate in human society, how signs are exchanged, and so forth; with lots of examples and...no footnotes”(4). These instructions become a “means of reinforcing the social power of language” (Adorno, *Dialectic* 22), and halt its play of meaning.

The consequences of language being stripped of polyvalent meaning, and devalued within the greater context of domination (in effect being reduced to reified communicative language), allows silence to function as an ethical alternative. Dawn carries a series of photographs depicting extreme violence against the Vietnamese by American soldiers: the rape of child-like Vietnamese woman; the severed heads of Vietnamese men, and an imprisoned Vietnamese man in a tiger cage (13; 15-16). These photographs are the only instance where the situation of the Vietnamese is shown: the narrative is conspicuously lacking in their voice. These silent photographic images of the Vietnamese suggest an integrity lacking in linguistic or verbal expressions of their victimisation. In other words, the silent photographs are uncorrupted visual rather than compromised linguistic accounts of America’s unjust war. They are “mute” testimonies to the unspeakable suffering of the Other. Much like Friday and Klawer, the Vietnamese manage to maintain the complexity of their Otherness, which is located within a greater system of social domination. Unfortunately though, by the close of the novel Dawn is no longer in possession of these images. He states: “My photographs are gone. I had photographs of the worst

of my tormentors before they were stolen from me" (48). The subjects of these photographs remain forever silenced, lost to history, even if Dawn promises "not to forget them" (48). This ending to "The Vietnam Project" puts a sinister spin on silence, and appears even more foreboding when we consider that Dawn previously referred to the photographic camera as the "ruler of [the Vietnamese] destiny" (16) as he used these American-controlled images to make his official report to endorse the war.

In closing, I would like to return to the controversy regarding Judith Butler's award of the Adorno Prize. Butler's response is deeply unapologetic, refusing to kowtow to the pressure of ignorant and radical opponents:

I was taught at every step in my Jewish education that it is not acceptable to stay silent in the face of injustice. Such an injunction is a difficult one, since it does not tell us exactly when and how to speak, or how to speak in a way that does not produce a new injustice, or how to speak in a way that will be heard and registered in the right way.

Butler's statement is one that resonates in the dialogue between Coetzee and Adorno – the complexity of speaking injustice, of articulating human suffering, especially in relation to the historical and social realities of colonialism and imperialism. I have tried to show in this chapter that a complex form of silence, a silence that speaks, is a viable and powerful voice, a voice that allows us to "hear" the silences of the oppressed or victimised.

“Telling the Truth”: Margarita Karapanou’s *Kassandra and the Wolf* and Adorno’s

Truth Content

It had monsters with strange uniforms
always secretly lurking in the shadows.

[...]

And to those that threatened me with burning chains,
I want them to know that I will not bother with fear.

Let them come and find me at the mountain top,

I’m waiting for them and I will not bother with fear.

— Pavlos Fyssas “I Won’t Cry, I Won’t Fear”

I came to this decision alone. I don’t know what changed my mind. Perhaps my visit to America and its freedom last fall, perhaps my talks with Senator McCarthy. But there is one thing that makes it urgent. These young people are losing so much, they are not learning and they are being filled with the most awful propaganda. We cannot afford to lose a whole generation. That is why I have spoken out, and now I feel at ease.

— George Seferis qtd. in Beaton *George* 399

In September of 2013, Greece was thrown into turmoil by the death of a 34-year-old Greek rapper, Pavlos Fyssas, who was killed on the streets of Keratsini in Athens by members of the Golden Dawn fascist group, a party whose political support has increased since Greece’s financial collapse began in 2008. Taking almost 7 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections of June 2012, the presence of an openly fascist party in Greece’s parliament was viewed with alarm not only by

Greek citizens but by the international community. Fyssas's songs, which openly condemned Golden Dawn, made him a target for the neo-Nazi group. Although his death was by no means the first death at the hands of Golden Dawn (a number of African and Asian immigrants had been killed or viciously assaulted by the group over the past few years), Fyssas was the first ethnic Greek to have been killed. This death spurred the government, under Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, to action – parliamentary members of Golden Dawn were arrested, and steps were taken to flush out fascist sympathies within the military and police systems.

Although it is true that Golden Dawn has only gained political support with the financial crisis, the ugly truth behind Fyssas's death is that fascism (rather than the Golden Dawn party itself) has been an element present in Greece since the 1970s, if not earlier if we take into account the Metaxas regime (1936–41).¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the fascistic elements present in all (but particularly higher) echelons of the military and police force is because many of these individuals were enlisted during the junta, and reaped the rewards of such a system. After the fall of the junta in 1974, many of these individuals continued to retain their positions within the military and police.

¹⁰⁸ Yiannis Metaxas was appointed caretaker Prime Minister of Greece in August 1936 by King George II of Greece. Metaxas is often associated with his refusal to allow Italy to occupy Greece during WWII (Greece celebrates this day as Greek National Day on the 28th of October) and successful macroeconomic policies. Therefore, the fact that Metaxas's government was fashioned on totalitarian models is often obscured or wilfully forgotten. Metaxas's "4th of August regime" expressed classic fascistic behaviour, including the suspension of the Constitution and many civil liberties. His support within Greece is a point of controversy. Edmund Keeley's *Greece, Inventing Paradise: The Greek Journey 1937–47* mentions that Metaxas was held in high esteem, referred to affectionately as "Uncle John" (175), by Greek soldiers fighting the Italians during World War II in the mountains of Albania, while at the same time in other parts of Greece, he had limited support (182).

There is a profound irony attached to the fact that Fyssas was killed for his politically-loaded art, for speaking the truth in the face of injustice and discrimination. In this way he is not dissimilar from Greek artists of earlier periods of Greek history, particularly under the military junta (1967–1974), that were tortured or oppressed because of their refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice. For example, Mikis Theodorakis (b. 1925), Greece's preeminent composer and songwriter, famous for setting the modern Greek poetry of George Seferis (1900–1971), Yiannis Ritsos (1909–1990), and Odysseus Elytis (1911–1996) to music, was forced into exile by the junta. Theodorakis translated highbrow Greek literature into accessible politicised artworks without denigrating the tone or complexity of the works, a laudable feat, especially considering that some of these authors themselves had not written the works with any sort of political imperative in mind (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 51) during the junta. Similarly, Yiannis Ritsos, whose communist sympathies were well known, had his work banned (as it had been almost twenty years earlier during the Greece's five-year civil war) and was placed under house arrest until 1970.

Of course, there were other artists that were writing in response to the junta that barely featured on its radar. One such artist is Margarita Karapanou (1946–2008), the daughter of the esteemed Greek novelist, Margarita Lymberaki (1919–2001). Karapanou's debut novel *Kassandra and the Wolf* (1974) is a complicated text, often read as a highly subjective and apolitical rendering of the childhood of the precocious narrator, *Kassandra*. Literary critics, for the most part, have been

oblivious to the political aspect of the text, preferring to read it as an exposé of the dark sexualised energies that pervade childhood. I suggest though, much in line with Roderick Beaton and Karen van Dyck, that the novel “owes much to the ...experience of censorship and the ‘usurped authority’ of the Colonels” (Beaton, *Introduction* 284), and could be read as protest literature. I suggest that an analysis of the novel’s content and form through its inherent “truth content”, a concept central to Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) and *Notes to Literature* (1958–74), grants *Kassandra and the Wolf* an unequivocally political status, and serves to widen our interpretation of resistance literature.

A brief historical and political explanation of the junta is necessary before progressing any further. The Greek military junta began in 1967 with a coup under the leadership of Colonel George Papadopoulos. The junta, highly conservative, and committed to the idea of “Greece for the Christian Greeks” harkened back to the “rhetoric and most of the repressive measures that had been used earlier by Metaxas, and against the Left during the civil war” (Beaton, *Introduction* 258). Its impact was ubiquitous – reshaping the administration and economy of the country, changing the Greek educational system, and purging the judiciary and legislature of anti-junta elements. It should be mentioned that the junta, as repressive as it was, was not entirely without public support owing to Greece’s relative economic prosperity¹⁰⁹ in the first few years of the junta, and increased public service delivery in certain

¹⁰⁹ Although it has been suggested that the regime’s economic policies only improved the circumstances of the already well-established economic oligarchy (Clogg and Yannopoulos xix).

neglected parts of Greece. Public support only substantially began to wane with the economic downturn of 1973, and the killing of student activists at the Athens Polytechnic in November of the same year.

During the junta heavy censorship laws, particularly in the first two years of the regime, were put in place. Writers responded to this issue in various ways. Certainly some writers did not feel the need to resist the junta, a point reiterated by Beaton: “[E]xcept during the closing stages of the regime, opposition to it was by no means universal” (*Introduction* 262). Initially, when censorship was at its worst (in the form of rigorous pre-publication censorship) writers, for the most part, simply refused to publish work, even withdrawing material that was in the process of publication.¹¹⁰ However, when preventive censorship was abolished in late 1969 and “replaced by a complex set of laws that were in effect a form of self-censorship” (Beaton, *George* 400), these writers changed strategies, using parody, satire, and allegory in ingenious ways. In a parody of a law that insisted that book titles were to correspond with the actual content of the book, writers published political texts with generic unassuming titles such as *Eighteen Texts* (1970). These texts in “various indirect ways criticised the regime and in particular the institution of censorship” (Beaton, *George* 400).¹¹¹ Artists were no doubt defined by their

¹¹⁰ Writers such Philippos Vlachos refused to partake in a culture of silence, explaining that silence is “an escape, not resistance” (qtd. in Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 25). He did not feel it “fair to leave readers with the drivel and propaganda the regime’s press office published” (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 25).

¹¹¹ A group of writers published *Eighteen Texts* (1970), an anthology of prose, poetry, and literary criticism. Later when this artistic silence was effectively broken (set in motion by George Seferis’s famous radio announcement “This Anomaly Must Stop” on the 28th of March 1969, the day

relationship to the junta, and certainly, the dichotomy between literature *engagé* and non-*engagé* become a prominent feature of literature of the 1970s. Apolitical literature was always defined as literature that was more clearly concerned with thematic ambiguity, and with exploring literary techniques, whereas political literature was considered more clear cut and equivocal both stylistically and thematically (Van Dyck, *Reading* 51–2).

Yet there were writers, such as the object of this study – Margarita Karapanou – who straddled this binary combining stylistic experimentalism with a political consciousness (although it should be noted that this idea of “political consciousness” is a complicated concept, and far from straightforward, as I will go on to show). Karapanou’s *Kassandra and the Wolf* (1974), as mentioned previously, uses a female child protagonist named Kassandra as its focalising agent. The child, raised in an upper class Athenian home, interacts with servants, teachers, familial figures, and other children in unnerving ways: in certain instances her relationships with these figures are highly sexualised, in others subject to or observant of a visceral violence. The novel is composed of episodes that are only very loosely chronological or teleological. In short, this is not a tale of linear narrative progression, although the first vignette of the novel, titled “The First Day”, starts with the birth of the child, and states, “I was born at dusk, hour of the wolf, July, under the sign of Cancer. When they brought me to her, she turned her face to the wall” (1). The final vignette

commemorating the Greek War of Independence of 1821), other texts were published that actively resisted the regime.

of the novel “The First Day at School” presents Cassandra attending school, thereby suggesting the end of a specific period of childhood, a childhood before entering educational institutions.¹¹² (The novel in this sense could be said to refer roughly to a time frame between 0 to 6 years.) Furthermore, the novel is not strictly realistic. Episodes in the novel are sometimes dream-like or surrealistic. For example, the character of Uncle Hariloas *successfully* commits suicide multiple times in the novel (see pages 22, 57, 123).¹¹³

Critics have been divided as to whether Karapanou’s work constitutes political writing. Certainly the novel hints at various points to Greece’s political history, containing references to the junta and to the Greek civil war (1946–49). For example, in the short chapter “Sunday”, Cassandra observes, “The King and Queen and survivors live in the Palace. At the big gate, to keep an eye on them, there are 2 Gentlemen-Governesses in white skirts and red downy hats. All around, shining policemen keep an eye on the walls, in case the King and Queen and their children make a run for it”(3). She continues, “But they don’t care at all: they have that huge garden to play in. Also they have those round Gentlemen, who look like turtles,

¹¹² Although the Greek original starts and ends with the same vignettes, the interceding vignettes do not correlate. See footnote 149 for an explanation regarding this discrepancy.

¹¹³ We should resist the urge to read Karapanou’s work through the lens of magical realism for two reasons. Firstly, there is no culture of magical realist writing in Greece. This is largely because Greece does not identify itself as a postcolonial state, and consequently does not feel drawn to magical realism’s politically revisionist aims. Secondly, the incidents in *Kassandra* function to disrupt the narrative surface to align the text with modernism, much like J.M. Coetzee’s *Dusklands* in which the double death of Jacobus’s servant Klauer unsettles the realist lucidity and order of the text. (Refer to “Klauer’s Quiet”, pages 147–148.) In fact, Christina Bogdanou goes as far as to suggest that it is useful to think about Karapanou in postmodernist terms (284), a term that has been related to Karapanou’s work by other critics too (see Zanca).

visiting them every day, and so they've always got some company" (3). The guards are the *Evzones*, the presidential guard, who are dressed in the traditional Greek uniform of white *fustanellas* (pleated skirts). This passage possibly references the Greek monarchy's role in setting up the junta. When the colonel's coup d'état took place it was the Greek monarchy that swore the colonels into government. This had the dual effect of "legitimizing" the junta, and of distancing the monarchy from the Greek populace. "Sunday" suggests the collusion of the monarchy with the junta (and possibly references their attempt at a counter-coup which left them with a problematic relationship with the junta as a result). Furthermore, in this chapter, Cassandra relates her grandmother's pro-junta statements. Cassandra comments: "'The General,' Grandmother says, 'restored order in Greece.' I imagine the General tidying up Greece, putting Gentlemen and Ladies in drawers" (3). Cassandra's statement refers to the junta's justification of the coup – the "ordering" of Greece, making Greece efficient, productive, and truly "democratic". Indeed, the junta's foreign apologists often commented that the junta was a necessary part of an "evolutionary process" leading the country towards "parliamentary democracy" and political stability (Clogg and Yannopoulos xv). Cassandra's imagining the "ordering" of Greece as the act of tidying one's room, the organising of individuals into drawers, makes fun of the self-righteousness and propaganda of the junta's (and its defenders') public rhetoric.

Similarly, the "National Festival" chapter (62) also speaks to Greece's political situation. In this passage, Cassandra relates a trip with her grandmother to the

National Stadium to see a performance entitled “The History of Greece”. In the production two key images of Greece are presented to the audience: those of the ancients, described as “men in cloaks and moustaches coming on, holding hands and dancing the *kalamatianos*”¹¹⁴ (62), and the Christians, with “no beards and no moustaches” (62). The production is filled with much spectacle and pomp: dance, somersaults, calls of “Long live the Nation”, and the singing of ‘A Brave Greek Airman I’ll Become’ (62). The production clearly speaks to two key tropes of Greece’s identity – its ancient heritage, and its bonds to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and emphasises the junta’s desire to preserve and project these images of Greekness. Cassandra completely deflates the pageantry of the propagandist show by comparing the festival to a circus, and screeching “my darling little Greecey, my little Greecey-weecey” (62).

However, to suggest that the novel offers a political commentary would be problematic. Hilary Plum, Karapanou’s American publisher, notes that although the novel references the historical situation of the junta, it does not necessarily offer an analysis of the period. She asserts, “The momentum of the novel is not in its commentary on history, or its creation of psychologically realistic characters interacting against a historical setting, but in the narrator’s voice itself” (“Field”). Plum feels that “having read the novel four or five times, [she is] almost as ignorant

¹¹⁴ A popular pan-Hellenic dance with its roots in antiquity. The junta’s leaders often promoted Greek folk song and dance, and never missed the opportunity to dance folk dances, such as the *Kalamatianos*, in public (Kornetis 198).

about anything one could call history as when [she] hadn't read it at all" ("Field").

At the centre of the novel, for Plum, is its interest in female sexuality and agency, but it is interesting to note that she also refers to the novel's "stunning, childlike language skipping vividly, playfully, through an extremely dark adult world" ("Field"), thereby connecting her with many critics and authors who view the novel as a story about childhood, stripped of a political edge. Certainly reviews on the back cover of the novel emphasise this point: Edna O'Brien reads the novel as "A frank, poetic uncluttered graph of the state of childhood" while John Updike comments, "Karapanou...writes of childhood with such lyric ferocity; her *Kassandra and the Wolf* has [a] jagged fantastic substance... with a vicious pre-pubescent sexual element chillingly added". Amanda Michalopoulou, the Greek writer, states, "I feel that nobody has talked about childhood the way [Karapanou] did, really, in *Kassandra*. If she wasn't Greek, but was American or German, I feel everybody would know her. Everybody could recognize themselves in her writings about childhood" (Fragopoulos *Amanda*). Jeremy Charyn's 1976 review in the *New York Times* is no less concerned with describing the novel as "a kind of netherworld where children are locked into a sexual hysteria that transforms everything around them into a frightening, grotesque dreamscape" (14).

For Charyn, the novel's dark (sexual) energies arise not from Greece's political climate (which he only mentions in passing)¹¹⁵ but class issues, in which the

¹¹⁵ He comments, "Kassandra lives in a nebulous, half-fabled Greece that is in the hands of the military" (14).

aristocracy demand decorum and restraint in the relations between the sexes.

Charyn states that “[t]he ‘pathology’ of the book becomes clear once we listen to Cassandra’s grandmother explain the obligations of a highborn wife” (14). He quotes Cassandra’s grandmother lecturing little Cassandra:

Then when the gentleman takes you to be his Lady, when he puts on his pajamas and you put on your nightgown, and he stands upright and naked and then on top of you, don’t ever show that you like it...Because if you were to moan, the Gentleman would divorce you and, with the name you have, and the position you hold, that would be terrible (14).

Certainly, Charyn’s point regarding the class element of sexual repression is reinforced by the scullery maid’s contrasting advice to Cassandra: “At night, learn the secrets under the sheet, open your legs and let the little stars and hurricanes into your belly. Learn the oceans and the stars, honey and agony” (40). Cassandra rails against aristocratic impositions upon her sexual drives and imperatives, and, in tacit acknowledgement of the scullery maid’s advice, relates to the reader: “Nights now, I stay awake till morning. I have never liked cross-stitching anyway, and I’ve got plenty of time before I become a nice Lady” (41). But perhaps Charyn’s belief that the novel is about gendered class issues, about Cassandra’s feeling stifled under “the smug moralistic pressures of her aristocratic family” (14), obscures a reading that relates gender more specifically to the military’s junta’s political policies.

The very limited (and only recently burgeoning) Greek scholarship on Karapanou largely focuses on psychoanalytic or biographical readings of her work, and often links Karapanou’s *Kassandra* with her diaries *He Zoe Einai Agrios Apithane*

(*Life is Fiercely Impossible*; my translation) or with her autobiographical novel *Mama* (2008). Panayota Nazou, a Greek literary critic based in Australia, analyses the troubled relationship between Karapanou and her mother, Margarita Lymberaki, in terms of the Lacanian categories of symbiosis, separation, and individuation (“Autobiographical” 503). Nazou, drawing specifically on *Kassandra* and the dairies, investigates how writing and sexuality are “two sides of the same problem that stem from the incomplete (during the early [Lacanian] ‘mirror stage’), and subsequently impaired, relationship of mother and daughter” (145; my translation).¹¹⁶ Similarly, *Aselenois Nyxi* (*To the Moonless Nights*; my translation) by Vivi Theodosatou, reads 19th and 20th century Greek authors (of which Karapanou is one) through psychoanalytic theory.¹¹⁷ The unpublished thesis, *Apo to Logo sto Vlemma: He Ksenoteta tes Kassandras: Gynaikeia Metapolemike Pezograpia* (*From Word to Gaze: the Foreignness of Cassandra: Post-war Female Prose*; my translation), by Athena Gavopoulou of the University of Thessaloniki reads Karapanou within a larger study of the varying gendered discourses circulating around the classical Cassandra

¹¹⁶ Nazou’s omission of the correspondence between Karapanou and her mother in *Den M’ Agapas, M’ Agapas* (*You Don’t Love Me, You love Me*; my translation) is disappointing. Placing Karapanou’s diaries, autobiographical novel, *Mama*, and the letters in a three-way conversation would have undoubtedly yielded a richer reading of the mother-daughter relationship. Nazou structures her work in terms of chronological overlaps (Karapanou’s *Kassandra* and parts of *He Zoe* coincide time-wise), rather than in terms of biographical or thematic overlaps.

¹¹⁷ The preponderance of psychoanalytic studies of Karapanou presumably suggests that Greek scholarship is conscious of international critical trends, while also pointing to the fact that Karapanou’s work, with its emphasis on language and sexuality, is obviously amenable to psychoanalytic readings. See footnote 140 for a Lacanian reading of “The Word” in *Kassandra*.

who functions as the “ultimate Other” (7; my translation), a figure whose prophetic words and vision separate her from society and her immediate environment.

And yet there are a number of scholars (all of whom are Anglophone) who place Karapanou within the ambit of the political. Michael Harlow’s anthology “Events in Greece: 1967–1974”, published in 1975, a year after the junta’s collapse, contains a passage from Karapanou’s *Kassandra and the Wolf*.¹¹⁸ Perhaps anticipating criticism of his rather unconventional literary choices for a political anthology, Harlow says: “I have attempted to minimise overt political statement; there is no paucity of such statement these days. Rather, the selections are as diverse and variably pitched as were the experiences – reaffirming a sense of self in reaction to the blunting of both spirit and word” (8). Roderick Beaton, the esteemed literary critic, argues that Karapanou’s *Kassandra and the Wolf* “owes much to the recent experience of censorship and the ‘usurped authority’ of the colonels” (*Introduction* 284) while acknowledging that the novel breaks with the “goal of objective authenticity that was...a hallmark of the fictional ‘testimonies’ of the Asia Minor disaster in the 1920s and of the Second World War in the 1940s and 1950s” (*Introduction* 284). However, Beaton’s interpretation mirrors the anxiety, the self-consciousness, of Harlow’s decision to include literature that is not committed in the traditional sense¹¹⁹, and he thus qualifies his reading of Karapanou within the parameters of the political by stating that her novel (like others of the 1970s) is “not

¹¹⁸ Refer to footnote 149 for a discussion of the *Kassandra* edition used for Harlow’s publication.

¹¹⁹ Traditionally committed literature is discussed in the Introductory Chapter. See page 12.

just, or even not primarily, about events: they are about the way in which particular individuals see these events and then narrate them" (*Introduction* 284). Although, of course, Karen van Dyck's *Kassandra and the Censors* sees the novel as political. Van Dyck's excellent seminal study looks at women's writing, particularly poetry, in relation to the censorship imposed by the junta. This study will be looked at in more depth at a later point of this chapter, but for now it is sufficient to say that Van Dyck sees *Kassandra* as an example of resistance writing, a writing that disassociates itself with binaries that categorise writing as engaged versus non-engaged. Instead, Van Dyck reads the novel as an alternative response to censorship – a response that "introduces the confusion and misunderstandings of the times into [its] language" (57).

However, Van Dyck's reading of Karapanou's novel is the exception to the rule, for literary critics either see no political value in it whatsoever or defend it very self-consciously. Yet, in this chapter I suggest that *Kassandra and the Wolf* can be understood as a political text if we read it in terms of Adorno's infamous truth content, a concept that will be dealt with in the next section. For Adorno, "truth content" does not mean that the text explicitly expounds upon a specific historical moment or event, but rather relates to how history is intrinsically embedded within the text. Owing to this historical authenticity, the text may inadvertently or unconsciously express a political viewpoint or perspective quite distinct from the author's explicit intention, or the text's manifest content, both of which may appear politically indifferent. Whereas other theoretical models, such as that of Mikhail

Bakhtin and Jean-François Lyotard (to be discussed in due course), struggle to explain the political aspect of artworks that on the surface appear apolitical, Adorno promotes a view that the text is an artefact harbouring political content. Adorno allows Karapanou to join the ranks of other political writers, without doing violence to her aesthetic project. In short, Adorno offers a fresh alternative model of resistance politics, of protest literature.

“Truth be Told”: Adorno’s Truth Content

“Always historicise!” bellows Fredric Jameson. “*Always* historicise?”, we tentatively ask. Absolutely *always*? Of course, Jameson would make such demands – no self-respecting Marxist literary critic would ignore the presence of history in relation to a cultural document. Indeed, Jameson asserts with gusto that literary texts “come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretative traditions” (*Political* 9). However, beyond this observation that the act of reading and interpretation is never neutral, always historically loaded,¹²⁰ Jameson offers another even more important perspective: history is embedded in the text itself. Therefore, Jameson’s command, “Always historicise!”, comes from a deeper,

¹²⁰ Derek Attridge makes a similar point in his *The Singularity of Literature* (2004): “This is what a literary work ‘is’: an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or act-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read” (59).

more nuanced position, a position where the reader's consciousness, shaped by historical and social forces, functions in tandem with the historically saturated text. Jameson's position is symptomatic of his Marxist sympathies. This ideological framework explicitly refuses to accept distinctions between the "structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the 'individual'" (*Political 20*). For Jameson, cultural texts are historical artifacts, embroiled in their specific historical moment (which is no doubt part of a grander totalising historical narrative). And for Jameson the historical *is* undoubtedly politics: they are one and the same. In short, Jameson's position "begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (*Political 20*). Under Jameson, we are incorrect to assume that cultural texts are simply either socio-political or not, and that such thinking reflects the insidious reification of human thought under modernity (*Political 20*). Instead, we need to acknowledge that every text has a "political unconscious" – a dark netherworld of latent political content beneath its ostensible manifest content, much in the same way that Freud suggests that beneath the waking conscious mind functions a psychic repository of knotty repressed memories, drives, and impulses.

Jameson's conception of the political unconscious is strongly reminiscent, but not equivalent to Adorno's truth content (a point that will be discussed more thoroughly shortly). Jameson recognises that Adorno's supreme relevance to

political thinking lies in his ability to read the aesthetic with “a starker, more luminous articulation than can normally be achieved within political analysis or social history” (Jameson, *Late* 225). This relevance, as reiterated by Jameson, lies in Adorno’s ability to conceive of the aesthetic’s “complex mobilities of the historical dialectic” (*Late* 225) that is inextricably connected to his concept of “truth content”. For Jameson, the notion of truth content is revolutionary because it allows Adorno to “transcend the limits of a whole range of conventional interpretations and hermeneutic schemes and to step outside of aesthetic meanings in such a way that they can be historically grasped” (*Late* 220).

However, Adorno’s truth content, which features strongly in his *Aesthetic Theory*, lacks a coherent or systematic definition. Alex Thomson laments, “It is particularly unfortunate that [truth content] is such an obscure concept in [Adorno’s] writing” (66) considering its importance to his thought. Thomson notes that we often understand Adorno’s truth content negatively, rather than through direct statements. Truth content can very roughly be translated as, though is not entirely reducible to, the “historicity” of the artwork, the crystallization of history in the artwork. Adorno states,

That by virtue of which truth content is more than is posited by artworks is their *Methexis* [participation] in history and the determinate critique that they exercise through their form. History in artworks is not something made, and history alone frees the work from being something merely posited or manufactured: Truth content is not external to history but rather its crystallization in the works (*Aesthetic* 133)

For Adorno, the artwork is an artwork because of its form. This form is a manifestation, or “sedimentation” (in Simon Jarvis’s words), of particular historical circumstances, and it is this very form that is able to offer a critique of history.¹²¹ This critique is not necessarily expressed through explicit or overt historical content – instead truth content articulates history negatively.¹²²

In order to illuminate this point I make reference to Adorno’s “Lyric Poetry and Society” essay (already discussed in the thesis’s first chapter in relation to immanence¹²³) in *Notes to Literature*. As mentioned previously, Adorno sees the lyric poem as an expression of individual human subjectivity, a romantic idealisation of the natural world. Although the poem ostensibly appears to lack an element of socio-historical commentary or critique, the poem owes its very existence to a specific historical moment, to the horror of industrialised capitalism. It responds to the “overpowering force of material things, ... against the reification of the world, against the rule of the wares of commerce over people which has been spreading since the beginning of the modern era – which, since the Industrial Revolution, has established itself as the ruling force in life” (215). As a poem that embodies “in its

¹²¹ Thomson sees the concept as straddling two traditional interpretations of art: formalist, with its focus on the “material construction of the artwork”, and historicist, which focuses on the art’s “historical dimension” (65).

¹²² Adorno’s concept of spirit (*Geist*) in the context of the definition of art must be kept separate from general notions of spirit in German idealism (*Fleeting* 68). Hohendahl provides a detailed definition of spirit (see *Fleeting* 68-69). For the purposes of this chapter it is sufficient to note that the spirit is a “self-produced moment of the artwork, responsible for the animation (*Beseelung*) of the work as well as the interior force of objectivation. Hence Adorno defines the spirit of artworks as an immanent mediation between the work as thing and the work as expression of truth” (*Fleeting* 68-9).

¹²³ See pages 79-81.

solitude the voice of humanity" (213), a longing for a pre-industrial world, it offers a critique of the current historical moment. Adorno stresses "This demand, however, that of the untouched virgin world, is in itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social condition which every individual experiences as hostile, distant, cold and oppressive; and this social condition impresses itself on the poetic form in a negative way" (214–5). The social aspect of the poem is understood negatively – its very "absence" denotes its presence. This social aspect could be said to be the artwork's truth content. Adorno himself states, "Society inheres in the truth content" (*Aesthetic* 131), although Hohendahl warns that we should be wary of "'rashly equat[ing]' truth content with social content" (*Prismatic* 138) for it is far more complex than this, as I will go on to show.

Certainly though, in accessing the truth content of a text we do not arrive at a message or dictum, but at something far more amorphous, fluid, and perplexing – we are variously confronted with a response to or expression of history, to social and material forces, something which may possibly (or only very tenuously) resemble political commentary. Hohendahl emphatically declares, "[Truth content] does not denote, in any crude sense, an abstract value based on the content of the artwork: for example, a message that could be communicated to the recipient, or an idea expressed another way" (*Prismatic* 201). In fact, the complexity, the "enigmaticalness" (a term with which we already familiar)¹²⁴, of the text's truth

¹²⁴ See pages 106–107, 141–142.

content should by no means be underestimated. Hohendahl in his most recent book, *Fleeting Promises: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (2013), reiterates that Adorno's "insistence that art can be read in terms of a truth content does not mean it can be treated as a stable object" (59).¹²⁵ Like quicksilver, truth content slips through our fingers, reminding us that "Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks" (*Aesthetic* 121). There is a profound relationship between truth content and enigmaticalness, as is made clear by Adorno. On the one hand, Adorno states that "artworks are enigmatic in terms not of their composition but of their truth content" (*Aesthetic* 127), thereby equating truth content with enigmaticalness. On the other hand, somewhat contradictorily, Adorno comments, "The truth content of artworks is the objective solution of the enigma posed by each and every one. By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content" (*Aesthetic* 127). Adorno seems to be saying that truth content is *both* the enigma of the text (that which needs to be decoded) and the solution to the enigma.¹²⁶ Indeed, Adorno complicates things further by suggesting that truth content is at once distinct from the meaning of the text, thereby "challeng[ing] traditional hermeneutics, which operate with the assumption of possible disclosure

¹²⁵ Despite the excellence of his latest reading of *Aesthetic Theory*, Hohendahl entirely ignores the historical aspect of truth content.

¹²⁶ Hohendahl comments that "[t]he search for the truth content as the ultimate exploration challenges the work as much as the enigmatic artwork challenges and potentially defeats the quest for truth content" (*Fleeting* 65).

of meaning" (Hohendahl, *Fleeting* 65).¹²⁷ Adorno says, in a rather glib and unenlightening statement, "The truth content of artworks is not what they mean but rather what decides whether the work itself is true or false, and only this truth of the work in itself is commensurable to philosophical interpretation and coincides – with regard to the idea, in any case – with the idea of philosophical truth" (*Aesthetic* 130). What Adorno means by philosophical truth is anyone's guess: "Does he refer to a specifically aesthetic truth (defined in terms of form and structure) or does he mean the truthfulness of the expression?" (Hohendahl, *Fleeting* 67). Whatever the case, this elusiveness, this indefinability, is what crucially ensures that the truth content cannot be appropriated by identity thinking¹²⁸ – a concept that will be explored in the next chapter. It also ensures its uniqueness when placed up against other aesthetic theories that aim to release the historical or political undercurrents of an artwork (this is precisely what makes it vastly different from Jameson's "political unconscious").¹²⁹

Understanding truth content is made even more challenging by the fact that although truth content is "always historically variable", it would be wrong to "simply see art as relative to a specific context" (Thomson 66). In other words, truth

¹²⁷ For Hohendahl, "Adorno concludes that the search for meaning in the artwork legitimised by idealism has to be suspended and ultimately replaced by a different and more radical understanding of truth outside the concept of meaning" (*Fleeting* 66).

¹²⁸ Hohendahl notes, "[I]t is the non-identity that marks the structure of the truth content" (*Prismatic* 202).

¹²⁹ Jameson uses the "political unconscious" to "demand[] the construction of some new and more adequate, immanent or antitranscendent hermeneutic model" (*Political* 23) in a way that is stripped of the equivocal, enigmatic character of Adorno's truth content, although his "political unconscious" and Adorno's "truth content" both strongly assert the historical undercurrent of artworks.

content is contingent, but it may regenerate itself in relation to various historical moments. Adorno challenges the “conventional notion that the reception of artworks changes with time, and that reception has its own history” (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 199). Instead he makes the more “much stronger claim that the essence or spirit of the artwork, for which he uses the term *Geist*, is exposed to historical time. There is no timeless idea of the masterpiece; hence, it can expire like any other human product” (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 199). (For example, great works of art are great only because they manage to update themselves perpetually.¹³⁰)

The enigmaticalness of truth content is precisely the reason that Adorno takes issue with artworks of an ostensibly political character (such as the committed artworks of Brecht and Sartre that we dealt with extensively in Chapter 1), that flatten a play of interpretation. Adorno asserts that deliberately adopted political positions in artworks “are epiphenomena and usually impinge on the elaboration of works, and thus, ultimately, on their social truth content” (*Aesthetic* 232). Adorno notes that the grimacing clowns of Beckett are more “truthful” than the characters of social realism of Soviet Russia. Beckett shows the “subject’s historical truth”, whereas social realism, by comparison, is “simply childish” (*Aesthetic* 250). This is a point that Jameson comments upon in his reading of Adorno, acknowledging that “while Adorno seems to exclude the possibility of political works of art, often with

¹³⁰ Speaking of great artworks, Adorno notes, “While their metaphysical meaning dissolves, something of their truth content, however little it can be pinned down, does not; it is that whereby they remain eloquent” (*Aesthetic* 40).

some vehemence, what he in reality opposes may be better identified as a political aesthetic" (*Late* 223). Adorno opposes a political aesthetic that "stresses and valorises the function of works of art within situations of immediacy, and in the realm of the day-to-day struggle and the Event, rather than their deeper expression of social struggle or historical contradiction" (Jameson, *Late* 223).

At this point it is necessary to remember Adorno's view of the autonomous artwork,¹³¹ the dialectical "opposite" of the committed artwork. To reiterate: Adorno is clear that the autonomous artwork is at once inextricably bound to society, forged by and within a social matrix, but it is also independent of this dynamic. It is this tension, this ambiguity, within the totality of social relations that invigorates the artwork and allows it to critique its historical and social moment.¹³² In fact, it is this relationship that prompts Simon Jarvis to assert that "works of art execute a critique of history", not through containing "an explicit historical content", but rather "through the way in which they configure materials which already contain history sedimented within them. In this way new works of art exercise a 'judgementless judgement' on what has gone before" (Jarvis 105). Jameson comments, on a somewhat related note, "Aesthetic experience...always leads us back to history – to the history of capitalism from which the work emerged, and to the constellation of

¹³¹ For Zuidervaart's brief definition see page 50.

¹³² Adorno points to the autonomy of the artwork in his comments, "That whereby the truth content of artworks points beyond their aesthetic complexion, which it does only by virtue of that aesthetic complexion, assures its social significance. This duality is not a stipulation that rules abstractly over the sphere of art" (*Aesthetic* 248).

classes and instrumental rationality which is its semantic content and makes its utopian dimension possible" (*Late* 225).

This embedding of history in the artwork's materials, its constitutive form, cannot be made or produced by the artist. It is something intrinsic to the artwork, and requires philosophical interpretation to elicit it. This profound relationship between the artwork and history, and the artwork's critique of history, are the very reasons "that Adorno believes that works of art are constitutively in need of a philosophical interpretation of their 'truth content'" (Jarvis 104). The truth content of the artwork must be extracted, even though truth content is wedded to its own enigmaticalness. Its obfuscatory character though reminds us that it "cannot be thought of as a kind of kernel which is inside the shell of a work of art and needs to be got out with philosophical nutcrackers" (Jarvis 104): this would be a denial of truth content's makeup. In fact, Thomson states that the "identification of the work's truth content is always a betrayal" (128) because it undermines the complexity of truth content. However, Adorno is adamant that we *must* interpret the autonomous artwork, declaring, "Artworks, especially those of the highest dignity, await their interpretation" (*Aesthetic* 128).¹³³

Adorno, anti-methodological and anti-systematic, gives us no indication as to how we should elicit truth content. He suggests that truth content turns the very

¹³³ Adorno asserts, "The claim that there is nothing to interpret in them, that they simply exist, would erase the demarcation line between art and nonart. Ultimately, perhaps, even carpets, ornaments, all nonfigural things await interpretation" (*Aesthetic* 128).

concept of immanent analysis on its head: despite wanting to read the artwork exclusively on its own terms, the artwork points to something external or beyond itself. He states, in his essay “Parataxis”, “The contradiction according to which every work wants to be understood on its own terms, but none can in fact be understood is what leads to the truth content...The path followed by the determinate negation of [subjectively intended]¹³⁴ meaning is the path to the truth content” (112). He continues that if truth content is to be “true in an emphatic sense, if it is to be more than merely what is intended, then it leaves immanence behind as it constitutes itself” (112). Truth content cannot function “without its structure [Gefüge] of the [artwork], the totality of its moments; but at the same time, it is something that transcends this structure, as a structure of aesthetic semblance: not from the outside through a stated philosophical content, but by virtue of the configuration of moments that signify more than the structure intends” (112–3). The impossibility of a fully immanent analysis suggests that we cannot enter into conversation with an artwork’s truth content without at least some knowledge of the artwork’s external context. (This point echoes an earlier discussion of immanence in Chapter 1.¹³⁵) The difficulty of eliciting truth content for the purposes of literary analysis does not stop there: certainly as “comprehensive historiographic judgement, philosophical truth claims are unacceptable both to those who think truth is eternal and to those who consider it unknowable” (Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s* 303). Moreover,

¹³⁴ Simon Jarvis’s insertion. See his *Adorno* 105.

¹³⁵ See pages 80–81.

Adorno himself acknowledges that accessing truth content is problematic, considering both the truth's variability and that it is always mediated by language, a corruptible and historically-determined entity in and of itself (as discussed in Chapter 2). Despite these issues though, we *must* endeavour to think and engage with the artwork in terms of its truth content.

Indeed, in accessing truth content through "philosophical reflection" (Adorno, *Aesthetic* 128), the artwork offers us a perspective on the world that may not necessarily be straightforward or easy to comprehend, but offers incisive social and historical critique shot through with a utopian element. Zuidervaart says it best: truth content is "historical but not arbitrary; nonpropositional, yet calling for propositional claims to be made about it; utopian in its reach, yet firmly tied to specific societal conditions" ("Theodor"). He continues, "Truth content is the way in which an artwork simultaneously challenges the way things are and suggests how things could be better, but leaves things practically unchanged" ("Theodor").¹³⁶ The artwork's truth content gestures with all its might towards that "which 'is not yet'" through its evaluation of a socio-historical present, "of what actually is" (Jarvis 104).¹³⁷ Adorno's "metaphilosophical claims are not simply claims about the connections of history, art, and truth. They are part of an attempt to lend a voice to

¹³⁶ Jarvis takes a slightly different view from Zuidervaart: "Works of art do not assure us of anything, and certainly not of utopia; instead, they hold open the possibility of new experience which perfected identity thinking would liquidate" (105). In this way truth content is involved in a stand-off against the administered world that aims to totalise and homogenise human thought.

¹³⁷ Jarvis refers to this process as "determinate criticism" (104).

unmet needs and unfulfilled desires” (Zuidervaart, *Adorno's* 304). Truth content is about the “express[ion of]...the suffering of socialised individuals” (Zuidervaart, *Adorno's* 204), and the “unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts” (Jameson, *Political* 20), and those concerns must be central to any reading of a work of art. It is with truth content in mind that we now turn to the “unpuzzling”, however tenuous and fractured a process that may be, of Karapanou’s *Kassandra and the Wolf*.

“The Moment of Truth”: Adorno and Karapanou

James Faubion, an esteemed social anthropologist and the author of *Modern Greek Lessons: A Primer in Historical Constructivism* (1993), says of Karapanou’s relationship to the political,

Margarita never once spoke to me about the junta. She made exceptionally few remarks of any specifically political character at any point that I was in her company. Nor do I know of anyone else who has found her to be in the slightest bit political....She deplored ardent nationalism, not even to mention nationalist essentialism. That's about as political as she got, but hardly political enough to align her with any specific party (Personal email correspondence, January 2013).

However, Adorno’s truth content functions without the need to acknowledge the intention of the writer, thereby liberating the text from the “tyranny” of an interpretation based entirely upon authorial intent – a truly fascinating prospect.

Adorno himself states in *Aesthetic Theory*, “That great artists, the Goethe who wrote fairy tales no less than Beckett, want nothing to do with interpretations only

underscores the difference of the truth content from the consciousness and intention of the author and does so by the strength of the author's own self-consciousness" (128). Indeed, although the author may have one idea about what the text may be doing or saying, this may be entirely distinct from both the truth content and general interpretation of literary critics and readers alike. Jarvis puts it somewhat differently: "since the truth-content of an artwork, in any non-idealist account of truth, cannot be something made [constructed]..., 'the content of a work of art begins precisely where the author's intention stops; the intention is extinguished in the content'" (139). I suggest then that although perhaps Karapanou was not strictly writing about the junta, the social climate certainly comes to the fore in the work's truth content. Karapanou herself states of her aesthetic practice, "I believe that one shouldn't aim to say 'great things', rather just 'things'. For me all the 'big names' [great authors] elevated me, they moved and developed my concern with 'things', with 'nothing' which, from the moment you write them, become miracles, sublime, huge" (*He Zoe* 283; my translation). She continues, "And I am almost certain that the big 'messages' are those that the big authors are oblivious to, things they said without paying attention" (*He Zoe* 283; my translation). In this passage Karapanou is clearly pointing to the fact that she does not enter the text with the intention of producing a novel about big issues – issues such as religion or politics. If such issues come through in the text, they emerge in the space characterised not necessarily by the writer's indifference, but certainly by a lack of awareness of what it is that they are *really* writing. In this section I look at Karapanou's *Kassandra and the Wolf* to suggest that

Karapanou is addressing “big issues”, big issues that she may not have even set out to address. The novel is a clear example of the subversion of the junta’s repression through various literary and linguistic techniques.

Despite the fact that the junta lacked a coherent ideology, it is possible to pinpoint “certain persistent themes, which throw light on [its] thinking” (Clogg 43), certainly in terms of its construction of gender. A strict code of “appropriate” behaviour and roles for each sex was made clear in various ways. As Kostis Kornetis notes in his historical account of the student resistance movement against the junta, *Children of the Dictatorship* (2013), the junta, like other fascist or nationalist-socialist regimes, viewed women in terms of their reproductive capacity (204). Kornetis pinpoints a key passage in the junta’s *To Pistevo Mas (Our Credo)*¹³⁸ that declares, “The Revolution sees in the Greek woman her primary biological mission as the Mother. It honours her for this capacity with a deep consciousness of her importance” (204). This “honouring” of the Greek woman “as the Mother” locked into expectations regarding women’s modesty and chastity, with oral testimonies by men and women alike noting that women were expected to dress in a manner that was not in the least sexually provocative.¹³⁹ Notably, these expectations were not

¹³⁸ *Our Credo* should not be understood as a manifesto or the political programme of the dictatorship. It is a collection of Colonel Papadopoulos’s speeches. The publication and distribution of this text to civil servants, teachers, and people in the military meant to serve an ideological purpose, to “re-educate” them.

¹³⁹ Interestingly though, the junta’s attempt to westernise, or rather Americanise, Greece in various ways, resulted in the public circulation of junta-endorsed newsreels of fashion shows with scantily-clad women in bikinis parading through Athens, or television commercials that appropriated feminist phrases to sell beauty products, such as shampoo. Rather than read these images as a contradiction, we should acknowledge that these images simply point to the fact that the junta’s traditional

limited to supporters of the junta, and Kernetis makes clear that even among left-wing student resistance groups, certain men would express puritanical views of appropriate female attire (210). Women (especially resistance fighters) were stuck in a difficult double-bind of having to fight gender discrimination and stereotyping on all fronts, although this is not to say that women themselves were willing to take on the values espoused by Western countries undergoing the Sexual Revolution.

(Kernetis indicates that interviews with female university students by the anti-regime student journal *Protoporia* in 1972 show that, on the surface at least or when publically questioned, they held wholly conservative views regarding issues such as premarital sex.) Certainly, the Sexual Revolution and female emancipation that had swept through much of the Western world during the Sixties, had made only a limited impact in Greece of the early 1970s, where “birth control remained taboo, abortion was ‘a crime under all circumstances’, and female adultery was a serious offence. In addition, female contraception was still finding its way as the selling and advertising of the birth control pill was prohibited and punished by criminal law” (Kernetis 208).¹⁴⁰ Of course, men also suffered gender biases under the junta: any suggestion of effeminacy or gender-bending was viewed with suspicion.

Furthermore, the junta maintained that there were no homosexuals in the country

conservatism was often in tension with its desire to make Greece appear modern, especially to the international community.

¹⁴⁰ It was not until 1981 with Greece’s entry into the European Community (EC) that women’s rights were seriously addressed in the public realm. The 1983 reforms of the Family Law (Law 1329/83) was a significant development in Greek history espousing a formal equality between men and women within the Greek household (Van Steen 262).

(Kornetis 209), and even went to some lengths to intimidate journalists or historians that made any reference to homosexuality in Ancient Greece (Kornetis 223-224).

Certainly Karapanou's *Kassandra* expresses a sensitivity towards the junta's gendered discourse in multiple ways (a point that will become apparent shortly), although almost all of her novels ostensibly display an interest in the fluidity of gender and the idea of heteronormativity. For example, Karapanou's second novel, *The Sleepwalker* (1985), presents Manolis, a messiah figure who commits a number of murders that are perplexing not simply because they appear unmotivated but because they involve the rape of both men and women, leading the police chief to complain – "Is [the murderer] queer?...A fag, a cocksucker, a lady's man, a sex fiend, a murderer – what can I say, I've never seen anything like it....You're this, you're that, or you're the other thing" (185). In *Rien ne va plus* (1991), Karapanou deals with the relationship between a married couple, and writes different parts of the novel from their opposing perspectives. The female narrator fictionalises the relationship (she is a writer), and portrays her husband as a homosexual. She states, in an address to her husband, "In my book, you're the monster and I'm the angel... I made you gay, too" (163). However, it should be noted that despite much of Karapanou's work displaying a preoccupation with gender, particularly the concept of femaleness, Karapanou herself did not admit to having any pronounced interest in gender. She notes in her diaries from the period 1967 to 1970, "Women were always my only point of interest, but this doesn't hold true any longer" (*He Zoe* 264; my translation).

In *Kassandra*, Karapanou modifies and sexualises the traditional European folktale and synthesises it with classical Greek mythology. These revisions, whether Karapanou intended it or not, result in a commentary upon and disruption of the sexist discourse of the junta. First and foremost, the novel makes reference to the classical figure of Cassandra¹⁴¹, daughter of the Trojans, King Priam and Queen Hecuba. Cassandra features in varying degrees in different classical texts – Homer’s *Iliad*, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*, and *The Cypria*, which is attributed to Stasinus of Cyprus or Hegesinus of Salamis. Some of the texts (i.e. the *Iliad*) make no reference to Cassandra’s prophetic powers or madness.¹⁴² In fact, the “mad” Cassandra foretelling the future may have been Aeschylus’ innovation that, together with Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and other lost plays, established that specific rendering for all subsequent authors. In one version of the Cassandra story, the god Apollo, enamoured by her beauty (to rival the goddess Aphrodite’s) wants to take Cassandra as a lover, and proffers the gift of prophecy. Cassandra’s refusal to submit to Apollo’s advances results in the punishment of being able to accurately see the future but never be believed. In another version, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Cassandra originally accepts Apollo’s advances in exchange for the gift of prophecy only then to break her promise, and as Apollo cannot retract his gift, he curses her, ensuring

¹⁴¹ The mythological Cassandra has been spelt with a “C” to differentiate her from Karapanou’s character Kassandra.

¹⁴² *The Cypria* is probably the earliest poem to mention Cassandra prophesying, though we know that text only through later summaries. It does not appear to mention madness, or that her prophesies are necessarily dire.

her prophecies will always fall on deaf ears.¹⁴³ The violence of Cassandra's "gift" in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* lies in the fact that she also foresees her own death, but is never believed. In looking at these two versions of the Cassandra myth, it is important to note that in both cases we come to the same conclusion: the voice of the female subject is misheard and ignored. Located within a sexual nexus, Cassandra is punished when she refuses or rejects the male god's advances and the heinous result is that her voice is nullified. The female voice becomes associated with hysteria and madness.

In *Kassandra* the links to the mythical Cassandra become glaringly clear in the chapter "3 Blind Mice". Kassandra relates, "One day, I was very sick. I started making noises and swinging from the chandelier in the dining room" (35). Kassandra's father is summoned to take her to a lunatic asylum, described as the "Holiday-House-for-the-Good-People-that-Hang-from-the-Ceiling" (35). However, when Kassandra and her father arrive at the asylum, the doctor (who Kassandra calls "Mr. Fat") focuses his attention exclusively on her father. Kassandra states that Mr Fat asked "Father why he'd got married, why he'd left his wife (Mother), if he dived into bed with other Ladies, why he was crying and eating his hat, and if he preferred a room with a bath or a shower" (36). Kassandra does everything in her power to get the doctor's attention, shouting "It's me, me, me, me!" (36), but it is Kassandra's father who is finally institutionalised as he begins "sobbing and leaping

¹⁴³ In a completely different account, Cassandra falls asleep in a temple. In her sleep she is licked by snakes, which thereby results in her being able to see the future.

on the table and chasing the 3 crossed ladies [the nurses] around the room and grabbing their chests and bottoms and tearing off his shirt" (36). This scene cleverly plays into the muteness of the mythical Cassandra whose cries fall on deaf ears, while exposing the hyper-sexualised madness and irrationality of the adult world. Cassandra's enactment of the mythical Cassandra reminds us not to ignore Cassandra's observations and statements for they embody a very real truth, even if they are dismissed by the people who surround her.

Running parallel to the mythical Cassandra allusion is the reference to Little Red Riding Hood. In this European fairy tale, a young girl, cloaked in red, is sent through a forest to visit her ailing grandmother's house with provisions. Unbeknownst to her, this very grandmother has been eaten by a hungry wolf that has consequently dressed up as the grandmother and climbed into her bed, and patiently awaits the arrival of Little Red Riding Hood so that he may devour her too. Upon her arrival, Little Red Riding Hood, too naïve and innocent to see through the wolf's disguise, remarks that she finds her grandmother changed: "Grandmother, what a deep voice you have!"; "Grandmother, what big eyes you have!"; "Grandmother, what big hands you have!", and, "Grandmother, what a big mouth you have". She is then gobbled up by the wolf. Little Red Riding Hood concludes in a number of different ways depending on the version of the fairy tale presented – some versions say that a lumberjack or hunter in the forest hears the child's cries and comes to her rescue, other versions that she is rescued only after she has been devoured (the lumberjack or hunter split open of the wolf's belly to free her). Social

anthropologists and folklorists, acknowledging the variations between stories, see the tale as suggestive of seasonal or fertility cycles,¹⁴⁴ or as alluding to atavistic puberty rituals in which the girl's emergence from the wolf's belly is suggestive of sexual maturity and awakening (Dundes 27–9).

In the passage obviously associated with the fairy tale in Karapanou's *Kassandra*, *Kassandra* is sexually molested by the General, who she compares with the wolf of the storybook she gives him to see. *Kassandra* recounts,

'Come on, let's look at the book with the pictures.'

I'd run to his room with the book under my arm, and give it to him tenderly.

The first picture was of a wolf opening his mouth to swallow 7 juicy piglets.

It was the wolf that I usually felt sorry for. How could he gulp down so many piglets in one go? I always told him that, asked him that. Then he'd put his hairy hand in my white panties and touch me. I didn't feel anything except a kind of warmth. His finger came and went, and I watched the wolf. He panted and sweated. I didn't mind too much.

Now, when they caress me, I always think of the wolf, and feel sorry for him (7).

The passage is complicated: it draws a parallel between the General and the wolf, a wolf that ruthlessly consumes seven little pigs. *Kassandra* sympathises not with the piglets – the wolf's helpless victims, but the perpetrator of the crime itself. Karen van Dyck reads this incident as an example of where clear-cut boundaries between victim and oppressor are blurred "at a time when the difference was clear in the

¹⁴⁴ Her red hood could symbolise the bright sun which is ultimately swallowed by the terrible night (the wolf), and the variations in which she is cut out of the wolf's belly could represent dawn. (Tatar 25)

[Greek] political sphere" (*Kassandra* 119). However, owing to the fact that *Kassandra* is in the process of being sexually molested in this passage – the General is touching her genitals, and working himself up to an orgasm – *Kassandra* becomes a victim (a point that I will elaborate upon shortly). Yet not only is *Kassandra* indifferent to the molestation – “I didn’t mind too much”, she explicitly places her sympathies with the General.

The chapter “The Party with the Greek Philosopher” plays on the same motifs and images. In this chapter a philosopher, also referred to as the “Marxist”, is invited to *Kassandra*’s birthday party to look after *Kassandra* and her friends while her mother (clearly bored and agitated) goes out. The games that the children play while *Kassandra*’s mother is in attendance are conventional: hide-and-seek, musical chairs, postman’s knock. However, once she leaves the party, the games take a markedly sinister turn and it quickly becomes apparent that the philosopher is in fact a pederast relishing the opportunity to be in close and unsupervised contact with children. The philosopher plays a series of games with the little girls, one of which is “Wolf, Wolf, Are You Here?” (78), that involves him imitating the wolf of the Little Red Riding Hood fairytale. Later, he devises a game in which whomever he tosses the ball to, will have to complete the first half of the word he has said. He explains, “I’ll toss you the ball that’s one syllable, You toss it back – that’s another syllable, and so on. This way we’ll make pretty little wordies” (78). Whereas all of the other little girls make innocuous words, responding things such as “Nut” when he calls out “Pee-” (79), *Kassandra*’s words have a distinctive sexual element. When the

philosopher says "Ass-", Cassandra replies with "End" (80). When the philosopher repeats "Ass-", Cassandra shouts "HOLE!" before provocatively "shoving the little red ball in [her] mouth and sucking it" (80). (This image appears especially provocative when we consider Cassandra's metaphorical description of the philosopher's testicles as "2 little red balls" (81).) The philosopher is clearly aroused by her words and actions and his "trousers swell like a little cloud" (80). When the game is later modified so that when the children toss the philosopher the ball they may also order him to do things, Cassandra continues to behave (presumably, but perhaps not, unwittingly) in a sexually suggestive way (80). While the other little girls order: "Philosopher, lift your arm up"; "Philosopher, do a somersault", Cassandra's injunction is both playful and sexually-loaded, "Marxist, pull your pants down" (81). The wolf-like philosopher reacts aggressively, unbuttons his trousers, and exposes his penis to the girls (81). Cassandra reacts to the paedophile's exposure of "this huge, dense, dumb thing, something like an eggplant left out in the sun" (81) in a manner quite unlike her friends who hide around the house.

Kassandra states, "I stare at [the philosopher] for a long time, then put my head between my legs and become an ostrich" (81). Kassandra's reaction may suggest victimhood, a state of shock, but also a complete obliviousness to forms of sexual molestation or harassment. Whatever the case, her victimhood is problematical based on the fact that the paedophile is submitting to her very command, "Marxist, pull your pants down" (81), and her earlier sexualised verbal play. In fact, Kassandra is even dressed as a Devil: "black tights up to my neck, black velvet horns, and a

bushy black tail with a hole at the tip for the flames to come out" (77), implying that her behaviour is not entirely innocent.

Of course, we are presented with numerous incidents where it is clear that Cassandra herself is victimising others. In one instance, at a birthday party, Cassandra urinates on the floor and then blames the act on another child. She threatens this child: "Zakoulis, if you take one step from here [the scene of the crime], I'll slaughter you and skeleton you" (10). Zakoulis then receives a spanking from his mother for his "misdeed". In another instance, Cassandra, desperate for a pet, is given a kitten with the knowledge that it will be returned to its owner within a week. However, instead of returning the kitten, Cassandra in an act of vengeance against her grandmother for not letting her keep the kitten permanently, ruthlessly tortures the kitten, breaking its back and placing needles in its eyes (69–70).¹⁴⁵

These allusions to the figures of Cassandra and Little Red Riding Hood are significant on a number of levels. Firstly, implicit in both tales – the classical Greek texts and the more contemporary European fairy tale, is a complicated sexual content. The Cassandra myth revolves around the rape of Cassandra, and her subsequent punishment for having to assert herself against patriarchy. However, the varying versions of the original myth complicate her relationship with patriarchy. Is

¹⁴⁵ Bogdanou has acknowledged the importance of the mythological Cassandra in relation to the concept of female language and voice. However, she tends to misinterpret the nuances attached to Karapanou's novel. Karapanou's Cassandra, for Bogdanou, is "reduced first to a silent observer of an absurd reality and then to its marginalised victim" (314). This is an overstatement that too easily places Cassandra in the position of victimhood, too easily folds to oppositional binaries, which the novel quite clearly resists.

the fact that her prophecies are disbelieved a punishment or retribution for a promise broken? Similarly, *Little Red Riding Hood* – traditionally a tale implicitly about sexual maturity and awakening – disrupts binary constructions of oppressor versus victim. It is important to note that these acts of revision are political.

Karapanou, in revising and “claiming authority/authorship over different cultural and traditional narratives (Greek myth and history, the European fairy-tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* – a story itself reflected and refracted across different traditions)”, ultimately comes to “unexpectedly, generat[e] possibilities previously unexplored, or suppressed by...mimetically stereotypical repetitions, possibilities” (Bogdanou 294). In the act of revision patriarchal oppressive structures and metanarratives are recomposed and historical materials are reinvigorated to communicate political sentiments. Through Karapanou the mythological *Cassandra* and *Little Red Riding Hood* become purveyors of the complex links between gender and domination under the junta.

That dominance in the Greek context has a gendered element becomes glaringly obvious in the chapter, “*Aunt Samantha Stages a Coup d’etat*” (104). In this short and evocative passage, *Kassandra* relates how her grandmother and the General relate with hysteria and disbelief to Aunt Samantha’s coup. *Kassandra* relates, “‘Aunt Samantha’s staged a coup,’ Grandmother shrieked. ‘Only the General can stage one,’ she explained to me, lowering her voice” (104). What this coup actually entails never becomes apparent. The mere fact that Aunt Samantha has decided to stage a coup appears sufficient to incite panic. *Kassandra*, feeding off her

grandmother's anxiety, phones the General to inform him when Aunt Samantha drops past the house soon after her grandmother's announcement of the coup. Cassandra pleads, "General, General, come over quickly. Aunt Samantha has staged a coup d'etat" (104). Crucially, Cassandra fixates on Aunt Samantha's clothing – markers of her biological sex – "Oh, General, those nice stockings she was wearing, those bracelets and necklaces, they were just to fool us" (104). The General's exaggerated and irrational response, "Run along and see if she's wearing dark glasses" (104), said with "his voice shaking" (104), gives the passage an entirely farcical air. Cassandra's response continues the scene's absurdity: she peeps through the keyhole to check whether Aunt Samantha is indeed wearing dark glasses, and upon confirming this to the General, who declares, "I'll be right over. The password will be Sly Sardine. Don't open the door unless you hear it" (104), she races upstairs to prepare for his imminent arrival. In her room she dons a helmet and frogman's fins and hides behind the curtain, despite knowing full well that Aunt Samantha has been locked in the parlour (104). This passage points to the junta's preposterous fear of female governance. (No women occupied positions in the upper echelons of government; the junta was exclusively a male run affair.)

Karen van Dyck connects the junta's anxiety attached to gender with its use and repression of language in the public sphere. The junta loathed both androgyny and homosexuality, which manifested in bizarre and infamous laws, such as the banning of long hair for men. For the junta, men sporting long hair were involved in a form of gender bending that "represent[ed] the degenerate phenomenon of

hippyism", the "hirsute flag of their nihilism" (in the words of Colonel Ladas) (Clogg 42). Interestingly, Van Dyck notes that the regime's suspicious reaction to individuals who transgressed normative and traditional gender stereotypes was not dissimilar to the way in which the junta reacted to words that did not strictly correlate with meaning (*Kassandra* 104). For the junta, language needed to be literal and unequivocal, and "authority depended on the strict regulation of meaning. Any kind of uncertainty was threatening" (Van Dyck, *Reading* 47). For example, as mentioned earlier, the regime expected the titles of literary texts to exactly mirror their contents. This "ongoing attempt [by the regime] to drain language of its figurative force did not go unnoticed by those in the opposition; it indeed led the resistance to a heightened awareness of the relation of language to political hegemony" (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 19–20).¹⁴⁶ Writers aimed to completely destabilise meaning and "set themselves the challenge of exposing the contradictions and hypocrisy that the regime was busy concealing. One of the most successful tactics was parody: writers would seem to cooperate with Papadopoulos's [the leader of the junta] desire to make everything fit perfectly while actually subverting him" (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 20).

Karapanou's sensitivity to language comes to the fore strongly in the fact that the child protagonist suffers from a severe stammer, much to the frustration of her

¹⁴⁶ Van Dyck notes that the regime ironically often used metaphor and figurative language to put their points across. Papadopoulos's reference to Greece as a "patient" that needs healing and care is a clear example. The junta is a "plaster cast" that rejuvenates a Greece that suffers from the ailments of chaos and strife (*Kassandra* 19).

family members. Cassandra answers questions in an “Nnnnotssssoggggggood” way, struggling, at various points in the novel, to pronounce her name “Kkkkkassssandra” (20). After significant strain maintaining a conversation with the General, Cassandra entirely refrains from speaking, thinking “How would I ever be able to finish the sentence?” (20). Other scenes in the novel oscillate between Cassandra’s refusing to speak at all,¹⁴⁷ and a fluency in which her simple innocent statements betray a dark truth at play in the adult world. Karapanou also sets up a link between language and the process of education. After her first day at school, Cassandra describes her day to the maidservant Fani as “Very good. I’ve learned to speak, answer and think in syllables” (130), to which Fani replies, “Then why are you crying?” (130). Cassandra responds, “It’s the syllables. It hurts when I cut the words in two” (130). The language imposed by state structures (possibly speaking to the institutionalisation of *Katharevousa*¹⁴⁸ over demotic Greek by the junta) is an act of violence that physically violates and hurts Cassandra when she articulates words in the manner expected of her.

However, at the centre of Cassandra’s relationship with language is its connection with sexuality and gender identity. This is particularly obvious in the short vignette, “The Word”. The episode borders on a surrealistic, somewhat dream-

¹⁴⁷ When Cassandra feigns dumbness her grandmother sends her to the doctor, who asks her pointedly, “My child, why don’t you talk to your relations?” (87). Cassandra’s responds, “But I do talk to them, only I don’t use words” (87).

¹⁴⁸ *Katharevousa* (also referred to as “purist Greek”) is a form of Modern Greek that is more closely aligned with Ancient Greek.

like, nonsensical series of events. Cassandra relates waking up in the morning “dumb, still as a clock” (112). Words, which she describes as “dumb”, exit her mouth to be torn to pieces by the air (112). The text sees words as physical objects that are able to solidify or metamorphose in a truly Ovidian manner. In fact, Cassandra narrates, “At night forgotten words tried to reach me. I listened with my skin. Words tore my skin off, crept inside me, and nestled down. When I opened my mouth in front of the mirror, beasts lay asleep in my throat; they’d made it their home” (112). Here words appear to be less than innocuous – they colonise Cassandra’s body and mind with a vicious animal ferocity. Settled in her throat, there is no way to eject these fearsome creaturely words. The situation becomes progressively worse. Cassandra complains that the words plague her: “T–K–P–X. They were driving me crazy” (112).

Interspersed between this bodily occupation by language are references to human sexuality. Note, for instance, the passage,

T–K–P–X. They were driving me crazy.
 A–R. Balsam.
 Grandmother spoke: Not a squeak.
 Mother spoke: I bled.
 Peter: he knew. He lulled the beasts to sleep.
 ‘My little cabbage, I’ll take you away from here.’
 T–K–P–X: ‘Peter don’t leave me.’
 ‘We’ll go to the island.’ (112–13)

The act of Cassandra's mother speaking is connected to blood, which possibly could suggest menstrual blood – the blood associated with femaleness and fertility.¹⁴⁹

Kassandra's connection with Peter (who in other passages in the novel is presented variously as a transvestite cross-dresser, the lover of one of the female servants, and a pederast) dispels the terror of language (to be discussed shortly). Kassandra describes suckling Peter before he turns into a woman (113). At various points in the passage he transforms into a cave, shelter, and water (113). Kassandra comments that as he grows bigger, she shrinks, and that a vein runs from his heart to hers.

Kassandra's enters Peter's body as a refuge – "It was so peaceful there that I curled up and fell asleep" (114) –, but this is interrupted by his birthing her. Although she beseeches Peter to stay nestled in his body, his "body arche[s] forward and [she] sho[o]ts out" (114).

¹⁴⁹ This passage features in Michael Harlow's anthology, with a more explicit sexual element. In the Greek edition printed in 1977, the text reads as "Mother spoke: I bled" (122; my translation). However, in Harlow's text it reads, "Grandmother spoke: I bled./ Mother spoke: *my thighs bled*" (my italics; 30). This suggests that the translation published by Harcourt Brace under the title *The Hour of the Wolf* (1974) on which Harlow based his translation contains minor differences from later editions, of which the change of title to *Kassandra and the Wolf* is the most obvious change. All editions refer to Nick Germanacos as the novel's translator. Germanacos asserts that after the book's publication with Harcourt Brace he and Karapanou parted ways and he had no further input on Karapanou's decisions regarding the book (Personal email correspondence, Dec. 2014). (Germanacos had been a significant presence in Karapanou's literary life – editing and shaping her manuscript of *Kassandra*, and later translating it into English.) There is no way to account for these discrepancies between editions, other than to suggest that Karapanou herself decided to modify the text after the initial publication. This would be very much in keeping with Karapanou's stance on translation as a "rape" of the text. She comments, "I believe in translation as a study of words. But not as a conveyance [from one language to another]" ("He Metafrase"; my translation). This stance was no doubt informed by the fact that she spoke superb English, French, and Greek, with equal fluency, and was sensitive to the nuances of each language.

In *Kassandra*, Karapanou's emphasis on shape-shifting, on the fluid movement between biological sexual boundaries, suggests to us a desire to react against the literality embodied by the words that have become physical objects. *Kassandra's* only respite from the onslaught of these physical words and language, which attack and deplete her strength, is through the blurring of sexual boundaries – by passing into Peter's body. After Peter's giving birth to *Kassandra*, *Kassandra* relates, "The windows were open: air and the sun warming my hair. I opened my eyes. Something fluttered in my mouth./ A word"(114). The words nestled in *Kassandra's* throat are expunged – they become innocuous butterflies that flutter out of her mouth and away. (On a more sinister note, the moment could suggest that the plague of the concretised words has not ended, and they continue to consume and inhabit *Kassandra's* body.)

Although the explicit content of this passage expresses a link between language and sexuality, it is only through an acknowledgement of the historicity of the text, its particular location within a historical moment, that we are able to relate the text to the junta. The sexual and biological amorphousness present in the text, the heaviness and physicality of the words, come to speak to the anxiety attached to the strict gender binaries enforced through the junta's public statements and rhetoric.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ An alternative reading of "The Word" is a Lacanian one. Certainly the image of *Kassandra* and Peter standing naked before a mirror, with Peter pointing to himself saying "I", shortly before *Kassandra* crawls into Peter's belly, fits neatly into Lacan's moment of recognition (*meconnaissance*): the staring into the mirror acknowledging the subjectivity of the self as separate from that of the Other. Similarly, the letters arranged in a chain "T-K-P-X" suggest Lacan's sliding signifiers of the unconscious that point to the "constitutive lack at the centre of language, a lack which marks the absence of a fixed anchoring point, the absence of a solid core of meaning for any term – its

It is not coincidental that there is an emphasis on language in this particular passage. Certainly, some of Karapanou's later work, *Mama* (2008) particularly – an autobiographical novel that contains short non-teleological vignettes relating to Karapanou's troubled relationship with her mother, her death, and her consequent grief – contains similar tropes or images to that of *Kassandra*. In fact, a number of the passages in *Mama* would not by any means appear out of place in *Kassandra*. Crucially, the idea of shape shifting features in *Mama*, no doubt related to the fact that Karapanou's mother never actually fulfilled a maternal role, itself a highly political and unusual stance in a country as heavily dominated, certainly at the time of Karapanou's childhood, by the expectation that women fulfil a domestic and maternal role. (Karapanou in a televised interview with Evi Kyriakopoulou emphasises that her mother should never have been a mother, and that she neglected her terribly during her childhood.)

However, the shape-shifting dream-like episodes in *Mama* quite clearly lack the linguistic emphasis contained in *Kassandra*. Consider, for instance, an episode in *Mama* where Karapanou relates that her mother becomes a mermaid: "Darkness. The sea is dark and thick. Mama, you are a mermaid. I am on top of your black tail, huge, and we're speeding, speeding. We're not speaking, we're just listening to the waves" (21; my translation). In the same scene, Karapanou is transformed into a mermaid, "I

necessarily open, ambiguous potential" (Grosz 95). Indeed, with a Lacanian reading, speech and language are imbued with a sense of disorientation, abstraction and alienation because the possibility of the signified ever correlating with the signifier in a "legitimate" sense is nullified. (Grosz 93).

try get up, but I can't. I too have a steel mermaid's tail. I dive into the waves, swim with vertiginous speed. I want to reach her" (21; my translation). But perhaps an even more important and telling example of how linguistic play is an issue specific to *Kassandra* is the strange birthing scene in *Mama*. This scene is strongly reminiscent of the birthing scene in "The Word". In the *Mama* scene Karapanou relates giving birth to her own mother: "Mother, I gave birth to you. With much pain, blood and snot. I didn't like it much. You grew up in one day, became big. You were big, but you couldn't speak. We returned home, but I was so tired..." (13; my translation). Whereas in *Kassandra* the scene enacts the inversion of gender boundaries, in *Mama*, the natural order of time and biology are turned inside out and the scene is entirely devoid of an interest in language. Therefore, when engaging with *Kassandra's* passage "The Word", what at first glance seems like a passage entirely devoid of political content, through an emphasis on the linguistic elements at play, shows itself to harbour something far more polemical than first thought. Through interpretation Karapanou's excerpt moves from the realm of the purely subjective to the realm of the political, a commentary on life under the junta. This passage could only have emerged from the specific historical moment of the junta, and thereby speaks to the temporality expressed by the work's truth content.

It is Adorno's truth content that bypasses a significant issue that has blighted Karen van Dyck's brilliant analysis of *Kassandra and the Censors*, which explores gender and language through the lens of the junta's repressive linguistic and sexual culture. Van Dyck sees Karapanou's *Kassandra* as an example of "an alternative

writing style full of stuttering, babble, and wordplay. In terms of women's writing, [Karapanou's] insistence on connecting language and sex suggests that this alternative writing style is a response to patriarchy's strict codes" (3). Van Dyck unsettles "the tendency to think about the dictatorship in terms of those who wrote engaged poetry versus those that did not" (31) by appealing to and modifying Bakhtinian theory, but also by turning to aspects of Lyotard's thought,¹⁵¹ particularly his concept of the paralogical. (I shall discuss both theories shortly.)

In a nutshell, Lyotard's theory of paralogy refers to the intellectual or conceptual movement through language games against established ways of reasoning. Lyotard's theory of paralogy is hostile to metanarratives, preferring to appeal to a dialogic form of engagement to reform systems of knowledge and their production, which remain trapped within a traditional and stultifying conceptual framework. This form of engagement self-consciously points to the "discourse of politics and the politics of discourse as linguistic performances" (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 29). However, this engagement should by no means ever culminate in consensus, for this would imply the "stabilis[ation of] meaning by institutionalising a new set of language games" (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 29). Van Dyck reiterates and elaborates upon this crucial point by pointing to Fredric Jameson's introduction to Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* that states that "practicing paralogy implies never

¹⁵¹ Van Dyck questions, in relation to the songs of Dionysis Savvopoulos, "Might there be a mode that actually manage[s] to sustain ambivalence?" (*Kassandra* 50). She imagines that such a mode exists with a "more performative paradigm of language with its Lyotardian negotiation of alternative truths" (*Kassandra* 50).

reaching agreement but always undermining from within the very framework in which the previous investigation had been conducted" (*Kassandra* 29). Indeed, as Van Dyck continues, "[Paralogy] involves different discourses without demanding that they interact coherently; it is less bound by social contracts, blatantly flaunting its absurd and imaginary origins" (*Kassandra* 29–30). Paralogy then can be said to centre around the instability of meaning, a resistance to an imposed clarity gleaned from the desire to reconcile discourses and narratives.

Bakhtin refers to monologism (which he identifies with poetry) and dialogism (associated with prose, and novel writing). Within this binary, monological writing is narrow and does not embrace multiple viewpoints, whereas dialogism is the opposite. Van Dyck not only rejects this binary, but suggests that Lyotard's paralogical that "emphasises the discursive process of undoing logic, rather than the absurd effect itself" (*Kassandra* 31) is an apt way of thinking about texts that emerge from the junta. She stresses, "The paralogical is not merely a literary style but can also, like the monologic and the dialogic in Bakhtin's formulations, be understood to be discursively implicated in particular political and social practices" (*Kassandra* 32).¹⁵²

However, Van Dyck emphasises though that it is important "not to turn such analogies into discursive styles and political practices into new fixed categories.

[She] introduce[s Bakhtin and Lyotard] solely as heuristic tools, as a way of thinking

¹⁵² For example, Bakhtin's theory is useful in explaining why certain literary forms are successful in Modern Greece – "why poetry has flourished and prose suffered" (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 30).

about the different responses to censorship in the particular context of dictatorship” (*Kassandra* 31). In fact, she notes that there may be significant problems in suggesting that Lyotard’s paralogy is a form of political activism. She states that although “Lyotard provides a seductive theory of evasion, the question of how this may translate into anything but political quietism is left unelaborated” (*Kassandra* 31). Certainly the paralogical may “admit [a] contamination between political and poetic spheres”, but Bahktin’s dialogic is “problematic because it too often succumbed to such contamination in the process of trying to resolve differences” (*Kassandra* 37); however, neither theory manages to suggest an inherent political content to specific literary texts, which is, in essence, the main thrust of Van Dyck’s argument. Adorno, like Lyotard, offers us a provisionality of meaning, a hostility to metanarratives, but it is only with his constant reminder of the text’s truth content, its historical locatedness, that we realise we are never far from politics.

Much in the same way that Karapanou’s novel itself is devoid of a formal message or slogan in relation to the junta, similarly the truth content of the novel does not dictate a particular message to us. Adorno states in *Aesthetic Theory*, “No message is to be squeezed out of *Hamlet*; this in no way impinges on its truth content” (128). In certain instances though, there is a surprising convergence in *Kassandra* between the truth content’s uneasiness with the junta and its policies, and the overt content of various passages in the novel. Within the anxiety attached to the literality of the junta’s public rhetoric, Karapanou’s truth content envisions the world anew – a world where gender politics are less restrictive and problematic,

more fluid and open to interpretation.¹⁵³ It is a world where ambiguity and ambivalence reign supreme.¹⁵⁴ (In fact, in her diaries, Karapanou emphasises the importance of ambiguity. She states that “ambiguity” is the “greatest secret of every good book” (*He Zoe* 339; my translation).)

Before concluding I will briefly mention the issue of utopia (also discussed in Chapter 4)¹⁵⁵ that is implicated in truth content. Both Jarvis and Zuidervaart comment on the fact that truth content offers us the possibility of a determinate criticism of “what is and has been” that consequently points us in the direction of a utopian vision – the vision of what society *should* be. The artwork points towards utopia negatively – the artwork’s very presence refers to a world that is bound to social injustice and antagonism. The form, the technical aspect of the artwork, arises from historical circumstances. Although a text may outwardly express a semblance of totality or organic unity, the truth content within the text will always speak to the

¹⁵³ Van Dyck makes a similar point in suggesting that the novel’s subversion of traditional gender identities parodies the rigidity of gender roles propagated by the junta, and points to a non-prescriptive vision of society.

¹⁵⁴ Interestingly, this technique of playing with the narrator’s reliability is also employed by Karapanou’s mother, Margarita Lymberaki, in her 1997 novel *Three Summers* (although a more literal translation would be *The Straw Hats*), in which the central protagonist describes the lives of three sisters, their relatives and friends, through three consecutive summers. The narrative has doubt cast upon it when the protagonist ends the novel saying,

Things must have happened something like that, I have tried to tell it in order without any lies. But then again, how is a person to distinguish what really happens from what one thinks is happening? Was Aunt Teresa’s gait so uneven? And David’s hands so expressive and feminine? And Andreas’s eyes so startling? Oops, I forgot I’ve never seen Andreas, only dreamt about him. And did Mrs. Parigori really love David? (306).

A further irony lies in the fact that we have no idea whether the narrator is lying about being a liar. This specific passage could possibly be the only lie in the novel.

¹⁵⁵ See page 258.

fraught conditions within society. (This is what Adorno means when he states, “Artworks stand in extreme tension to their truth content” (131) in *Aesthetic Theory*.)

The artwork’s very existence suggests to us a world that could be other. In its insistence on suffering or pain, it suggests the dignity of a world where neither exist. In direct reference to *Kassandra and the Wolf*, the linguistic play, the obsessive focus on gender and its restrictions, points to a world in which the junta’s literality no longer exists. Gone are the stultifying gender stereotypes. The dystopia of the novel, the fragmentation of its structure, its modernism, and embeddedness in modernity, looks towards utopia as a respite, as a conceptual space that will allow for gender and linguistic liminality and provisionality. However, it is important to note that, as mentioned earlier, an artwork’s truth content may confront the reality of material and social relations, and evokes the possibility for change of this reality, but *cannot* practically realize transformation (Zuidervaart, “Theodor”). Zuidervaart reiterates this point in *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, “Yet artworks can only testify for the possibility of the possible; they cannot actualise this possibility” (203). Owing to ongoing social antagonisms and other material factors, the truth content, at the very heart of the literary text will always reflect a state of unreconciliation, despite its aspiring towards reconciliation.

This is partly because of Adorno’s wariness of the idea of utopia itself. Siegfried Kracauer emphasises that for Adorno, utopia was “‘quite simply a regulative concept’: a concept which never could be, and was never really intended to be, realised, but rather to act as a perennial corrective against any claim that a

natural or equitable social order had been finally achieved”(qtd. in Jarvis 218).

Utopia is something to perpetually aspire towards, to think about, but its actual realisation is mired in various problems and concerns. Adorno makes the startling statement, in an interview undertaken together with Ernst Bloch, that utopia is dull and tedious: “As they [utopias] have been realised, the dreams themselves have assumed a peculiar character of sobriety, of the spirit of positivism, and beyond that, of boredom” (1). Behind this statement, which may have been Adorno’s weak attempt at a joke, is the belief that utopia is unachievable, not because it is impossible or boring, but rather because our complicated unconscious desires and personal investment in the status quo work against its full realisation. Adorno declares, “In other words, to use Freud, [individuals] ‘identify themselves with the aggressor’ and say that this [the world as it is] should not be, whereby they feel that it is precisely this that should be” (4). But, more importantly, Adorno’s suspicion of utopia as something to be actualised is in keeping with his general phobia regarding totalitarianism: Adorno, drawing on the memory of the utopianism of an ethnically homogeneous Third Reich, sees the very concept of utopia as harbouring a latent fascism.

It is this “castle in the air” quality of Adorno’s utopia that makes it easy to see why social scientists or literary critics would struggle to support Adorno’s version of political engagement. Certainly, Zuidervaart complains that the fact that truth content can only be interpreted through philosophical interpretation makes it an intellectual process. He states, “[D]isclosing artworks and their truth is a

sociohistorical process in which both art and philosophy participate. This means, however, that truth content has more to do with the movement of intellectual culture than with the life of ordinary participants in struggles for political liberation" (*Adorno's* 147). For Zuidervaart, all "autonomous intellectual culture", which has truth content as its centre, has no more than "slight potential for contributing to actual political struggles" (*Adorno's* 147). For Zuidervaart this is deeply problematic because "Unless [the] truth [of autonomous art] can be politically actualised" (in other words, be transformed from contemplative praxis into action-based praxis), it "runs the risk of becoming an abstract utopia, one that inadvertently endorses the status quo" (*Adorno's* 149).

However, such a reading forgets that for Adorno, authentic, and more humane, political praxis lies in contemplative action (as discussed in Chapter 1¹⁵⁶). For Adorno, merely to *think critically* is enough of a political action. We must always remember that for Adorno action-based praxis is simply an excuse for violence: "Either humanity renounces the eye for an eye of violence, or the allegedly radical political praxis renews the old terror" (*History* 268). For Adorno, contemplation always trumps action-based praxis, which cannot help but employ the mechanisms of authoritarianism. Adorno, thinking about individuals who engage in action-based praxis, asserts, "Those who protest most vehemently are similar to authoritarian personalities in their aversion to introspection; when they do consider themselves, it

¹⁵⁶ See pages 53–54.

happens without criticism, and unreflectedly, aggressively is directed outward” (*History* 271).

Of course, we have to ask, is contemplative praxis tending towards an abstract utopia enough of a political action? Especially in an unequal world where only the intellectual elite think critically? The point is that thinking critically *has to be enough*, because the option of embodied action directly correlates with the potential for fascism and violence. For Adorno, “social freedom” (*Dialectic* xiii) exists only in and through thought: only in thinking critically do people begin to start acting more empathetically, more humanely, and become more conscious of the socio-economic structures that result in suffering. As Horkheimer, Adorno’s “partner in crime”, put it: “In a historical period like the present...the future of humanity depends on the existence of the critical attitude”(qtd. in Lazarus 144).

In conclusion, truth content proves a useful concept in thinking about literary texts that may not ostensibly seem to be political treatises or harbouring a political vision in any capacity. Through the act of interpretation, through accessing the truth content of *Kassandra*, we are confronted with a highly complex reading of the problematic gender politics of the junta, and how it relates to the function and thrust of words and language within the junta’s public discourse and rhetoric. *Kassandra* proves to be a novel of particular political worth – different from the explicit resistance literature emerging from writers such as Manolis Anagnostakis and Takis Sinopoulos. In arguing for the truth content of Karapanou’s *Kassandra*, I am essentially arguing for “the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It

conceives of the political not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretative methods current today – the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural – but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (Jameson, *Political* 17). In its deep commitment to its own enigmaticalness, its refusal to submit to an identity thinking that will subsume it into totalising and homogenising classificatory categories, truth content, absolutely and resolutely refuses to accept that texts are only sometimes historical, sometimes political. This is undoubtedly a controversial position (especially when we consider that the act of interpreting truth content is so painstaking, so difficult, and indeed, may never culminate with a satisfactory “a-ha!” moment), but it is a position that is a deeply liberating one because it forces us to think about resistance literature in an entirely new and innovative way, to redraw the parameters of political aesthetics in a manner that pushes up against previous hidebound definitions. Through Adorno’s truth content, texts, like Karapanou’s *Kassandra*, so easily dismissed by political sloganeers, by the “literature police”, joins the hallowed ranks of protest literature.

"Pure Identity as Death": Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost and Adorno's Non-Identical

We, my family & I, left our home many years ago when the war was still simmering out of sight. In those days there were only riots to contend with. Some broken glass windows on a bus, verbal abuse, a stone or two been thrown. Then, suddenly I saw some Singhalese youths set fire to a Tamil man. My father saw this too and also the writing on the wall. And so with the violence a hair's breath away, we left. What happened next is familiar history and, depending on which side you were on, the story differs.

— Roma Tearne "Still Counting the Dead"

The deserts of Libya. Remove politics and it is one of the loveliest phrases I know.

— Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* 257

"Do you mean to say that you do not want to have any identity?" queries the star struck interviewer. "On the contrary, I do, like everyone else", answers Jacques Derrida, the French Algerian philosopher. However, in the spirit of deconstruction, he couches his answer, "But by turning around this impossible thing, and which no doubt I also resist, the 'I' constitutes the very form of resistance" (340). He continues, "Each time this identity announces itself, each time a belonging circumscribes me, if I may put it this way, someone or something cries: Look out for the trap, you're caught. Take off, get free, disengage yourself" (340). What are we to make of Derrida's statements? On the one hand, he suggests that, like "everyone else", he

shares the desire to articulate a coherent sense of self – an “I” – that is easily narrativised. Asserting an “I” – a unique personal subjectivity – is an act of resistance (presumably political and social) pushing up against the homogenising impulses of modernity that constantly attempt to downgrade the individual in the interests of (bureaucratic and institutional) homogeneity. However, the very concept of asserting “I” Derrida acknowledges is oppressive, categorising the individual, forcing them to make claims about ethnicity and nationality, forcing them into boxes in which official mundane details like “Jacques Derrida was born July 15, 1930, in El Biar, near Algiers” become an established “truth” (339). Derrida rails against being trapped in the act of claiming an identity. He demands, among other things, an “interminable analysis of the phrase ‘je, je suis, je suis nè’” (339).

This interest in identity, the manner in which it oscillates between a static fixedness and a fluidity, an ebb and flow between generality and specificity speaks in part to Adorno’s complicated interest in the particular and conceptual identity. Adorno’s concept of the particular (also referred to as his concept of non-identity) recognizes – and responds to – multiple theorists, such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Benjamin. Each of these theorists defines the concept of the particular differently, but for the purposes of this chapter it is sufficient to say that each theorist conceives of the particular as a conceptual system set in contradistinction to monolithic social, economic or political systems, or against “subsumptive and classificatory thinking” (176), as Jarvis puts it. These systems rely

on a framework that speaks to a universality of thought, and utilize abstract and general concepts in order to operate.

The assertion of the particular is a type of a cognitive experience “synonymous with intellectual non-conformity” (Buck-Morss 84). The particular is a means of countering capitalist modernity’s totalising energies through a conceptual discourse that involves a sustained critique of the assumed autonomy of the individual consciousness. It is construed as a stance against the ideological and collective categories that progressively, and steadily, oppress the mind of the individual. Put differently, the idea of the particular refuses the “identity and unity” that “impose[s]...upon [conceptual and physical] objects, suppressing or ignoring their differences and diversity” (Zuidervaat, “Theodor”). A neat definition of the particular, or non-identity, would be to read it as a “respect of difference”.

The particular then is the vital acknowledgement of heterogeneity, and is thereby associated with the mental sovereignty of the subject within the oppressive superstructure of capitalist modernity. Adorno qualifies his preoccupation with the particular though: it should not be converted into an absolute concept in and of itself. For Adorno, the universal categories must exist for the particular to have any substantive worth. Terry Eagleton warns, “We must no longer aim thought directly at this totality, but neither should we surrender ourselves to some pure play of difference, which would be quite as monotonous as the dreariest self-identity and indeed finally indistinguishable from it” (345).

The “telos of [Adorno’s] thought is...to reveal the ‘nonconceptual in the concept’” (Marais 231). Adorno adopts a Benjaminian theory in order to advance his argument. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin offers two, but not completely unrelated images, that of the mosaic, and that of the constellation, to engage with the particular. He comments, “Just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum. Both are made up of the distinct and the disparate; and nothing could bear more powerful testimony to the transcendent force of the sacred image and truth itself” (28–9). The mosaic is composed of fragments to make up an image; similarly, philosophical contemplation could function through a reading of small composite parts in order for the totality of philosophical truth to emerge. However, it is Benjamin’s second image, that of the constellation, which we discussed briefly in Chapter 2¹⁵⁷ in relation to the issue of configurational language, that has the most force, appearing first in Adorno’s inaugural lecture “The Actuality of Philosophy”¹⁵⁸ in 1931. This concept informed Adorno’s thought till his death in 1969. Benjamin notes, “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria

¹⁵⁷ See pages 123–124.

¹⁵⁸ In this lecture he speaks of “the manipulation of conceptual material by philosophy...of grouping and trial arrangement, of constellation and construction” (Osborne). However, it should be noted that one of the primary difficulties of interpreting this lecture lies in that it uses “language identical to that of the Kabbalah-influenced *Trauerspiel* [*The Origin of Tragic German Theatre*] chapter to express a non-identical content: By changing the configuration of the words Adorno translated Benjamin’s mystic-influenced theory into a ‘dialectical’, ‘materialist’ one” (Buck-Morss 95).

with which to judge the existence of ideas" (34).¹⁵⁹ Adorno envisages a philosophical system in which the particular comprises part of a constellatory whole (*Negative* 162). In the same way that a constellation is an image in the night sky composed of individual stars which burn with their own intensity, the particular is expected to operate within a larger integrated philosophical network. Within this network it should maintain its conceptual integrity. The particular gathers around the object of cognition (Eagleton 346), and should rotate around this central gravitational point. Zuidervaart asserts, "Constellations let concepts interrelate in such a way that both the sociohistorical essence of phenomenon and their unique identities can emerge" (*Adorno's* 61).

In *History and Freedom*, Adorno elaborates upon the importance of the constellation as a contemplative model. For Adorno the constellation's importance lies in the fact that through a consciousness of the particular, the totality is illuminated. He comments, "I try to think my way deeply into specific phenomena in order that light will fall from them onto the totality, not just on what I happen to be discussing at any particular moment, but on things that cannot be thematised by any philosophy that is so aware of its fragmentary nature" (184). However, it should be noted that this is a vision of "reciprocal interaction" (185): "Just as the constellation

¹⁵⁹ Simon Jarvis notes, that in "Constellation in Science" in *Negative Dialectics*, the key differences between Benjamin and Adorno's rendering of the constellation come to a fore. For example, their relationship to concepts in which thinking is "primarily concerned with what the object comes under, not what it is in itself" (*Negative* 176) differs. Adorno is sceptical that it "would ever be possible to separate out such 'ideas' indifferent to particular experience, from concepts" (*Negative* 176).

always consists of individual phenomena, so too light can fall on individual phenomena only from the constellation" (184). For Adorno, the particular is involved in a two way conversation with the constellation, with totality.

However, most importantly, Adorno employs a dialectical style of writing to maintain the integrity of the particular. By writing in a way that oscillates between thesis and counter-thesis, but never arriving at pure synthesis, never fully reconciling conceptual or intellectual contradictions, Adorno ensures the impossibility of never thinking in terms of universal categories. Adorno is clear that the very power of dialectics lies in the fact it refuses to resolve contradictions, thereby maintaining an allegiance to the particular. In a dialectical system, in "removing contradiction by contradiction, so to speak, we also remove dialectics by broadening it into totality" (Adorno, *Negative* 161). Indeed, Eagleton describes Adorno's writing as a "discourse pitched into a constant state of crisis, twisting and looping back on itself, struggling in the structure of every sentence to avoid at once a 'bad' immediacy of the object and the false self-identity of the concept" (341). He continues, with his usual lucidity:

Dialectical thought digs the object loose from its illusionary self-identity, but thereby risks liquidating it within some ghastly concentration camp of the Absolute Idea; and Adorno's provisional response to this problem is a set of guerrilla raids on the inarticulable, a style of philosophising which frames the object conceptually but manages by cerebral acrobatics to glance sideways at what gives such generalised identity the slip (341-2).

In writing dialectically Adorno denies the coerciveness of absolute identity by foregrounding the occluded and inarticulable. For Adorno, "dialectics means to

break the compulsion to achieve identity, and to break it by means of the energy stored up in that compulsion and congealed in its objectifications" (*Negative* 157).

Adorno's non-identitarian writing is also encapsulated in his "The Essay as Form" – an essay that patterns itself dialectically, plays with language, forces the reader to think beyond presuppositions and stereotypes. Hohendahl states, "In its antisystematic mode, the essay form ['The Essay as Form' essay] frees itself from the pressure to use language as a means of identification. In fact, the essayist's awareness that representation through language is not identical with the object (*Sache*) provides the essay with critical energy" (*Prismatic* 234).

Adorno reads into identity thinking a pathological fascist streak. His theory of non-identity is, according to Susan Buck-Morss, a reaction to the "Nazi slogan 'The individual is nothing, the people everything', but equally Brecht's line 'The party has a thousand eyes, the individual but two'" (82). For Adorno fascism is fuelled by an impulse towards collectivisation, a Freudian communal narcissism. Certain personality types are "authoritarian", characterised by "weak egos" and the need to "find[] security in great collectives" ("Meaning" 94).¹⁶⁰ This feeling of security feeds the individual's "instinctual drives" and allows them to "find substitute satisfaction in their identification with the whole" ("Meaning" 96). According to Adorno, for the German people, this desire for collective identification has not disappeared with the

¹⁶⁰ Adorno was involved in a study entitled *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). This was a highly controversial work, certainly in terms of its unorthodox methodology, that social scientists hold in disdain, although it did offer some insight into what characteristics are present in the personality prone to fascism.

transition to a democracy.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the composite and multi-layered identity of the individual under German fascism was systematically deconstructed because it directly threatened the unity of the German National Socialist state. Marxism sees the individual as a historically contingent being; under fascism, identity is located in definitive terms with no room for the expression of historical or subjective idiosyncrasies. The individual is not a layered psychological and spiritual entity, but a fixed static point that demands physical eradication should it not connect with the sanctioned version of identity. Under the Nazis the connection of the individual to an exclusive ethnic or cultural identity created a sense of the individual as “fungible and replaceable” (*Negative* 362). Identity becomes “the universal coercive mechanism” (*Negative* 147). Adorno’s claim appears wholly justified,

Genocide is pure integration. It is on its way wherever men are levelled off – ‘polished off’, as the German military called it – until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death. (*Negative* 362)

It becomes clear that the collapse of individual identity into conceptual categories impacts upon the physical integrity of the body. The individual body becomes a receptacle of ideological forces. These ideological forces physically distort the body until it is completely destroyed. In pure integration is the “ontologically pure being named Death” (*Negative* 366). The refusal of post-Auschwitz culture to adopt a “new

¹⁶¹ Memory has been “weakened” and “persists in glorifying the National Socialist era, which fulfilled the collective fantasies of power harboured by those people who, individually, had no power and indeed could feel any self worth at all only by virtue of such collective power” (“Meaning” 95).

categorical imperative" (*Negative* 365) conscious of the disjuncture between the collective and the particular is a violation of the individual body itself.

Actions to resist fascism reoccurring must ultimately "work against the brute predominance of all collectives, to intensify the resistance to it by concentrating on the problem of collectivisation" ("Education" 197). The only recourse against the collective, is the non-identical. Indeed, as Jaimey Fisher mentions in his excellent essay "Adorno's Essay Plans?", Adorno's insistence on the persistence of fascism is linked to the "intolerance, conceptually and socially, of the non-identical" (84). For the individual in the post-Holocaust world, "the pressure to adapt, to conform to the authoritarian order, will persist – the mandate of identity thinking disciplines both body and personality" (Fisher 86).

Indeed, in his lecture series, *History and Freedom* (1964–1965), Adorno describes a post-Holocaust world shaped by the all-encompassing hand of instrumental reason, a world in which the "growing concentration of the economy, the executive and bureaucracy has advanced to such an extent that people are reduced more and more to the status of functions" (3). Frighteningly, individuals are entirely deluded as to their position and agency within this system: "Human beings feel intermittently that they are free, even though unfree in reality" (266). Although individuals may formally have access to rights and opportunities, choices are actually predetermined and limited by totalising socio-economic structures. The individual is unable to even comprehend social and material relations for what they truly are (this inability is what is referred to as "false consciousness" in traditional

Marxist thought). Personal and societal change is impossible because the mechanisms of administered capitalism “have stamped themselves on people’s characters to such a degree that they are quite incapable of spontaneity and the conscious actions that would be required to bring about the necessary changes” (Adorno, *History* 76).

This view, that there is no exit point for the individual from the overwhelming totality of administered capitalism, has the effect of painting a depressing and enervating picture. Hohendahl mournfully states, making reference to Adorno’s Education essays¹⁶², that Adorno’s “social diagnosis burdens his pedagogical project [that advocated self-reflection (i.e. non-identity thinking) and educational initiatives to bolster individual autonomy] with a major problem: the thesis of a totally administered society in which the individual is conceived of as passive and manipulated leaves little room for individual self formation” (*Prismatic* 68).

However, despite this apparent futility, Adorno does explicitly offer us a glimmer of hope in the follow-up discussion to the radio broadcast “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” (1959) that examines the failed democratisation of post-Holocaust Germany. In this broadcast Adorno suggests, rather uncharacteristically, practical techniques or ways of developing sincere democratic values and sensibilities in the general German populace, who have only an “attenuated

¹⁶² “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” (1959) and “Education After Auschwitz” (1966), both of which are available in *Critical Models*.

attachment to democracy” (Fisher 89). As mentioned earlier, Adorno suggested self-reflection through Freudian psychoanalysis and education programmes for children to achieve this aim. The “Freudian model [of self-reflection that plays into non-identity thinking] is exempt from instrumental rationality precisely because it offers critical access to the structure of the individual” (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 69).¹⁶³

Whereas for Marx the way that people think and feel must be examined from a materialist point of view, for “life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (qtd. in Barrett 402), Freud offers a conception of social behaviour, in terms of unconscious psychological motivations, that extends beyond merely socio-economic factors. This “individual process of working through one’s biography is expected to have an impact on the collective, as much as collective learning processes will provide the individual with potential insights” (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 69). In fact, Adorno’s faith in his pedagogical model is expressed with some conviction: when a student questions Adorno after the radio broadcast, “To what extent are the societal processes and conditions so overwhelming that for the individual there remains no possibility whatsoever to make one’s own decisions and to act with personal responsibility?” (“Appendix 1” 297), Adorno answers, “If people are able really to see through their entanglement in...objective conditions...that the consciousness raises itself above this compulsion by seeing

¹⁶³ However, while Adorno disagrees with the neo-Freudian effort to “redefine psychoanalysis in terms of a larger social theory, he equally resists the claim of the late Freud that sociology is no more than applied psychology” (Hohendahl, *Prismatic* 69).

through it at the same time also produces the potential that can be used to resist it" ("Appendix 1" 297), thereby indicating the chance (however slim) of the individual challenging the oppressive impulses at play within an ever-present and ubiquitous capitalist totality.

Even when Adorno is placed in an uncomfortable position when asked the question, "How can working through [the fascist past] succeed if self-examination already assumes abilities the majority of people doesn't [*sic*] have?" ("Appendix 1" 300), he suggests that it is sufficient to give people the option to become critically aware and self-reflexive, even if they do not exploit the opportunity, stating, in a spirit somewhat contrary to the open-endedness of non-identity thinking, "What we can do is give people contents, give them categories, give them forms of consciousness, by means of which they can approach self-reflection" ("Appendix 1" 300). Astoundingly, Adorno reiterates that self-reflection even among those individuals (such as anti-Semites) that seem entirely incapable of self-analysis, individuals defined by their "incapacity for any experience whatsoever, by...unresponsiveness" ("Meaning" 101)¹⁶⁴, are able to access the vestiges of a conscience by delving into the unconscious.

¹⁶⁴ Adorno's comments that the "inability to identify with the other was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred in the midst of a more or less civilised and innocent people" ("Education" 201). However, it is interesting to note that Adorno does not suggest an encounter between individuals to encourage identification. He boldly asserts, "I also do not believe that too much will be achieved by community meetings between young Germans and young Israelis, and other organised promotions of friendship" ("Meaning" 101). Nor does he encourage the promoting the "positive qualities possessed by persecuted minorities" ("Working" 193). This is because for Adorno such moves lack true reflection on the part of the individual. Individuals in these instances are ordered to feel or respond to the Other

Cultivating the critical consciousness, the non-identity thinking, of the individual counters the “blind identification with the collective” (“Education” 197) that feeds into fascism. (To be part of a collective means to forgo self-reflection and critical thinking: “People who blindly slot themselves into the collective already make themselves into something like inert material, extinguishing themselves as self-determined beings” (“Education” 197).) Critical thinking can effect change, as is clear in Adorno’s words: “We are not only spectators looking upon this predominance of the institutional and the objective that confronts us; rather it is after all constituted out of us, this societal objectivity is made up of us ourselves” (“Appendix 1” 298). He declares, “In this doubleness, that we are subject and object of this society, surely lies precisely also the possibility of perhaps changing it” (“Appendix 1” 298). Adorno’s vision for a post-Holocaust society is “exemplary in that it folds the particular, the historical, the contingent back into an ethical thinking that has been hollowed out by instrumental rationality, its relentlessly sceptical inquiries, its denigration in favour of the universal” (Bernstein qtd. in Fisher 96).

It is clear that Adorno’s concept of non-identity offers a fruitful way of thinking about political and historical situations that are defined by a classificatory

in a specific way, and the insincerity of their response nullifies any supposed “connection” between the individual and the Other. He states that such situations “amount to heteronomy, a dependence on rules, on norms that cannot be justified by the individual’s own reason” (“Education” 195) and thereby produces just another automaton. Indeed, “People who adopt [these false “bonds”] more or less voluntarily are placed under a kind of permanent compulsion to obey orders” (“Education” 195) – in other words, they are the same people that are responsible for Auschwitz in the first place.

thinking, an obsession with categorising human identity, in a manner that ultimately impacts upon the physicality and dignity of the individual. Certainly, Adorno's identity thinking could be used to explicate the entire socio-legal project of apartheid South Africa, so intensely concerned with pigeonholing individuals into distinct ethnic and racial groups. Being identified as black in apartheid South Africa may not have had the same repercussions as being identified as Jewish in 1930s Europe (apartheid South Africa relied all too heavily on black labour to have death as its logical culmination point), but certainly the label of "black" determined an individual's access to health care, livelihood, legal rights and recourses (a point I discussed earlier in relation to *Life & Times of Michael K*). In apartheid South Africa, to think in terms of non-identity, against physical and ideological classification, was a deeply political (and radical) act – a vision of the collapse of apartheid, a vision of a non-racial future. And indeed, non-identity thinking is of equal resonance if we think of the Sri Lankan Civil War. In this Civil War, pure identity had dire consequences: being Tamil or Sinhala directly correlated with victimhood, with being the target of insurgent groups or guerrilla forces, or being treated differently by the government. In this sort of political climate, literature too becomes a victim of identity thinking – certain writers and readers alike want literature to take a side, to prove unequivocally their allegiances to a particular ideology or group. However, as I have shown in previous chapters, within these contexts there are writers that are concerned with moving beyond classificatory boundaries, in terms of genre and style, or simply in terms of the way that they engage with particular topics. These

authors offer us texts that force us to think in terms of a text's contradictions and aporias, force us into the territory of ambiguity or obscurity, and thereby promote critical thinking.

In this chapter then I ask if Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, which echoes Adorno's non-identical, could give us a political writing. This work (like some of his other texts on Sri Lanka) embodies a refusal to engage with totalising or essentialising ideological premises or political rhetoric (although admittedly, in certain instances, does engage with the universalising discourse of "human rights"); a rejection of facile victim/oppressor binaries that align individuals to collective groupings, and the fragmentation of an overriding identity from the point of view of genre or character. In fact, the non-identical speaks to Ondaatje's work in two ways: firstly, in the way that Ondaatje constructs the figure of the individual in his novels, and how this relates to totalising versions of identity (nationality and ethnicity) that contribute to human suffering. Ondaatje plays the concept of the individual against universal "isms", in a way that, rather than arresting cognition, gives us a textured way of thinking about identity's construction and appropriation by political or national collectives. Secondly, (as will become apparent in the "Excavating Identity" section of this chapter) Ondaatje appears to adopt a Benjaminian-inspired constellatory vision in his treatment of the Buddha figure in *Anil's Ghost*, which forces us to think about utopia or visions of the socio-political future in a diffuse and fluid manner. It is impossible to deny that to employ Adorno's theory of the non-identical is extremely difficult because we are in danger of betraying the very

concept of non-identical thinking. Merely “to think is to identify” (*Negative* 5). Adorno reiterates, “We can see through the identity principle, but we cannot think without identifying. Any definition is identification” (*Negative* 149). Of course, Adorno suggests that ideally “[Non-identical] cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself” (*Negative* 149). How then do we analyse texts *without* making statements that impose an identity, an overall “truth”, upon a text, that transform non-identical thinking into identity thinking? Does identifying the non-identical elements of a text feed into the pigeonholing of it in a manner that strips it of its critical worth and complexity? Consequently literary analysis becomes a balancing act, almost impossible to achieve, but one nonetheless worth the strain.

“This Angle of the World”: Criticisms of Anil’s Ghost

Michael Ondaatje’s writing about Sri Lanka – his literary memoir, *Running in the Family* (1982); poetry collection, *Handwriting* (1998), and the fictional novel, *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) – have variously been read in light of Sri Lanka’s protracted civil war (1983–2009). This is to be expected of Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), considering that the civil war functions as the novel’s background and impetus. *Anil’s Ghost* is the tale of a young forensic anthropologist, Anil Tissera. Anil is estranged from her homeland, Sri Lanka, after fifteen years spent studying and working abroad. The death of her parents has exacerbated her distance and alienation from the country.

Anil is sent to Sri Lanka on an international mandate to investigate ongoing human rights violations taking place during the Sri-Lankan civil war. On her arrival in Sri Lanka, Anil is paired with an archaeologist named Sarath. Together they discover a modern skeleton buried in an ancient burial ground controlled by the government. Unlocking the identity of this skeleton will implicate the government in the killing of its citizens. The novel largely revolves around a series of emotional events – Anil recuperating her sense of being Sri Lankan, the rekindling of old friendships and rivalries, and a growing awareness of the psychological and physical implications of the war.

Before progressing any further, a brief description of the Sri Lankan civil war is necessary. The Sri Lankan civil war began in 1983, 35 years after Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) gained independence from the British, and ended only quite recently, in 2009. During colonialism the majority Sinhalese Buddhists believed that the Tamil Hindu minority (predominately located in the north of the country)¹⁶⁵ were given legislative and civil preference. After independence from colonialism the Sinhalese, in an attempt to avenge the British favouritism of the Tamils, began a campaign of active discrimination against the Tamils that eventually culminated in the Sinhala Only Act (1958), which made Sinhala the new official language of Sri Lanka (English was previously the official language). This Act, together with later developments

¹⁶⁵ It should be noted that the Tamils were not a wholly homogenous group. The British colonists had brought Tamil labourers from the south of India to work on tea plantations in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). This group was somewhat distinct from the established Tamil community already living on the island.

such as entrance quotas at universities for Tamils in the early 1970s (Ratti 125), resulted in Tamils feeling increasingly alienated and atomized within Sri Lanka, and prompted the desire for an independent Tamil state. This aspiration was largely coordinated through the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), a collection of parties that came together under the 1977 national elections (Spinks 208). With Sri Lanka unable to accommodate growing Tamil nationalism that demanded an autonomous Tamil state in the north-east of the island, the country eventually erupted into a protracted and bloody civil war.

The main protagonists of this war were the government, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, but also known as the Tamil Tigers) in the north, and the JVP (Janatha Vinukthi Peranuma or People's Liberation Front) in the South. The JVP was an armed anti-government, socialist party "desperate to preserve the privilege enjoyed by the Sinhala majority since independence [from the British] in 1948" (Spinks 207). As the war progressed the Tamil Tigers became progressively more violent. The government responded to the violence of the Tamil Tigers with statist violence, justifying themselves by saying that they were killing "terrorists". Eventually, in 2009, the government decided that the Tamil threat had been completely eradicated and ceased hostilities.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ However, the end of the war has not resulted in peace. Despite being lauded as a magical holiday destination, the island still suffers the psychological and emotional scars of the war. Moreover, the island is plagued by human trafficking in which people are illegally transported for sex and manual labour to various parts of the globe.

Ondaatje's description of the Sri Lankan civil war emphasises that the war is complicated and multifaceted, in which the lines between perpetrator and victim are often blurred. He states, "I certainly don't think there is one side to the story; there's no right or wrong. The tragedy is that it's a country that is completely multicultural and multi-religious, but splits happen" (Jaggi 7). Of course, Ondaatje has been clear that he by no means wishes to be considered an international spokesman on the war. Instead he prefers to "burrow" beneath the word politics, disavowing political intentionality in his works related to Sri Lanka (qtd. in Burton 51). In *Anil's Ghost* he declares that his interest lies primarily in presenting personal and intimate moments within a "political surround" (Jaggi 7). He aims to access the private human moments that are obscured by the official narratives that emerge from grand political events. He clearly asserts, "Our newspapers are full of official stories, and what the novelist is responsible for is something unhistorical, unofficial — what goes on in private. That's what interests me" (Jaggi 7). In fact, he reiterates that *Anil's Ghost* is "not a historical novel; it's a very fictional world" (Jaggi 7) in which he explores the subtle nuances of the private life of the individual. He is adamant: "I didn't want to write the public portrait of the place, but the situation of the individual in a country like this. I was more interested in how people live: how does fear affect you, and denial? So I was learning while I was there; I wasn't trying to write a formal document" (Jaggi 7).¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Ondaatje says, "I don't think *Anil's Ghost* is an autobiographical book. It's quite a personal book" (Jaggi 6).

However, in saying that the novel's focus is on personal moments does not necessarily imply that Ondaatje lacks a political consciousness. Crucially, the book is a symptom of the sense of duty that Ondaatje feels towards Sri Lanka and its political situation. When questioned by Maya Jaggi: "It wasn't that you felt a sense of responsibility, as the best known Sri Lankan writer, to make the country's plight better known?" (6), Ondaatje betrays his obligations to the island:

But I remember reading an Indian myth, *The King and the Corpse*, in Sri Lanka. It's a strange, nightmarish tale about a king who ends up with a body round his neck that he has to be responsible for, which I quoted in the book. The king has to save the country, and he keeps burying the body, but he wakes up the next morning and it's round his neck again. Without making too many parallels about trying to save a community, it hit me that I had that same kind of obsession Anil has with the skeleton — not letting go of it (Jaggi 6).

Despite, emphasising that he had absolutely no desire to appear "didactic" or to "lecture" his audience, in this statement, Ondaatje offers us the idea of Sri Lanka as a deadweight, as an unburied corpse demanding to be buried. In a country where corpses strew the streets, Ondaatje's image asserts that he places himself in a position in which he must defend the individual victims of human rights abuses.

There is no doubt that Ondaatje's position (much like Coetzee's and Karapanou's) has been misconstrued by the literary establishment (Sri Lankan¹⁶⁸ and

¹⁶⁸ In Sri Lanka literary texts were, and continue to be, judged by the ethnicity of the author, by literary critics who read the texts in line with their own ethnic and ideological affiliations. Chelva Kanaganayakam explicitly states that "[L]iterary criticism in Sri Lanka is determined by personal biases and subjective attitudes" (64). He also states, "This again is hardly surprising in a country where the political violence has been of such magnitude that it is often difficult, even for the most liberal academics, to achieve [a] kind of objectivity" (57). Much of this Sri Lankan criticism demands

international alike). Instead of acknowledging Ondaatje's interest in the microcosm, the emotional centres at play in situations of political extremity, critics (such as Tom LeClair) have been quick to deride the novel, complaining that the violence and terror of the civil war is used as an arbitrary backdrop to the interpersonal relationships and romances of the lead characters. LeClair snidely remarks, "One understands why *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* foreground tempestuous, failed loves. Still, to use terror as a background for class nostalgia and romance seems overkill."

Qadri Ismail emphatically asserts that *Anil's Ghost* does not adequately deal with the country's complicated identitarian politics, and actively promotes a pro-Sinhala stance. Ismail notes that all the key characters of the novel are Sinhala and Buddhist (qtd. in Spinks 229) as can be deduced by their names. A specific passage in the novel appears to confirm this bias:

There had been continual emergency killings from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses.

It was a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. *The reason for war was war* (38–39).

that literature be political and of a social realist nature, which is no doubt problematic when it comes to authors that have a nuanced approach to politics.

For Ismail, the fact that the Northern Tamil fighters are referred to as “terrorists” and the Sinhalese in the South as “insurgents” thereby suggests an ideological preference for the Sinhalese. Of course, Ondaatje provides us with a far more objective reading of the Civil War in his Author’s Note that precedes the novel:

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the anti-government insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents.

However, the novel’s description of the civil war functions in opposition to the more objective Author’s Note. Indeed, Lee Spinks notes that the “distinction between ‘terrorism’ and ‘insurrection’...significantly recasts the moral neutral description of ‘the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north’ proposed in the ‘Author’s Note’ to the novel” (231).

Another problem with the aforementioned passage in the main body of the novel lies in the fact that Ondaatje’s statement that “*The reason for war was war*” suggests that the Tamils have no legitimate claim to an independent state. It is a refusal to acknowledge the validity of the Tamils’ ethnically-orientated claims, and the complex reasons for their insurrection and violence.¹⁶⁹ Spinks reiterates that if these reasons “are left wholly unexamined by the text; so is the undistinguished

¹⁶⁹ It should be noted that the Tamil Tigers were often responsible for grave human rights violations: the use of civilian women and children as human shields, holding civilians hostage, and not allowing human rights corridors, etc.

record of Sinhala nationalist political repression” (Spinks 231). He continues that “It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the narrator’s recasting of the civil war as a new ‘Hundred Years’ War’ serves to obfuscate the historical origins of the conflict and to reduce the resonance of [Ondaatje’s] meditation upon the contribution of his former homeland to the ‘harsh political events of the twentieth century’ (AG, 300)” (Spinks 231).¹⁷⁰

More recently, studies, no doubt influenced by a current global climate increasingly concerned with ethnically and religiously motivated terrorism, internecine wars, and riots under a fragile EU, turn to *Anil’s Ghost* to suggest a way of negotiating violence and terror. In a perceptive and astute article, “The Dead that Haunt *Anil’s Ghost*: Subaltern Difference and Postcolonial Melancholia”, Mrinalini Chakravorty’s criticism not only reiterates aspects of Ismail’s and LeClair’s readings, but notes that the novel’s discourse around human rights has the effect of feeding into stereotypes of the postcolony as disordered, chaotic, and violent, marked by death. Despite being able to acknowledge that the novel is laudable in many ways, Chakravorty asserts that it unwittingly reinforces the stereotype that the West (as the purveyor and “champion” of human rights) is somehow superior to the East, which is invariably seen as a “crypt” of death.

¹⁷⁰ LeClair reiterates that Ondaatje does not adequately address the historical reasons behind the civil war, and thereby evacuates the conflict of its legitimacy, significance, or meaning. He complains, “Ondaatje shows no interest in the soil and roots of ethnic oppression. Instead he repeats the blind epigrapher’s near-tautology: ‘The main purpose of war had become war’.”

However, among his various detractors, a number of critics have been sensitive to Ondaatje's interest in communicating the nuances of Sri Lanka's complicated politics. Continuing in the vein of human rights discourse, Teresa Derrickson views the novel as critiquing the fact that "universal" human rights intervention often functions in the interests of the hegemonic West. Similarly, Robert Young's article "Terror Effects" (in Elleke Boehmer's and Stephen Morton's *Terror and the Postcolonial*) posits the topicality of the novel, and its attempt to negotiate violence through the literary. Young argues that *Anil's Ghost* shows how individuals "subjected to terror learn how to resist the terror effect, challenging its affect through a radically reimagined voyage into the ethical, psychic, and political space of androgyny, non-violence, and the post-human" (326).¹⁷¹

I would assert that what is political in Ondaatje is the way in which he engages with a human rights discourse on terror, constructing the identity of the individual in his novels with an eye towards conceptual ambiguity, contradiction, and intertextual play to ensure that his work is processed in terms of non-identical thinking (as I will shortly go on to show). The human rights discourse in *Anil's Ghost*

¹⁷¹ Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights Inc.* (2007) offers a different interpretation through one of the most innovative readings of *Anil's Ghost*. He views the various discourses and counter-discourses of international human rights law as being played out in complex ways in the *Bildungsroman* form (a form concerned with the integration and development of the human subject), of which *Anil's Ghost* is a type of postcolonial manifestation. Slaughter acknowledges that the novel's questioning of institutionalised Westernised "narratives" of human rights have little bearing in a country with a compromised civic sphere, and where the state (traditionally the purveyor and protector of human rights) is an active participant in violence. The complicated narratives of the civic sphere (and alternative imagined communities) are submerged by the ethno-nationalist metanarrative of the state (neither a democratic nor legitimate entity).

certainly *is* a universalizing discourse that threatens to eradicate the particular. The “language of ‘human rights’ demands a universalizing perspective: it is impossible, after all, to speak in the name of human rights without recourse to an idea of ‘rights’ or the ‘human’ in general” (Spinks 219).¹⁷² Manav Ratti, complains that it seems that in *Anil’s Ghost* Ondaatje “ironically...wishes to work in a kind of timelessness: he visits a particular time, a particular place, but his craft – framed through the discourse of human rights – wishes to universalize identities embedded within this locus” (138). And, of course, Ondaatje himself at times ostensibly plays into this desire to universalize the conflict. Consider, for instance, Ondaatje’s statement – “In many ways, the book isn’t just about Sri Lanka; it could be Guatemala or Bosnia or Ireland. The stories are very familiar in other parts of the world” (Jaggi 7). Spinks notes that Ondaatje’s “belief that the Sri Lankan situation is part of a broader international political crisis probably explains his decision to frame the Sri Lankan sections of the novel with an account of Anil’s forensic work in Guatemala in the 1980s” (231). Spinks continues, “Unfortunately one effect of this framing device is to deny the specificity of the political forces that shaped the Sri Lankan Civil war by

¹⁷² It is worth mentioning here that although human rights discourse is clearly non-totalitarian in impulse, it can ironically be appropriated in a manner not only destructive but antithetical to its socially edifying purpose. This is partly what Judith Butler is getting at in *Precarious Lives* (2002), a text I discuss in much detail later in this chapter, where she points out that the American military – an inherently misogynistic and homophobic institution – uses, under the direction of the government, a universalizing humans rights discourse as a guise to secure its political and economic interests. It actively promotes the view that the political conflicts it instigates are partly motivated by the desire to “liberate” non-Western (brown) women in the Middle East from the patriarchy of their governments and culture.

envisaging it as merely one episode in a universal – or certainly pan-national – conflict between terrorism and civil society” (231).

Ondaatje’s use of the discourse of universal human rights appears contradictory when placed in relation to his scepticism and hostility towards totalising ideological narratives. However, it is crucial to stress that despite the multiple problems attached to a universalising human rights discourse, a world without human rights discourse at all would be a very dark place indeed.¹⁷³ There is no way to reconcile the contradiction between Ondaatje’s resistance to the universalising narratives of ethnicity or nationality while simultaneously embracing the universalising and pro-Western narrative of human rights, other than to suggest that Ondaatje’s aim to place individual suffering at the centre of his aesthetic project allows him to engage with totalising narratives he finds amenable to this vision. (Of course, though, non-identity thinking relishes contradictions, acknowledging that “total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification” (Adorno, *Negative* 6).) It could be said that Ondaatje’s interrogation of the individual (a point I will thoroughly explore in the next section of this chapter) in relation to

¹⁷³ Elizabeth Anker, in her excellent book *Fictions of Dignity* (2012), acknowledges that contemporary human rights discourse is plagued by a number of problems, only one of which is the imposition of norms with an “overly Eurocentric inheritance” (4) and “Enlightenment-based lineage” (4) upon varied geographical and political localities. Yet she does not deflate the absolute importance of human rights in “combat[ing] the oppression of women,...consolidat[ing] international opposition to torture, genocide, and severe rights infringements,...minimis[ing] conditions of economic disenfranchisement, and...encourag[ing] socio-political rapprochement in the aftermath of rights abuses” (1), all of which are advances indispensable to global equity and justice. Rather than suggesting a dismantling of the discourse of human rights, Anker points to literature as a productive means of exploring and negotiating different aspects of the discourse.

more obviously or potentially destructive totalising conceptual systems maintains its nuance and conceptual sophistication irrespective of Ondaatje's willingness to venerate human rights. In *Anil's Ghost*, *The English Patient*, and even his poetry collection, *Handwriting*, Ondaatje subverts clear-cut and essentialist readings of nationhood, ethnicity, or selfhood. Individuals are understood as composite and multifaceted beings – beings that cannot be easily reduced to mere archetypes of gender, race, or ethnicity. In their intricacy and uniqueness, they undermine or push against ideological or political collectives. This is not to say that Ondaatje completely forgoes the concept of identity – there are points in his novels where he acknowledges its importance, such as when identifying or naming the victims of crimes, but these identities are never exploited in a way that champions a political or ideological allegiance, or subsumes the individual identity into a greater totalising narrative. In fact, as will become apparent in the “Excavating Identity” section, Ondaatje's vision of political redemption in his novels is reminiscent of the visual image of Adorno's Benjaminian-inspired constellation, concerned with the complex and dynamic interplay between the particular and the universal.

Identifying Non-identity

Ondaatje's key protagonist, Anil, is a fierce embodiment of individuality. At the age of thirteen Anil buys her name from her brother in exchange for a mysterious sexual favour, Gold Leaf cigarettes, and some money. In order to pacify her fierce temperament so obvious in the ruthless and unscrupulous acquisition of her new

name, Anil's parents take the adolescent Anil to an astrologer in Wellawatta. The astrologer, wholly unaware of the trials and tribulations attached to Anil's name, attributes her temperament to her name, and suggests that it be changed. Anil's passionate refusals result in the astrologer offering a makeshift solution – "the addition of an *e*, so she would be *Anile*. It would make her and her name more feminine, the *e* would allow the fury to curve away" (133). However, Anil refuses this, and continues to immerse herself in the "slim, stripped-down quality" (63) of the name. Interestingly, the passage in which Anil is forced to see the astrologer is followed by a discussion of her time in medical school where she becomes obsessed with the act of "distinguish[ing] female and male traits as clearly as possible" (133). Set up against the provisionality of gender boundaries, and familial norms, encapsulated in Anil's acquisition of her name, is the act of categorization, of anatomization, of scientific classification. Anil, the hybrid thing, with a male name despite being female, the individual willing to engage in incest thereby blurring the strict sexual taboos between siblings, searches out definitive behaviour from men and women alike. Indeed, as a forensic anthropologist Anil belongs to a world of objective and impartial assessment – her job is to set down cold hard facts, excavating the identities of the individuals that she is investigating. Anil is concerned with giving names, ages, occupations, histories, causes of death to individual victims in the name of Human Rights, despite ironically defying clear-cut

interpretations of gender and sexual norms herself.¹⁷⁴ It could be said then that Anil encapsulates a dialectical tension between the search for identity as something containable, in thrall to a universalizing discourse, and identity as something highly specific and unique, something which is multifaceted and changeable.

Her fierce and complicated individuality stands in stark contrast to the events of a war that places immense value on identity, or rather totalising versions of identity, such as ethnicity and nationality. The war could easily be described as a complete disregard for the individual (which, as mentioned previously, in Adorno's vocabulary is synonymous with the particular). Certainly, in *Anil's Ghost*, atrocities are perpetrated in the name of grand totalising narratives that entirely disregard the complexity that humanness entails. This is clearly apparent in the horrifying incident in which Ananda's wife, Sirissa, makes her daily walk to the school where she teaches. Ordinarily, on her walk, Sirissa would pass a group of teenagers with "catapults hanging off their shoulders, some smoking" (169), and fishermen with their prawn boats before arriving at the school. Yet after the government curfews are imposed, and the town nearby is terrorised – "So many things happened during the feathers of night. The frantic running, the terrified, the scared, the pea-brain furious and tired professional men of death punishing another village of dissent"

¹⁷⁴ Anil's ambiguity does not end there. She has spent her childhood and adolescence in Sri Lanka, but the remainder of her life in North America and England. She is not strictly part of the Sri Lankan diaspora, but at the same time she struggles to identify herself as Sri Lankan. Initially, she feels like an outsider investigating human rights violations, yet by the close of the novel she has begun to see herself as Sri Lankan once more. Sarath relates at the Human Rights hearing, "Then he heard her [Anil] say, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us.' Hundreds of us. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us" (271–2).

(170) – Sirissa’s peaceful daily routine is disrupted by the gruesome images of “the heads of the two students on stakes, on either side of the bridge, facing each other” (171). The scene only increases in horror as she sees two more heads and “recognises one of them” (171) before running to the school in a state of shock to find even more decapitations. These heads, these faces, have been decapitated because the perpetrators of these crimes do not identify them as human, but simply as functionaries or representative symbols of national or ethnic politics.¹⁷⁵

Within this “compulsive pathology of the identity principle” (Eagleton 350), which has death as its logical culmination point, Ondaatje (via Anil) feels the need to name the victims of war, to assert their individuality. How to go about this is no easy task: how do we name victims in a manner that does not feed into totalising narratives? Simply to give a name (at least in the Sri Lankan context) supposedly betrays a national or ethnic identity and the political baggage attached to that name. However, Ondaatje is careful never to couch the act of identification within ethnic or national essentialisms. In fact, Ondaatje establishes a dialectical tension in which the act of identifying or naming the victims blatantly rejects the claims for socially constructed identity politics, despite functioning in the service of a human rights discourse. For example, the skeletons that Anil and Sarath unearth represent the deaths of thousands of Sri Lankans during the civil war. Naming the skeletons Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor (in a parody of the English nursery rhyme and

¹⁷⁵ In fact, here the human head submits to the flip side of the Levinasian image (a point that will be dealt with in due course) in which the face *incites* the desire to kill.

counting game) suggests that the skeletons are representative of the wide range of individuals affected by the war. Anil herself reiterates: "She remembered Clyde Snow, her teacher in Oklahoma, speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan: One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims" (172). It is important to note that Anil endeavours to give the skeleton of Sailor a name – to identify him – for "Without identifying Sailor, they had no victim yet" (172). Without identification there can be no justice in the name of human rights. She acknowledges, "[Sailor functions as a] representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (53). She eventually identifies Sailor as Ruwan Kamara, a gem-miner from a plumbago village. Yet at no point does Anil discuss whom Ruwan's death would implicate, beyond the generic claim of the "government". Neither does she suggest in what ways he may have been responsible for his death, nor what his potential political affiliations may have been. What remains central is that Ruwan is an individual victim, a victim like many others, within a complicated matrix of human rights abuses.

At this point it may be useful to evoke Adorno's Benjaminian interest in the constellation, in which the particular clusters like stars around a central "object of cognition" (*Negative* 162) to illuminate a wider conceptual issue, to speak to Ondaatje's pinpointing of individual victims to express a wider system of human rights abuse. Ondaatje's complex and sensitive rendering of the particular and the universal is apparent when Sailor's skull is given to Ananda, a sculptor and painter, in the hope that he can reconstruct the face of the victim. However, the face Ananda

constructs is a face which is universal, a face that in no way is an actual reproduction of the victim's unique physiognomy. The omniscient narrator describes how Anil "slipped into the courtyard and saw Sarath still there facing the image of Sailor. He would already know as she did that no one would recognize the face. It was not a reconstruction of Sailor's face they were looking at" (184). Even within this generic reconstruction of a face lies a specificity, an expression linked to the individual, the particular. The narrator describes how Anil "realized [that] the face was in no way a portrait of Sailor but showed a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim"(183). Ananda reproduces a facial expression that speaks to his own wife, Sirissa, who disappeared during the war, and for whom he still grieves. Set up against the fact that Sailor was apprehended because he was identified by a *billa* – "someone from the community with a gunnysack over his head, slits cut out for his eyes" (265), someone entirely anonymous, we have a head that is twice individualized – firstly, in the fact that the face is an attempted reproduction of Ruwan's face, and secondly, in its reproduction of an individual expression, the expression of Ananda's dead spouse. Ondaatje does not see one identity as replaceable with another – he is not saying that one identity is interchangeable with another. Instead what we have is a layering effect, a superimposition of one individual identity upon another. That identity is constructed not as Sinhalese or Tamil, but as the identity of the individual – the identity of Ruwan Kamara, the identity of Sirissa, Ananda's wife – which both, in turn, engage with a wider discourse of victimhood and suffering. Ondaatje recasts

the relationship between individual and the universal, which in this case is embodied by the generic human skull, and simultaneously constructed as both Ruwan and Sirissa.

In *The English Patient* Ondaatje's interest in identity plays with the idea of the total erasure of identity and its implications, both positive and negative. The novel is set in the dilapidated Villa San Girolamo in Italy as World War II draws to a close. As military forces pull out of Italy, Hana, a young Canadian nurse, commits herself to tending a patient – the novel's eponymous "English patient" – who is too fragile to be moved, but is able to relate his past experiences (although not his identity) in the north African desert with the help of Herodotus's *Histories*. As the novel progresses we are introduced to two characters – Kim, an Indian sapper, and David Caravaggio, a professional thief – who interact with Hana and the English patient in a way that evokes home truths about colonialism, war, and love.

Michael Marshall cites two comments on *The English Patient* by Ondaatje – "I wanted all the uniforms removed", 'Right from the start I was aware that it was a very political book' – and concludes, 'The tension between these comments leaves the book seriously flawed'" (Bolland 72). Marshall's seeing the book as flawed is linked to misapprehension on his part – an inability to construct a political vision beyond the pith helmet and khaki. For Marshall, politics cannot be disconnected from taking a side. However, it is precisely the stripping of uniforms – the refusal to make his characters act as political functionaries, despite being parts of the machinery of war as soldiers or nurses, and nominally "Canadian" or "Indian" –that

allows the novel its force in investigating the personal impact of the war. The destructiveness of “uniforms” becomes all too apparent in the death of Madox, the English patient’s old colleague. Madox, after years in the desert, kills himself when he goes back to Somerset in England after listening to a blatantly jingoistic sermon “without any doubt in its support of the war” (242) at his local church. Madox despairs at the priest’s “inton[ing] blithely about battle, blessing the government and the men about to enter the war” (242). Unable to cope with the sermon’s nationalism, the fact that all his friends have suddenly been turned into the “enemy”, Madox kills himself using a desert pistol. The English patient relates, “Someone’s war was slashing apart his delicate tapestry of companions. I was Odysseus, I understood the shifting and temporary vetoes of war. But he was a man who made friends with difficulty. He was a man who knew two or three people in his life, and they had turned out now to be the enemy” (241). Madox’s poignant death – the bang of the bullet, the “desert silence” (242) that follows the shot, and his wife’s tender embrace – reminds us of the fluidity of victimhood¹⁷⁶: how easily one is subject to and affected by arbitrary collective categories and definitions.

However, Ondaatje complicates the idea of the erasure of identity as an entirely good thing in his treatment of the patient and his past relationships. The narrator describes the English patient as someone faceless, without an identity: “A

¹⁷⁶ On a somewhat related note, the patient’s facelessness and burnt body has the effect of complicating the notion of victimhood in the war. Unsure as to whether the patient was aligned with the Allied or Nazi powers (despite their assumptions), the novel’s characters (and readers) are forced to respond to patient’s fragility and physicality, which take precedence over his nationality.

man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognise him" (48). Indeed, there is much confusion as to the nationality of the English patient – it is assumed he is English by Kip who associates England "with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason [that] somehow converted the rest of the world" (283). Yet as the novel progresses Caravaggio begins to suspect that the patient may possibly be the Hungarian explorer and triple-agent Count Ladislaus de Almásy. Caravaggio tells the patient: "They were waiting for you [Almásy] in Cairo, but of course you turned back into the desert. Later, when I was sent to Italy, I lost the last part of your story. I didn't know what had happened to you" (252). The patient's response may be a confirmation of Caravaggio's assumption, but equally may perhaps be gentle mockery, "So you have run me to earth" (252).

Interestingly, when the patient narrates his memories, most specifically his relationship with Katharine Clifton (the wife of a colleague), he points to a great source of heartache between the two of them – their relationship towards naming and ownership. The patient, speaking in third person, states, "She would have hated to have died without a name. For her there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile, whereas he had erased the path that he had emerged from. He was amazed she had loved him in spite of such qualities of anonymity in himself" (170). Whereas Katharine is able to trace her ancestral lineage, and feels very deeply connected to

her family name, the patient defines himself as someone uninterested in names and nationality, and the act of ownership that accompanies them. Instead, he declares: "Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert... I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from" (139). Like the shifting sands of the desert (itself once an entirely different element – a great ocean), that the patient describes as unable to be "claimed or owned...a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names" (138), the patient refuses to commit himself to an identity. At the time of his relationship with Katharine, his unwillingness to identify himself with a group identity, or to submit fully to her, appears an apolitical act – one based more on personal reasons rather than ideological ones. However, his desire to "erase [his] name and the place [he] had come from" (139) ultimately has severe repercussions that in part contribute to Katharine's death.

The patient is all too aware of the fact that naming Katharine, or more specifically giving her husband's name, would have been the way to save her from her lonely death in the Cave of Swimmers. After a plane crash in the desert, Katharine is severely injured and the patient walks to the nearest bastion of civilisation in order to get help. No-one believes his story of an injured woman in a cave at the Gilf Kebir, and instead he is arrested on the assumption that he is "just another second-rate spy" (251). He complains bitterly, "The war was beginning already. They were just pulling spies out of the desert. Everyone with a foreign name who drifted into these small oasis towns was suspect" (251). The patient, the

man with the “wrong” name, “didn’t give them [the British authorities] the right name” (251). He gave them his name, “whereas the only name [he] should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton’s [Katharine’s husband]” (251). The dialectical push and pull at play here: the danger of naming, the difference between “right” and “wrong” names, all point to a refusal on Ondaatje’s part to fall into a systematisation of thought. Naming, showing oneself as part and parcel of a collective, can be a lifeline or a severe liability.

That the authorities ignore the patient’s demand to help Katharine based on the exchange of legitimate names points to the way that the life and death of human subjects are controlled by sovereign powers, a point taken up by Achille Mbembe in his theory of necropolitics. Mbembe’s re-writing of Michel Foucault’s traditional conception of biopolitics¹⁷⁷ suggests that contemporary politics is characterised by how sovereignty (not necessarily state driven or sanctioned) pronounces power in terms of “the right to kill” (16).¹⁷⁸ Within this matrix of violence, Mbembe suggests that the power of modern political entities is a de-individualising mission: “In the case of massacres in particular, lifeless bodies are quickly reduced to the status of simple skeletons” (35). This undifferentiated mass of skeletons, *nameless* and *faceless*

¹⁷⁷ Foucault’s defines biopolitics as the “domain of life over which power [the modern nation state] has taken control” (Mbembe 12) and locates “sovereignty within the boundaries of the nation-state, within institutions empowered by the state, or within supranational institutions and networks” (Mbembe 11).

¹⁷⁸ The spirit of contemporary politics, for Mbembe, is characterised by the “generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (14) by entities that extend beyond simply the nation state.

victims, speaks to how the sovereign power effaces and defaces the individual.¹⁷⁹

Mbembe continues, “Their morphology henceforth inscribes them in the register of undifferentiated generality: simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor” (35).

Of course, in *Anil's Ghost* and *The English Patient* the naming of victims has the very important task of allowing for mourning to take place, and for grief to be expressed. Various critics have emphasised how this act of naming, of individualising, the dead is crucial to the act of appeasing both private and public forms of grief. Gail Holst-Warhaft's *The Cue for Passion: Grief and its Political Uses* (2000) – an interdisciplinary literary, ethnographic, and political study of the process of bereavement, and the way that mourning may have political or social implications – presents the case study of the Argentinian military dictatorship (1976–1983) that was responsible for the disappearance of thousands¹⁸⁰ of individuals. In discussing this case study, Holst-Warhaft specifically refers to the fact that during this “Dirty War” the Argentinian government never returned the bodies of missing persons to their families, which thereby resulted in a political movement known as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of distraught mothers who demanded that the regime disclose the fate of their abducted children. Holst-Warhaft notes the importance of the act of naming for these grieving mothers. She comments, “Naming the dead, for

¹⁷⁹ Interestingly, necropolitics is defined rather accurately in *Anil's Ghost*. Anil tells Sarath, “When I was in Central America there was a villager who said to us: When soldiers burned our village they said this is the law, so I thought the law meant the right of the army to kill us” (40).

¹⁸⁰ Numbers range from 11,000 to 30,000 depending on sources.

[these] Mothers, was always linked to naming the one responsible for the death” (116). This act of naming and identification allowed these women to break out from the stasis of uncertainty and begin their grief proper. Grief “cannot take place when there is any ambiguity about death” (Holst-Warhaft 121).

Indeed, Judith Butler’s *Precarious Lives* (2002), which “approaches the question of a non-violent ethics, one that is based upon an understanding of how easily human life is annulled” (xvii) makes a similar point. For Butler, in the current global climate where the West is obsessed with the threat of Islamic terrorism there is a direct correlation between how humanness is constructed or assigned, and the manner in which we – as national or political(ised) entities – grieve. For Butler, only that which is human is grievable. Butler believes that America’s military engagement with the Middle East can be assessed through this conception of grievability, in which the Middle Eastern Other is constructed as non-human, and therefore ungrievable. This stripping of humanity is done through a complex of phenomena – by refusing to narrate (unless in triumphalist pro-Western terms) the lives of non-Western victims, by leaving victims of Western violence unnamed, and by manipulating the way that the human face (a crucial issue that will be dealt with extensively in the next section) is projected to a Western audience through the Western media. For Butler, the dehumanisation, and consequently the ungrievability, of the Other allows the various conflicts in the Middle East to continue unabated. In fact, Butler asserts,

Certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is derealised and diffused. Such prohibitions not only shore up nationalism based on its military aims and practices but they also suppress any internal dissent that would expose the concrete, human effects of its violence (38).

It is only through a drive to ultimately humanise the Other – to ensure that they are understood as inhabiting a vulnerability, a human “precariousness” (Butler 150), having a name and face – that will “return [us] to a sense of ethical outrage that is, distinctively, for an Other, in the name of an Other” (Butler 150). Butler demands that we question the “conditions under which a grievable life is established and maintained, and through what logic of exclusion, what practice of effacement and denominalisation” (38) ungrievability persists. We need to think seriously about how “our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss” (Butler 32).

Excavating Identity

Butler’s *Precarious Lives* relies heavily on the theory of Emmanuel Levinas in order to discuss the ethical engagement with the Other through the figure of the human face.¹⁸¹ Butler, via Levinas, asserts that to look upon the human face is to acknowledge its vulnerability, its fragility, which, in turn, ironically evokes in us the dual ethical injunction to protect and kill the possessor of the face. Levinas explicitly

¹⁸¹ It should be noted that the face is metonym for any aspect of the human anatomy or figure. Butler states that the Levinasian face is “not precisely or exclusively a human face, although it communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable (xvii).

writes in an essay entitled “Peace and Proximity” that “the face of the other in its precariousness and defencelessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the ‘You shall not kill’ ([] 167)” (qtd. in Butler 134).¹⁸² The Other is simultaneously recognised as a threat (and therefore must be killed) but this is placed in tension with the fact that one recognises oneself within the Other. There is a push-pull relationship between the distance of difference and the closeness of identification in engaging with the Other. Butler notes that the “non-violence that Levinas seems to promote does not come from a peaceful place, but rather from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence” (136). Butler declares, “[I]t is unclear why Levinas would assume that one of the first or primary responses to another’s precariousness is the desire to kill” (136). Furthermore, the act of identification, the seeing of the self in the Other is also fraught with problems. This act of identification is mediated – it is never a full act of identification. We always acknowledge a difference between the self and the Other because complete identification would result in the collapse of subjectivity – complete identification erases difference.

For Butler, using Levinas’s theory, in which “the face makes various utterances at once: it bespeaks an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it speaks a divine prohibition against killing” (135), offers a way of developing non-

¹⁸² What Levinas fails to mention is that given the asymmetry of race and power relations, some faces are more precarious than others, a point that Butler develops in her reading of Levinas.

violent political solutions.¹⁸³ This is implicated in the idea that we identify with the face – we acknowledge that we too could be suffering, we too are precarious and vulnerable. For Butler, “Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions” (29).¹⁸⁴

Levinas certainly offers Butler a viable means of understanding the process of dehumanisation of the Other by the socio-political machinery, but it seems that beneath the rich soil of Butler’s Levinasian vision lie the curled seedlings of Adorno’s concept of utopia (to be discussed shortly). Indeed, if we compare Levinas and Adorno’s philosophy in broad rough brushstrokes, it becomes apparent that their work is not all that far from each other’s. The writing of both philosophers is forged in the crucible of the Holocaust, and resonates with the screams of human suffering, and the eerie silences of society’s indifference, contained in that dark historical moment.¹⁸⁵ In *Minimal Theologies*, Hent de Vries suggests that “from the very beginning of their careers, both independently made an ‘idea of the other’ – in forms that are figuratively comparable and structurally indistinguishable, if in part incommunicable – an integral part of their intellectual projects” (38). De Vries notes

¹⁸³ Levinas states, “To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill” (qtd. in Butler *Precarious* 138).

¹⁸⁴ Butler suggests grief as the solution to violence: “To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself” (*Precarious* 30). She also states, “If life is not grievable, it is not quite a life” (*Precarious* 34).

¹⁸⁵ However, Adorno and Levinas were never directly influenced by each other. As Hent de Vries comments in his comparative study of Adorno and Levinas, Levinas had only ever read Adorno’s *Jargon of Authenticity* (1964) and was duly unimpressed with it. Similarly, Adorno’s knowledge of Levinas seems to have been somewhat limited although he respected Levinas enough to recommend him to the Institute of Social Research.

that in the “complementary but aporetic relationship between the philosophical projects of Adorno and Levinas a certain theological perspective is, if not ‘sublated’, then at least suggested” (562). Adorno and Levinas “express together what neither could express alone” (De Vries 559). In fact, De Vries continues, “The dialectical critique of dialectics presented by Adorno’s negative metaphysics and phenomenological critique of phenomenology pursued by Levinas’s early and later thinking toward the other...constituted two halves (more precisely, two among many relevant elements) of [a] minimal theology” (562).¹⁸⁶ And certainly, as Fred Alford asserts, both Adorno and Levinas are “concerned with the tendency towards totalisation, best defined as the reduction of the other to the same, the elimination of difference” (88).

However, on closer analysis we realise that there are substantial differences between the two thinkers: most importantly, for the purposes of this chapter, their relationship to the particular and the universal. The philosophy of Adorno and Levinas may “start” at the same place – in the twentieth-century concentration camp – but their endpoints are quite different places. Alford declares, “[T]he moment one looks at their solutions...it becomes apparent that they mean something quite different by totality and same. Against totality Adorno sets the particular; Levinas sets infinity” (88). For Levinas, “Infinity is a way of talking about a supreme non

¹⁸⁶ De Vries shows them as both thinking in dialectical terms (although Adorno’s is a more materialist dialectics). However, we have to work very hard to connect them in this way, and in either instance we have to be wary of reducing their individual complexity.

being, an otherness so other that like Moses we cannot look upon its faceless face without being stricken. As close as we dare get is the face of the other” (Alford 90).¹⁸⁷ Whereas for Adorno, “Infinity is the profusion of particulars” (Alford 90), for Levinas, it is “a world with neither universals nor particulars” (Alford 97). Adorno’s telos is a version of utopia (bathed in a Benjaminian messianic light) in which non-identity reigns, whereas Levinas’s telos involves not redemption, nor reconciliation, but the brilliant light of infinity offering an “exit, a way out of the burden of being in this world” (Alford 105).¹⁸⁸ Adorno’s utopia, according to Martin Jay, is “the restoration of difference and non-identity to their proper place in the non-hierarchical constellation of subjective and objective forces he called peace” (qtd. in Alford 88). Adorno declares, “Utopia would be above identity and above contradiction; it would be a togetherness of diversity” (*Negative* 150). I would argue that Adorno’s utopia is the logical culmination point of Butler’s thinking – a space where the acknowledgement of otherness and likeness exist in tandem.

Although Ondaatje’s novel expresses an interest in the Levinasian face, the complex relationship between self and other, and indeed, the concept of “grievability” and dehumanisation (as further developed by Butler), it is Adorno’s image of utopia as a space of non-identity that speaks more meaningfully to *Anil’s Ghost*, particularly the closing passages of the novel. Ondaatje’s vision of war-torn

¹⁸⁷ For Adorno, “infinity means the way in which objects always overflow their concepts, the world more diverse than any concept can know” (Alford 90).

¹⁸⁸ For a discussion of utopia see Chapter 3, pages 209–211.

Sri Lanka is devastating: The perpetrators of human rights violations are completely unmoved by the humanity, the precariousness, the Levinasian face, of their victims. The novel chronicles, in Gamini's words, "cases where every tooth had been removed, the nose cut apart, the eyes humiliated with liquids, the ears entered" (287). Furthermore, Ondaatje reminds his readers that all individuals are complicit in this dirty war – there is no way of truly affixing blame¹⁸⁹ because, in one way or another, even those who are supposedly impartial to Sri Lanka's politics somehow contribute to its culture of violence. Sarath and Anil, both ostensibly against the war, are implicated (albeit unwillingly)¹⁹⁰ when the batteries from their alarm clocks are confiscated at a road block so that the fighters may use them for homemade bombs (159). When on holiday Gamini's batteries are stolen for exactly the same purpose (216). The very idea of victim and oppressor shifts¹⁹¹, refracted through a prismatic and obfuscatory light.

The reader is forced to ask: What hope is there for redemption? How can we think about the future in this vortex of inhumanity? Ondaatje's response (which should not be read as synonymous with a "political solution") is to fixate on the

¹⁸⁹ In *Handwriting*, "Buried 2" reiterates that it is impossible to affix blame for the atrocities perpetuated as everyone is implicated in the violence of the war.

¹⁹⁰ This reading of complicity is not dissimilar to that of George Steiner's where to exist is to be complicit. Note, for example, his comments, "In the Warsaw ghetto a child wrote in its diary: 'I am hungry, I am cold; when I grow up I want to be a German, and then I will no longer be hungry, and no longer cold.' And I saw it to myself many times over, in prayer for the child, in prayer for myself. Because when that sentence was written I was fed, beyond my need, and slept warm, and was silent" (168).

¹⁹¹ The conceptual disruption of this binary is notable in relation to Karapanou's *Kassandra*. See pages 192–196.

reconstruction of a crumbling Buddha as the metaphor for the rebuilding of a society that needs to acknowledge and embrace difference (in other words, the non-identical). The novel's narrator describes how Ananda has been employed to reconstruct a 120-foot-high statue of Buddha that was destroyed during the war by thieves searching for treasure. (The thieves were not motivated by politics. They were "trying to find a solution for hunger or a way to get out of their disintegrating lives" (296).) Once destroyed the Buddha's isolated location – "the nearest village [is] four miles away" (295) – makes it the ideal spot for disposing of the victims of Sri Lanka's dirty politics. The narrator states, "Since it was mostly uninhabited land, with only a few farmers and pilgrims, this was a place where trucks came to burn and hide victims who had been picked up. These were fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century" (296). When Ananda is asked to repair the Buddha, he is forced to literally cobble together the statue – getting the village involved in washing, sorting, and arranging the broken stone that once made up the statue. Interestingly though, when Ananda reconstructs the statue he does not attempt to hide the fact that it was once broken: "He and the two others used a system of fusing rock. Up close the face looked quilted. They had planned to homogenise the stone, blend the face into a unit, but when he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was. He worked instead on the composure and qualities of the face" (298). As Ananda continues with his work, he observes, "Now sunlight hit the seams of its face, as if it were sewn roughly together. He wouldn't hide that" (301). Ananda acknowledges that the part of the Buddha that animates it,

that humanises it – the face – must show the scars of the past in order for its rebuilding to be redemptive, to commemorate the victims of the war. The cracked or “quilted” face becomes an image of humanness constructed out of destruction. (It is also visually reminiscent of the Benjaminian mosaic or constellation mentioned earlier in this chapter.) Ananda’s decision not to homogenise the Buddha’s face is born out of the grief he feels for his wife’s death, the fact that he himself suffers the scars of war.

It is of the utmost importance that the Buddha’s face is not just the face of an inanimate object – it is a face that is thoroughly anthropomorphised.¹⁹² Ananda is employed to work on the Buddha because he is a renowned painter of the Buddha’s eyes – he is the artisan who animates the idol. Palipana states, “Without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer [the painter] brings to life sight and truth and presence. Later he will be honoured by gifts. Lands or oxen” (95). The eyes are painted on in a way that the painter does not directly face the Buddha. He uses the reflection of a mirror to guide him – “No human eye can meet the Buddha’s during the process of creation” (95). Once animated, the statue comprehends the world as if it is a human subject: “And now with human sight he was seeing all the fibres of natural history around him” (303).

¹⁹² Akin to this act of anthropomorphising objects, is the animalising of humans. In this scene Ananda thinks of his dead wife and compares her to a bird – “The birds dove towards gaps within the trees! They flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared” (303).

The Buddha sees and feels “each current of wind, every lattice-like green shadow created by cloud” (303). In fact, it not only acknowledges the beauty of the natural world, but the signs of turmoil and unrest associated with the war: “Grasses being burned, bamboo, the smell of petrol and grenade” (303). Crucially, Ananda, after animating the Buddha, sees the world through its eyes – “Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was seduction for him here. The eyes he had cut and focused with his father’s chisel showed him this” (303). The act of reciprocation, in which the formerly inanimate informs the human, becomes a deeply moving moment in which one face recognises the world through another. The narrator describes the contemplative Ananda: “The eyes like his at this moment, would always look north. As would the great scarred face half a mile away, which he had helped knit together from damaged stone, a statue that was no longer a god, that no longer had its graceful line but only the pure sad glance Ananda had found”(303). The novel ends on a note in which the human face, and the human touch, are redemptive. As Ananda embodies the gaze of the scarred Buddha, and thinks back to his wife, his assistant reaches out and touches him: “He felt the boy’s concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world” (303). This act brings Ananda back from the transcendent vision of the Buddha and allows him to recognise his own embodiedness – the fact that he, as physical entity, is embedded in the material world, among other human beings. This touch is a definitive gesture of compassion in which one human being recognises the pain, the human face, the precariousness,

of the Other.¹⁹³ But in an Adornian spirit, the touch is also that of a particular boy tangibly reaching out through the universal experience of war and grief to another individual.

It should be noted that the reconstruction of the Buddha feeds into the criticism that Ondaatje is pro-Sinhala (as discussed earlier), as it suggests a new world order in which Buddhism (and thereby the Sinhalese nationalism) is dominant. However, such a view fails to acknowledge that Ondaatje not only questions nationalising narratives, as is the case in the casting out of Palipana owing to his manipulation of history in a way that valorises Buddhism¹⁹⁴, and in that Ondaatje connects violence with the Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus equally.¹⁹⁵ In fact, the criticism of Ondaatje's "pro-Sinhala" stance leads certain literary critics, such as Marlene Goldman, to jump to Ondaatje's defence: "Read in the context of the ongoing historical connection between Buddhism and the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, *Anil's Ghost* does not promote a transcendent, unified vision of Buddhism free from the fetters of politics" (36). Ondaatje's reference to the

¹⁹³ The use of touch in this context is quite unlike that of Coetzee's. At the close of *Disgrace*, David Lurie's touching the dead bodies of the dogs in the spirit of political and social redemption initiates death. The redemptive touch operates via death.

¹⁹⁴ See Marlene Goldman's "Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*", page 31.

¹⁹⁵ In the novel we see Dr Linus Corea – a neurosurgeon in the private sector (116) – abducted by insurgents that may possibly be Sinhala-speaking (they explain to Corea in Sinhala what they expect him to do (116).) Despite having no interest in politics, he is dragged into the conflict and forced to treat patients connected with the insurgents. Similarly, when Gamini goes on holiday and is taken by guerrillas, he is expected to treat a "hut full of wounded boys" (214). The narrator notes that there is a "problem with communication" (215) between Gamini and the guerrillas. Gamini "couldn't speak Tamil well enough, they couldn't speak Sinhala" (215). The incidents are mirror images of each other, serving to show that each side committed similar crimes against individuals and also incurred casualties, and could also explain the inclusion of the Lineas Corea passage that has garnered criticism for being "out of place" in the novel.

reconstructed Buddha looking northwards suggests an acknowledgement of the “reality of Tamil suffering”, offering “a haunting reminder of the outcome of the bloody conflicts in the northern provinces” (Goldman 36).¹⁹⁶

Ondaatje’s mention of a Buddha figure is a trope or motif that runs through much of his work on Sri Lanka. In his poetry collection *Handwriting* (1998), out of which *Anil’s Ghost* arose, Ondaatje makes reference to Buddha statues in three different but interlocking poems: “Buried”, “Buried 2”, and “Brother Thief”. The shared themes and images within the three poems and *Anil’s Ghost* promote a sense of a constellatory network of meaning, an intertwined conceptual discourse. Both “Buried” and “Buried 2” foreground images of the burial and unearthing of Buddhist statues so that they are not desecrated during periods of war and upheaval. “Buried” opens with an evocative image, simultaneously wistful, nostalgic, and declaratory in tone: “To be buried in times of war,/ in harsh weather, in the monsoon/ of knives and stakes”(1–3). The poem’s speaker relates how “the stone and bronze gods [are] carried/ during a night rest of battle” (4–5) so that they can “be buried/for safety”. The process of burial and excavation is continuous, and takes place sporadically over centuries of Sri Lanka’s history. The speaker mentions that “Fifteen generations later armed man hide/ in the jungles/ Burying the Buddha in stone” (89–90) to point to the endless repetition¹⁹⁷ of “carrying the faith of a

¹⁹⁶ Also quoted in Spinks 230.

¹⁹⁷ Ondaatje complicates the very idea of violence, suggesting not just its historical continuity, in mentioning other conflicts (such as Hiroshima or violence in Central America), but by referring to changing value systems that understand violence differently. For example, Sarath describes an

temple/ during political crisis/ away in their arms" (21–23) and into the deep bowels of the earth.

Parallel to these scenes of burial in this poem are images of the burying of libraries "under the great medicinal trees/ which the invaders burned" and the burying of a Buddha's tooth "within the rapids of a river"(11) in "Buried 2". However, "Buried 2" offers more decisive images of unearthing than "Buried", with the speaker stating, "Our archaeologists dug down to the disappeared/ bodies of schoolchildren" (104–105). Putting aside the obvious connection to *Anil's Ghost*, the poem depicts a scene in which what has been buried is not simply inanimate objects or historical artefacts, but human beings. The visceral unnaturalness of the image lies in the fact that children, rather than the aged, have been killed. But this image functions in tandem with the uprooting of trees in the same part of the poem where "[a] woman said a man pretending to be from the/ military made her part with four jak trees in her/ garden as a consideration for obtaining the/ release of her son arrested some years earlier/ during the period of terror"(96-100). Trees are uprooted so that information may be unearthed in which children may (potentially) be exhumed or released from the dark recesses of prison. Each unearthing, unburial

archaeological expedition in China in which a water tomb is discovered. Within the tomb – 23 bodies are found: the man who died, and 22 female musicians who had been sacrificed in order to accompany him to the netherworld. Anil reads the death of the women as "murders", but Sarath corrects her, stating that it was a different time. Ondaatje is not trying to endorse violence in any way, but he does suggest that it has existed from time immemorial, and that we have to establish ways of countering that (universal) violence in which complicity is a complicated affair. For Ondaatje, the human contact – through the senses of touch and sight – is the way.

speaks to the sense that the natural order of the world has been disrupted by violence.¹⁹⁸

However, the poem closes in a surprising way by ending with a series of four poetic phrases. The phrases offer an innocuous image of a woman travelling with “darkness in her hair,/ the sky lovely with its stars” (120–121). This ending may seem odd until we realise that this too is an act of unearthing. Earlier in the poem, the speaker lists all the things lost in the war, foremost of which is “The interior love poem/ the deeper levels of the self/ landscapes of daily life” (41–43). Having the poem end on a note of poetry – of “lyrics that rose/ from love/ back into the air” (58–60), is an act of retrieval and reclamation of all that was “burned or traded for power and wealth/from the eight compass points of vengeance” (71–72).¹⁹⁹ Indeed, Ondaatje makes the loss of Sri Lankan traditions and customs brutally clear in the poem “Brother Thief”. In this poem, Ondaatje chronicles that the “bronze/ Buddha at Veheragala” (1–2) has been stolen and carried into the jungle by four thieves. As three of the thieves sleep, the fourth stays awake and becomes entranced by the statue. However, instead of showing the utmost respect to the idol, in line with ancient customs that are based on “the rule of courtesy – how to enter/ a temple or

¹⁹⁸ Although somewhat ironically, one of the final images of “Buried 2” (in an echo of the bomb explosion that kills the Silver President in *Anil’s Ghost*) is of bodies that cannot be buried. The poem’s speaker remarks on a bombing – “The heat of explosions/sterilised all metal” (106–7) – that entirely destroys the bodies close to the blast. The speaker refers to “Those whose bodies/could not be found” (116–117).

¹⁹⁹ Ondaatje cleverly points to how the war inverts the “Noble Eightfold Path” of Buddhism, on the wheel of Dharma (a visual counterpoint to the compass), that is meant to point the individual down a route that culminates in the cessation of suffering.

forest, how to touch/ a master's feet before lesson or performance" ("Buried 2" 46–48), the thief desecrates the Buddha. In an act that goes against centuries' worth of veneration, and inverts Sri Lanka's historical culture of sophisticated craftwork – "art of the drum. The art of eye-painting" ("Buried 2" 49) – the thief "climbs/ behind the bronze/ slides his arm around/ with the knife/ and removes the eyes/ chipped gems" (41–45). The brashness of his gesture "startles" (47) even the thief, who then ironically "rubs his own eyes" (50).

These lines shed an interesting light on Ananda's rebuilding the Buddha in *Anil's Ghost*. Certainly the rebuilding shows that Ananda refuses to enter into a culture of revenge and retribution, a cycle of violence, but it also points to something more: "He looked at the eyes that had once belonged to a god. This is what he felt. As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation" (301). Ondaatje then suggests that the very crafting, or artistic remaking of the Buddha, is a redemptive act.²⁰⁰

The close of "Buried" in which the speaker relates, "Lightning over that drowned valley/Thomas Merton who died of electricity/ But if I had to perish twice?" (13) appears wholly disconnected to the final lines of "Buried 2", but it is important to note that we are not interested in reconciling differences, but in engaging concepts and images in a constellatory manner, a point I will return to

²⁰⁰ It is interesting to note that Eagleton views the artwork as a repository for the non-identical.

shortly. In “Buried” the closing reference to Thomas Merton (1915–68), a Trappist monk and spiritualist, is significant. Despite being profoundly committed to Christianity, Merton delved deeply into Eastern faith systems (particularly Zen Buddhism), and they informed the way that he engaged with Christian theology and spirituality. The value of Merton’s thought lies in his aversion to ideological metanarratives, and choice to engage with different faiths in such a way as to develop a world view that held pacifism at its conceptual centre. In fact, by the time of his premature death at the age of 53, Merton had come to the conclusion that “the answer to mankind’s global survival, both physical and spiritual, lay in bolting together the remnants of one’s beliefs and forming a unified body of very different individuals [and faiths]” (McDonald *Tom* 13). In 1968, while in Thailand to attend an interfaith conference, Merton was accidentally fatally electrocuted by an electric fan.²⁰¹ Ondaatje establishes a rapport between the lightening of nature – the lightening that illuminates a “drowned” valley – and Merton’s death by electricity. Set up against the grand destructiveness and power of nature, is the microcosmic image of Merton’s deadly electrocution. Ondaatje’s message is unclear: he could be suggesting that visionary individuals, individuals willing to dismantle and restructure universal metanarratives in the desire for peace, are snuffed out by human technology, itself a distorting double of the power of the natural world.

²⁰¹ Merton’s cause of death is disputed by some parties. The most extreme readings of his death suggest that his anti-war views on the Vietnam resulted in him being assassinated by the CIA.

Through this reference to Merton's demise Ondaatje may possibly be implying the impossibility of a viable serene future for Sri Lanka.

The final line of the poem "But if I had to perish twice?" takes on a multivalent meaning. One interpretation may be that Merton himself is speaking. He may be suggesting that he lives on through his writings on pacifism and the synthesis of Eastern religions with Christianity. The disappearance of these important writings would have him "perish twice", and leave the world a darker and more cynical place. However, crucially, the line is also a reference to a short apocalyptic poem, quoted in full below, by Robert Frost, entitled "Fire and Ice" (1920):

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

The poem is a classic example of Frost's sparse style, language whittled down to its bare bones to convey a surprisingly profound message. The poem draws on a conversation that Frost had with an esteemed Harvard-based astronomer, Harlow Shapley (Fagan 115). Frost demanded to know from the astronomer how the world will end. Shapley replied that the sun will explode and thereby obliterate the earth. Should the earth somehow escape this fate, it will float off into space and freeze.

Frost cleverly takes these scientific facts and gives them a metaphorical spin, connecting them directly with human feeling and behaviour. For Frost, destruction will be the result of human action, not grand galactic phenomena. Frost links the two elemental opposites of fire and ice mentioned by Shapley with the heat of passion or desire and the cold-bloodedness of hatred and cruelty, respectively. The poem's speaker comments that, based on his personal knowledge of desire, the likelihood of the world exploding into the destructive flames of passion is greater than that of its destruction through hate. However, if the world had to "perish twice", he is certain that enough hate exists in the world for it to freeze over. The speaker's vision is entirely hopeless: there is no escape from the intensity of human feeling (on either end of the spectrum) that leads to global destruction. There is no value judgement evident in the poem – the speaker is simply stating his opinion. He does not suggest that hate is somehow worse than passion, only that either one will have the same net result of destroying humanity. Ondaatje's ending the poem in this manner reiterates a pessimistic view of Sri Lanka's future.

Yet the final line of the poem could suggest something more than hopelessness. If "perish" is understood as the act of being damaged or suffering, the poem takes on a different nuance. The speaker could be taking on the voice of a Buddha statue (as we have seen Ananda do in *Anil's Ghost*), referring to the process of being submerged and suffering physical perishing like "Rock paintings eaten/ by amoebic bacteria" ("Buried 2" 126–127). Coupled with the reference to Merton, Ondaatje may be pointing to pacifism and a resistance to ideological metanarratives

as a means of dealing with political crisis: that we should learn from the passive acceptance of the multiple Buddhas mentioned in *Handwriting* who suffer corrosion, both from the constant process of burial and excavation and from the brutal acts of human desecration. Crucially, it is only through reading *Anil's Ghost* and the poems from *Handwriting* together that we are able to come to this conclusion. It is through seeing these Ondaatje texts through a constellatory system that "circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers" (Adorno, *Negative* 163) that we are able to hold such a view. By placing *Anil's Ghost* in conversation with *Handwriting*, the reader becomes aware of a mode of cognitive thinking that involves respecting and lauding the fragmentary but interlocking aspects of Ondaatje's oeuvre, that promotes critical thinking.

In closing I make reference to Ondaatje's poem "Wells" in *Handwriting*. This poem contains the poignant lines "nine soldiers on leave/ strip uniforms off/ and dig a well/ to give thanks/ for surviving this war" (41–45). This idea of the soldiers stripping their uniforms off (discarding the markers or symbols of political or ideological affiliation) before engaging in a sacred and communal act, roughly speaks to the concept of non-identity that I have explored in this chapter. Only in stripping away, or at least interrogating, conceptual categories – symbols of race, ethnicity, nationality, among others – that aim to categorise or classify the individual can we aim to free ourselves from existing and potential historical atrocities, such as

war and genocide. This “stripping away” is non-identity thinking – a process of acknowledging the particular (at points synonymous with the individual) against the totalising impulses inherent to capitalism, religion, nationalism, and other metanarratives. In this chapter, I have aimed to show Ondaatje’s literature, particularly *Anil’s Ghost*, echoes Adornian non-identity, in its representation of the concept of individual identity within a complicated situation of identitarian politics that relies on totalising narratives of nationality and ethnicity to construct humanness and citizenship. As I have argued in the second part of this chapter, Ondaatje’s vision, mosaic-like in nature, comes to the fore strongly in its interlocking of various literary texts. By adopting this structural mode, Ondaatje’s literature embodies non-identity in its very performance, which is no mean feat.

“Giving Us the Words to Say It”: Concluding Remarks

In this country you may not
 Suffer the death of your stillborn,
 remember the last push into shadow and silence,
 The useless wires and cords on your stomach,
 the nurse’s face, the walls, the afterbirth in a basin.
 Do not touch your breasts
 still full of purpose.
 Do not circle the house,
 pack, unpack the small clothes.
 Do not lie awake at night hearing
 the doctor say ‘It was just as well’
 and ‘You can have another’
 In this country you may not
 mourn small passings.

— Ingrid de Kok “Small Passings” 221

Ingrid de Kok’s poem, “Small Passings”, published in 1988, discusses the grief she experiences on the stillbirth of her child. The poem is poignant not only because de Kok describes the grief of a mother for a child, but because the death is caught up in a complex matrix of what constitutes “legitimate” grief in the context of apartheid. De Kok, a white South African woman, is callously told by a man *“to stop mourning, ‘because the trials and horrors suffered daily by black women in this country are more significant than the loss of one white child’”* (poem’s preface; italics in the original). According to the man, the death of De Kok’s child is unworthy of grief when juxtaposed with the scale, frequency, and intensity of suffering undergone by the oppressed black majority, thanks to the laws enforcing white minority rule in

apartheid South Africa. De Kok assiduously, and without rancour, chronicles apartheid South Africa's various injustices towards blacks, ranging from homelessness, evident in the lines "The newspaper boy in the rain/ will sleep tonight in the doorway"(15–16), to issues of migrant labour: "The woman in the busline/ may next month be on a train/ to a place not her own"(17–19). She by no means attempts to deny the suffering of black South Africans, but she rejects the racialized and politicised hierarchy of suffering in which some deaths are more or less important than others. In fact, the poem ends with images of solidarity between mothers – both black and white – the sense that there is no such thing as a "small passing", an insignificant death. The speaker states solemnly that no black mother would tell her to ignore her grief simply because of her race: "They will not tell you your suffering is white/ They will not say it is just as well/ They will not compete for ashes of infants" (50–2). Instead, their shared maternal grief envelops her, and she imagines how they would offer her sincere emotional solace and support:

Come with us to the place of mothers.
 We will stroke your flat, empty belly,
 let you weep with us in the dark,
 and arm you with one of our babies
 to carry home on your back. (54–58)

However, the poem could also suggest something equally important – the way that small intimate events were stripped of their worthiness as aesthetic material during apartheid. De Kok's poem speaks to the stark divide that characterises aesthetic production during periods of political extremity, the way that some writing is

considered “political” and other writing, particularly writing concerned with personal subjectivity, is dismissed or viewed with scepticism. Indeed, Njabulo Ndebele declares that protest literature during apartheid had a “tendency either to devalue or to ignore interiority” (149).²⁰² But can we really think about aesthetic production during political unrest in terms of binary “oppositions”, in terms of, as quoted earlier, “those who were silent versus those who were not, those who wrote engaged poetry versus those who did not” (Van Dyck, *Kassandra* 31). Is it truly that simple? What happens to writing that may ostensibly appear apolitical, but the author assures us is not? Can a text that appears silent to politics (or as in the case of some of Coetzee’s fiction portray physically mute characters) “claim a political significance? Or is silence forever consigned to marginality or apoliticality and complicity?” (Sussman 5).

In the course of this thesis, I have aimed to show that there are different types of political writing: writing that may not manifestly or ostensibly appear to be political, but actually harbours profound political sentiments or content. The version of the political that the thesis investigates is not an alignment with a specific party, or ideology, but often simply a consciousness that refuses to submit the individual to racial categories, gender stereotypes or the violence of identity-thinking. It is a

²⁰² In fact, Njabulo Ndebele demanded that South African authors focus on “rediscovering the ordinary” – on writing texts that focus on intimate personal events and experiences. He argues that writers must move away from their obsession with grand “spectacular” political events for even commonplace and private events are political, just by virtue of the fact that they occur in a politicised context. He reminds his audience that the “ordinary day-to-day lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions” (156).

writing that acknowledges “small passings”, the intractable and enigmatic, and feeds into Adorno’s claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that “social freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought” (xiii). And in today’s world, where ethnic and gender atrocities persist, such a consciousness is truly revolutionary, truly utopian in outlook.

Each of the authors I have chosen to analyse in this thesis not only emerge from situations of political extremity, but have borne the brunt of criticism by literary critics for not writing the “right” type of literature in response to their respective countries’ state of crisis. Criticisms of these authors’ work range from being too subjective and oblivious to political concerns to not taking their political situations seriously enough. Yet, as I have shown, the texts by each of these authors *do* express a political commitment, but a political commitment different from what we understand as traditional protest literature, which at its very worst does little to “delve into intricacies of motive or social process” (Ndebele 144) and trades in uniformities and stereotypes. Njabulo Ndebele complained of the deadening and over-simplification of the human character and experience in protest literature during apartheid South Africa: “People and situations are either very good or very bad. Those who are bad, invariably used as the focus of moral lesson, either come to a well-deserved bad end, or dramatically abandon their evil ways overnight” (144). This is not to deride the necessity of traditional protest literature: if the point of traditional protest literature is to educate or conscientise an oppressed or largely illiterate people, perhaps a certain degree of caricature or painting political issues in

broad painterly strokes may need to be adopted. But what is more interesting and, in my opinion, more worthy a form of political literature is that literature that is concerned with “speaking politically, not politics”, a literature that could never be picked up by fascism (or any “ism” for that matter) in an emphatic sense.

Key to my re-categorisation of these supposedly “apolitical” authors – authors largely understood by the literary establishment as distanced from the socio-historical moments of their contexts – has been the theory of Theodor Adorno. Using key concepts within Adorno’s extensive oeuvre and placing them in relation to the literary “case studies” of Coetzee, Ondaatje, and Karapanou gives us a conceptual vocabulary, previously lacking in scholarship, trying to engage with these complex authors on a political level. In essence, Adorno is (to appropriate Marie Cardinal’s phrasing) “Giving us the words to say it”, giving us a way to connect the political subtext of the text, the amorphous bubbling thing below the ostensible surface of the text, to its socio-political context.

However, this thesis had a twofold aim: not only to re-categorise authors and offer a new definition of aesthetic commitment (in a completely anti-prescriptive way, as such a thing would go against Adorno’s spirit of non-identity thinking), but also to claim Adorno’s relevance and applicability in the sphere of literary criticism. Over the course of this thesis I have shown that Adorno is relevant to twentieth-century fiction with which he is not historically associated. Indeed, this thesis adopted one of Adorno’s favourite figures of speech – chiasmus. Adorno used this concept to “indicate the unreconciled and unsublated relationship between two

elements that nonetheless are inextricably intertwined" (i.e. "history is nature; nature is history,") (Jay, "Adorno" 181). In this thesis Adorno's theory fleshed out the literary, and the literary fleshed out Adorno's theory.

At this point it is necessary to address an aspect of this thesis that has not been mentioned explicitly: the fact that Coetzee and Ondaatje are often taught as canonical postcolonial writers. The ease with which Adorno was used to engage with these authors suggests that the traditional scepticism by the Anglophone literary establishment in using Adorno and the Frankfurt School, beyond the obvious *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and "some all too metaphoric and allusive references to the 'ruins' of history, the catastrophe of the nation" (Ganguly 242), for postcolonial studies is unwarranted. As Keya Ganguly notes, "for the most part the frameworks and modes of thinking about issues of postcoloniality have taken their lead from the dominance within contemporary theoretical discourses in general of the Derridan, Freudian, and Foucauldian orthodoxies" (242). Adorno, associated with "European (and imperialist) 'high' culture and as a 'radical' with paradoxically little faith in the aspirations of the powerless" (Varadharajan, *Exotic* xviii), has all too often been brushed aside as an irrelevant theorist by the postcolonial establishment. In her 2007 article "On the Morality of Thinking, or Why Still Adorno", Asha Varadharajan notes that her *Exotic Parodies* (1995), a seminal and ground-breaking text, has not resulted in a postcolonial critical industry with Adorno at its centre. This dismissal of Adorno is woeful, but persists despite excellent illustrations of how well Adorno works for postcolonial studies.

For example, Ganguly refers to the “necessity and value of [Adorno’s] authenticity as a concept and an experiential force so that the attempt to think concretely about the lived realities of colonial and postcolonial existence can no longer be waved off as naïveté about the real or nostalgia for an irrecoverable past” (243). For Ganguly, Adorno’s version of authenticity, which she defines in terms of a non-discursive subjective form of truth that, crucially, is not identical with an objective truth²⁰³, is located in a “category of materialist knowledge” (225). In other words, for Ganguly, Adorno’s version of authenticity “proposes a way to think about the conjunction of knowledge, experience, and aesthetic form” (250) within a conceptual framework that does not dismiss the social and material reality of the human subject’s colonial or postcolonial experience. In *Exotic Parodies*, Varadharajan argues through a theoretical interface between Adorno and Spivak, Derrida, and Said that the “racial, ethnic, and feminine” (xi) object may be emancipated from postcolonial discourses that problematically entrench the idea of “the impossibility of speaking about the object”(28), thereby problematically placing the object in a position of powerlessness. Varadharajan is able to see that the alterity of the Other can only be respected when engaged with via a dialectical Adornian critique that neither elides nor effaces difference by using the “Eurocentric and masculine” as its key point of reference, which some discourses within postmodernism and poststructuralism are somewhat prone towards (*Exotic xi*). Indeed, Varadharajan

²⁰³ By not equating the two, Ganguly ensures that we are not confronted with a singular and overburdened reading of the truth that threatens to impose meaning.

endeavours to show that Adorno's system of dialectics that refuses to trade in fixed conceptual oppositions can be used to counter postcolonial discourses that "subsume the particular in the universal, the fact in the category, and the object in the subject... [and thereby] produces the [O]ther in its own image" (*Exotic* 46).

Yet, in my thesis, rather than rewriting the theory of, say, postmodernists or poststructuralists to show Adorno's worth, Adorno stands on his own terms, and the strength of his unique concepts are given full force in relation to specific postcolonial literary fiction, rather than abstractions. A key concern of my thesis is Adorno's highlighting the (postcolonial) aesthetic object's enigmaticalness, something that neither Ganguly nor Varadharajan touch upon. This enigmaticalness (a concept that warps and wefts across my entire thesis) is a vital aspect of Adorno's definition of autonomous art, and the element that most strongly baulks at identity thinking. Enigmaticalness, that gaping hole in the whole of the text, points to the precariousness of meaning, and ensures the sanctity of both the aesthetic (postcolonial) object *and* the postcolonial object itself by pushing up against totalising and homogenising discourses. Although enigmaticalness may certainly fall into the trap, much in the same way that Varadharajan's belief in Adornian dialectics may, of the "the impossibility of speaking about the object"(28) because no categorical claims whatsoever may be made of it, it is also a viable and important way of ensuring that the Other cannot simply be read as a "negated and inverted reflection of the subject" (Hendricks 128). Through enigmaticalness the object becomes a "force of determinate and specific resistance to the subject's attempts to

colonize it" (Hendricks 128), a point I feel became wholly apparent in my readings of Coetzee's historically oppressed Michael K and Friday. Indeed, my thesis, like Ganguly and Varadharajan's scholarship, proves that various Adornian concepts – such as enigmaticalness, truth content, non-identity thinking, dialectics – may certainly offer a productive theoretical framework for postcolonial literature, a literature born from the crucible of independence movements, revolutions, a shifting world order, and contestations of modernity.

However, the greatest value of my thesis may lie in Adorno's interest in the aesthetic²⁰⁴ (an area of resurgent scholarly interest). In tandem with literary critics such as Isobel Armstrong and Elaine Scarry, and as I have made clear throughout my thesis, Adorno refuses to see the aesthetic as devoid of political content or sentiment. However, as Peter Hohendahl notes, Adorno's relationship with the aesthetic is distinctive: "We are not dealing with a historicist but an ideologically critical historical approach. This means that the encounter with the work of art that deserves the name of criticism interrogates the structure of the work of art by attending to the element of historical truth it contains" (*Reappraisals* 138). Crucially,

²⁰⁴ De Bolla admits that the term is "often [used] for different purposes or ends being made clear" (5). He notes that the term may refer to "something like [an] artist's principles or particular program[me] of making art" (5), but its more significant usage is in relation to the history of philosophy or ideas. Indeed, intellectuals speak of a "tradition of 'aesthetics'" from the 18th century onwards (5). De Bolla continues that the term also functions in relation to a "philosophy of art" (allied with the school of analytic philosophy). In "analytic aesthetics", questions such as "'What is art?', 'What is it to understand an artwork?', 'What is the value of the artwork?'" are pervasive (6). Lastly, the term may also be used in regards to the theory of aesthetics, in which Kant is considered the most important thinker (7). For some, a "'theory of aesthetics' is taken to be completely independent of any instances of art" (7).

this historical truth – this enigmatic “truth content” – is a non-propositional truth, a truth that reminds us that “neither artworks nor aesthetic judgements [are] unproblematically available” (Hohendahl, *Fleeting* 7).

The “non-propositional” aspect of truth content is precisely what makes Adorno’s aesthetic conception a challenging and interesting avenue for further investigation, particularly when read in light of Adorno’s attempt to rework the subject/object dichotomy. The “[w]ork of art may be objective, both in being object – artefact – and in embodying an objective relationship to societal dynamics, and in this sense non-subjective in that it is not simply some purportedly unique and original personality exercising its creativity” (Nicholson 16). However, the “objectivity of the artwork is nevertheless mediated both by the subject who produces it and by the subject who experiences it” (Nicholson 16). This dialectical push and pull between subject and object, the object constantly being read through the subject, who follows the dialectic intrinsic to the text, that functions as a repository of social and material relations, forces us to acknowledge that “[i]f there is no such thing as a work of art in itself, outside of history and immortal the way the system of bourgeois cultural prestige would have it, neither can there be any one ahistorical ‘authentic’ interpretation of the work” (37). This makes the artwork both contingent and variable, constantly shifting the stable boundaries of what constitutes “objective” knowledge. (Gillian Rose notes that “‘Objectivity’ can only be attained by recognising that the object is mediated by subjective factors” (152).) It is this question of the subject’s relationship with an object that contains a non-propositional truth

content, a truth content that constantly shifts and changes in relation to circumstance and social relations, that leaves us questioning how we can think about a relatively uniform aesthetic response or a universal political reaction arising from the artwork. In fact, it may be necessary to think of the artwork as the site of a dialectical movement between subject and object, a space where the subject must embody a “spontaneous receptivity” that “must coexist with [his or her] ability to move back and forth not only between the whole and the parts and between the various moments within the work but also between the work and the subjective associations that arise” (Nicholson 18). In short, Adorno’s disruption of the subject/object dichotomy, complicated by a recalcitrant truth content, translates into a process of energetic and rigorous dialectical thinking about new methods and categories or forms of interpretation via the subject. With aesthetic expression functioning as “transsubjective” in that it “does not recognise th[e] polarity [of subject and object] as definitive” (Adorno, *Aesthetic* 111), perhaps, Adorno is calling for us to ascertain whether “[a] so-called ‘objective’ method which seeks to eliminate all traces of subjectivity is subjective, whereas an idiosyncratic method may attain greater ‘objectivity’” (Rose 152).

In building new methodologies and categories and interrogating old ones, and *thinking* in different ways, in order to fruitfully engage with artworks, we feed into the overall project of Adorno’s critical theory – to never simply accept knowledge as static and unchanging. This endeavour becomes especially important if it brings us closer to the realisation that the artwork is “the sole realm in which

freedom from and opposition to the omnipresent system can be articulated” (Hohendahl, *Reappraisals* 138), that the artwork is an expression of human and animal suffering, historical, social, and political. Adorno declares, “[B]ecause the world has survived its own downfall, it nonetheless needs art to write its unconscious history. The authentic artists of the present are those in whose works the uttermost horror still quivers” (“Those Twenties” 47). For Adorno, the autonomous artwork is that space where even “small passings”, the “minima moralia”, within the great shuddering events of history and politics, past and present, are acknowledged and respected, and sometimes even in silence.

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