

**MASARYK
UNIVERSITY**

FACULTY OF ARTS

The Writing of Ethics in Coetzee's Works

Master's thesis

XUAN TRANG NGUYEN

Supervisor: Stephen Paul Hardy

Department of English and American Studies
Programme English Language and Literature

Brno 2025

MUNI
ARTS

Bibliographic record

Author: Xuan Trang Nguyen
Faculty of Arts
Masaryk University
Department of English and American Studies

Title of Thesis: The Writing of Ethics in Coetzee's Works

Degree Programme: English Language and Literature

Supervisor: Stephen Paul Hardy

Year: 2025

Number of Pages: 101

Keywords: ethics, power, literary creation, the ideal, otherness

Abstract

This master's thesis investigates J. M. Coetzee's treatment of ethics in his works, examining its relationship with power, writing, animals, and the ideal. It applies the theory-driven literary analysis, combining the textual analysis of *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K.*, *Foe*, *The Lives of Animals*, *Disgrace*, and *The Childhood of Jesus* with various philosophical approaches of ethics and power, primarily drawn from Levinas's philosophy of the other. It aims to identify the key thematic and formal aspects of Coetzee's ethics and explore how they evolve throughout his career, serving as a theoretical framework for reading his works as an ethical critique and subversion of power.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis titled **The Writing of Ethics in Coetzee's Works** that I have submitted for assessment is entirely my original work, and that no part of it has been taken from the work of others unless explicitly cited and acknowledged within the text of my thesis.

I certify that I have used AI tools in accordance with the principles of academic integrity and that I have appropriately referenced the use of these tools in my work.

Brno April 14, 2025

.....
Xuan Trang Nguyen

Acknowledgements

I attribute the completion of this thesis to Dr. Hardy, whose breadth of knowledge, patience, and kindness have guided me throughout this journey.

And many thanks to my husband, who embodies ethics in his soft belly, hot soup, yogurt, pastries, washed sheets, dispassionate comments, and witty humour.

Table of Contents

Introduction	11
1 Ethics and Power	14
1.1 Historical and Biographical Background	14
1.2 Power, Ethics, and the Other	19
1.3 The Guilt of Complicity	31
1.4 Embodied Ethics.....	35
2 Ethics and Writing	44
2.1 Ethics, Language, and Power	44
2.2 Ethics and Aesthetics.....	59
3 Ethics and Animals	65
3.1 Animals, Reason, Otherness.....	65
3.2 Animals, Race, Gender.....	71
4 Ethics and the Ideal	78
Conclusion	93
Bibliography	97

Introduction

This thesis examines J. M. Coetzee's treatment of ethics as a central philosophical domain that recurs throughout his oeuvre. First, this study contributes to a thematic understanding of his works by identifying and examining key moral concerns that repeatedly direct his writings. Second, it intends to gain a deeper insight into Coetzee as a complex literary figure whose inner ethical struggles are projected in his fiction. In other words, it aims to provide a theoretical framework to read Coetzee's works with particular thematic signatures. Recognising the well-established studies on ethics in Coetzee's works as both opportunities and challenges, this thesis selects and engages with noteworthy studies while attempting to provide fresh perspectives in order to enrich the current discourse on his works.

The thesis's structure is divided thematically into four chapters, each examining the connection between ethics and power, writing, animals and the ideal, respectively. Coetzee's works analysed, namely *Dusklands* (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983) in chapter 1, *Foe* (1986) in chapter 2, *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Disgrace* (1999) in chapter 3 and *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) in chapter 4 are chronologically ordered. This structure aims to demonstrate how Coetzee's treatment of ethics has evolved thematically and stylistically.

The first part of this thesis is centred on the political ethics, confronting Apartheid in South Africa and the broader political violence of colonial powers. *Dusklands* (1974), his debut novel, offers a critique of the inhumane and unimaginable atrocities committed in the Vietnam War. It delves into the psychological motives of those participating in war as both culprits and victims, stuck in a vicious cycle of violence. The unnamed empire in *Waiting*

for the Barbarians (1980) exposes the brutal nature of colonisation in dehumanising and violating the other, while *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983) portrays the civil strife in the apartheid era. They address the political unrest and dissect the moral corruption of power through an urgent voice of conscience and the guilt of complicity, yet with utmost caution toward ideology, which characterises Coetzee's works.

The second part dissects power through the lens of writing, establishing the relationship between language, power, and ethics. *Foe* (1986), marked by early features of Coetzee's experimental writing, examines power through metafiction and epistolary narrative techniques. He delves into how language can oppress and colonise the other through the power structures embedded within it. He also examines the moral responsibility of a writer who, through his manipulation of language, gets caught between reality and fiction, truth and aesthetics. He incorporates the triad-dynamics of reader, writer, and text in his analysis of power.

The third part integrates animals into his analysis of power and otherness, intersecting speciesism, racism, and sexism. *The Lives of Animals* (1999) introduces readers to Coetzee's experiment with essayistic fiction and the character Elizabeth Costello, his alter ego, who will be extensively developed in his later works. It subverts anthropocentrism and challenges the supremacy of reason, reassessing the relationship between humans and other species based on embodied ethics. *Disgrace* (1999), Coetzee's first novel on post-apartheid South Africa, examines the ethical complexities of national reconciliation, fusing humanist ethics, politics, and art with animal and post-humanist ethics.

The final part focuses on his late style toward a more abstract and philosophical mode of writing. He overlaps ethics with metaphysics, epistemology, religion, and even

mathematics. *The Childhood of Jesus*, the first novel in the Jesus trilogy, largely deals with the nature of the ideal by examining the moral dilemma of compromising desires and reason, materialism and idealism, the universal and the particular, and idiosyncratic morality against social conventions.

Regarding methodology, it employs qualitative and theory-driven literary analysis, combined with close readings of selected texts to illuminate conceptual arguments. The theoretical framework centres on otherness and power, primarily drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of the other, particularly his central concepts of 'alterity', 'infinity', and the 'face of the other'. It also explores ethics in relation to various philosophical perspectives, including those of Foucault, Nietzsche, and Gramsci on power; Lacan, Derrida, and Wittgenstein on language; Plato and Spinoza on the ideal, affect, and reason; and Hume and Bergson on sentiment and intuition. Some of their central concepts and ideas are utilised for arguments and textual analysis, such as Foucault's notion of panopticon, Nietzsche's interpretation of good and evil, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Lacan's mirror stage and symbolic order, Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism and phallogocentrism, Wittgenstein's critique of private language, Plato's theory of Forms, Spinoza's ethics of reason and affect, Hume's moral sentimentalism, and Bergson's emphasis on intuition.

The study on Coetzee's ethics finds its relevance in the contemporary milieu, as his works address moral concerns related to racism, nationalism, and colonialism. His moral critique of colonialism and its legacy, his analysis of power structures, hegemony, and political violence, his percipient portrayal of the dehumanised other, and his caution toward ideology resonate deeply with the current unstable political climate entrenched with social and political division.

1 Ethics and Power

1.1 Historical and Biographical Background

This chapter examines the relationship between ethics and power, especially political power in the specific context of Apartheid in South Africa and Vietnam War, as well as colonialism in general, represented at the outset of Coetzee's career, notably in *Dusklands* (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983). His critical reflection on power and ethical dilemmas of struggling against different moral and political systems can be first traced back to his family background. John Maxwell Coetzee was born on 9 February 1940 in Cape Town and spent his childhood and young adulthood in Cape Town and Worcester, South Africa.¹ From his mother's side, he is descended from a Pole who got married with a German girl, had his children born and raised in the U.S, and later moved to South Africa. From his father's side, his ancestors from the Netherlands migrated to a Dutch colony in South Africa, which was later subjugated by the British Empire.² In an interview, he presents his background as complex and diverse, exemplifying how different generations yield to the tides of history and the successive shifts in dominant powers:

What I'm telling you is a story of how, for the sake of social advancement, a mother tongue, first Polish, then German, was abandoned in favour of a father language, first German, then English. That's from my mother's side. From my father's side, [...], my ancestors accommodated themselves to their new masters [...]. Again, we have a story of a

¹ "Biography of J.M. Coetzee", J.M. Coetzee: Biography (webpage), Central Oregon Community College, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/CoursePack/coetzee.htm>.

² J.M. Coetzee, "J.M. Coetzee and Valerie Miles. Europe and the world outside," October 28, 2024, YouTube video, 27:05 – 28:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhs9G2EF7Fs>.

mother tongue, Dutch, being abandoned in favour of a more powerful father tongue, English.³

Despite being of Afrikaner descent, his family distanced themselves from the Afrikaner community; English was primarily spoken at home, while Afrikaans was reserved for other relatives. An ambiguous sense of belonging deepens his alienated state in formative years, prompting him to observe the world from a peripheral viewpoint and sympathise with marginalised communities: “Coetzee is not an Afrikaner, but a white South African inhabiting a very particular margin, since his background partly distances him from both Afrikaner as well as English affiliations.”⁴ His characteristic tendency to refrain from a straightforward political stance and a particular ideology can be, in part, attributed to the moral ambiguity in his family. He presents ethical judgements he learned from his childhood as complex and full of contradictions, demonstrating struggles to reconcile inherited prejudices with lived reality, as he observed from his mother: “He is always trying to make sense of his mother. Jews are exploiters, she says; yet she prefers Jewish doctors because they know what they are doing. Coloured people are the salt of the earth, she says, yet she and her sisters are always gossiping about pretend-whites with secret Coloured backgrounds. He cannot understand how she can hold so many contradictory beliefs at the same time.”⁵ His father was dismissed from a civil service position due to his opposition to Afrikaner nationalism. “Coetzee’s parents were *bloedsappe*, Afrikaners who supported General Jan Smuts and

³ Coetzee, “J.M. Coetzee and Valerie Miles”, 00:27:53 – 00:28:48.

⁴ Dominic Head, “Coetzee’s life,” in *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3. https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/67474/excerpt/9780521867474_excerpt.pdf

⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (Secker and Warburg, 1997), 37.

dissociated themselves from the Afrikaner nationalist movement that eventually came to power in South Africa in 1948.”⁶ However, they neither supported Apartheid nor fully acknowledged the equality of other racial groups. His growth in such an environment exposes him to nuanced ethics that are distinct in his works, bearing an identity marked by ambivalence, doubt and guilt.

Intertwined with the family background is the political turmoil of his time. He directly experienced the extreme division of his country during the Apartheid from 1948 to 1994. The violation of the natives and other racial groups, such as territorial expulsion, denied political involvement, and labour exploitation, had already been deeply ingrained in South Africa’s history due to colonisation, first by the Dutch, then by the British, long before 1948. However, the 1948 election, marked by the victory of the National Party led by D. F. Malan, officially established institutionalised racial exclusion to uphold white supremacy and Afrikaner nationalism. Apartheid, literally meaning ‘separateness’, divided people into four categories according to the Population Registration Act (1950): Bantu (Black Africans), Coloured (mixed race), Asian, and White. Group Areas Act introduced in 1950 and Bantu Authorities Act in 1951 facilitates the forced relocation of non-white groups to designated racially based areas - ten designated homeland reserve areas governed by complicit chiefs - for separate developments.⁷

⁶ “Biography of J.M. Coetzee”, J.M. Coetzee: Biography (webpage), Central Oregon Community College.

⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “apartheid,” last updated August 19, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/apartheid>.

Pass laws imposed by the Natives Act in 1952 restricted movements of the Blacks, especially black men from the age of 16, who were required to carry reference books with employment records to enter white areas.⁸ The government also promoted the ideology of racial purity by enforcing the Prohibition of Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) that forbade interracial sex and marriage. Social inequality was exacerbated by the restriction of education to marginalised groups. The Bantu Education Act (1953) established a separate, unfair educational system for Black people that limited their opportunities and mainly prepared them for manual labour to fuel the white-ruled economy. White hegemony was upheld by the constant suppression of opposing political movements and uprisings. Indemnity Act (1961) legalised police brutality — including “acts of violence, torture, or killing in the pursuit of official duties.”⁹

These policies were met with severe backlash, starting with nonviolent strikes, demonstrations, and marches led by the African National Congress (ANC) after 1952 and “many of its leaders were arrested and charged with treason in 1956.”¹⁰ Subsequently, violence erupted and escalated, leading to the tragedy of the Sharpeville Massacre at a gathering organised by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) on March 21, 1960. The massacre was followed by the National Party’s banning of both the ANC and the PAC.¹¹ At this point, the

⁸ “Pass Laws,” South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy (website), accessed August 29, 2025, <https://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?kid=163-582-15>.

⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “apartheid”.

¹⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “African National Congress”, updated August 21, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/African-National-Congress>.

¹¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Sharpeville massacre”, updated August 2, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sharpeville-massacre>.

ANC shifted its direction toward militarization and guerrilla warfare, establishing its armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (*'Spear of the Nation'*), in 1961 under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964.¹²

After a decade, the Soweto uprising on June 16, 1976, was the tipping point in the struggle against the Apartheid regime. Around 10,000 students from different schools across Soweto went down the street to protest against the Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974, which mandated Afrikaans as the language of instruction in all black schools¹³ This event brought about the revival of the ANC and culminated in “virtual civil war during the 1980s.”¹⁴

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) and *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983) written during this period significantly reflected the social unrest infused by fear, hatred, distrust, and political violence. The Afrikaner part inevitably attached to Coetzee's identity gives rise to a sense of complicity in the committed atrocities: “Although he felt no affinity with contemporary Afrikaner identity in the Apartheid years, Coetzee admitted that he could be branded ‘Afrikaner’, on the basis of historical connection, and as a way of identifying his guilt by association with the crimes committed by the whites of South Africa. Coetzee has indicated that his writing sometimes draws its validity from this sense of complicity.”¹⁵ (Head 3).

¹² Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “African National Congress”.

¹³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Soweto uprising”, updated August 21, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Soweto-uprising>.

¹⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “African National Congress”

¹⁵ Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee*, 3.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1980s became widespread around the world, especially in Britain, where demonstrations and boycotts played a crucial role in pressing for an end to Apartheid.¹⁶ In response to calls for sanctions from the UN General Assembly, the Commonwealth, and many other international partners, the South African president F. W. de Klerk declared negotiations to terminate the Apartheid in 1990, lifted the bans on the ANC and PAC, and released Nelson Mandela after his nearly three decades in prison.¹⁷ The historical milestone was achieved on March 17, 1992, when more than two-thirds of white voters supported the termination of the Apartheid system, marking the transition to democracy for a multiracial society.¹⁸

1.2 Power, Ethics, and the Other

Ethics provides a system for judging and evaluating human life and conduct, particularly how one should relate to and treat others in a specific socio-cultural system, in which particular power structures are embedded. Power is essential to understanding ethics, and in the heart of both lies the notion of the other, a central concept in Coetzee's ethics. First, he traces the root of unethical violation of the other to power imbalance. The characters' eyes in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, standing for gaze and identity, serve as an allegory of power. Coetzee

¹⁶ "The Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1980s", Forward to Freedom (website), accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.aamarchives.org/history/1980s.html>.

¹⁷ "The Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1990s", Forward to Freedom (website), accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.aamarchives.org/history/1990s.html>.

¹⁸ "President F.W. de Klerk Announces Whites-only Referendum Results," South African History Online (website), March 13, 2012. <https://sahistory.org.za/dated-event/president-fw-de-klerk-announces-whites-only-referendum-results>

contrasts Colonel Joll's eyes with those of the barbarian girl to highlight the asymmetrical dynamics of colonial power. Joll, a torturer, withholds his intentions, emotions, and thoughts in his eyes behind the dark glasses: "I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them."¹⁹ Under his gaze, a subject "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication."²⁰ Those glasses restrict information flow at one end while facilitating it at the other, demonstrating a non-reciprocal nature in their relationship: "'Does no one move you?'; and with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me."²¹ On the contrary, from the barbarian girl's perspective, her eyes are irrevocably impaired as a result of his torture: "When I look straight there is nothing, there is —' (she rubs the air in front of her like someone cleaning a window). 'A blur,' I say. 'There is a blur. But I can see out of the sides of my eyes.'"²² The damage to her central vision signifies the expulsion of the natives from the centre to the margin of the body politic. They become outsiders, excluded from the vision of their reality. This obstruction of the natives' vision renders them more vulnerable to oppression and violation, further perpetuating the vicious circle of power inequality. Despite the impaired vision, she can still feel the weight of the

¹⁹ J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Penguin Books, 1982), 1.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, "'Panopticism' from 'Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.'" *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25594995>

²¹ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 44.

²² Coetzee, 29.

colonial gaze constantly placed upon her: “Her face has the look of something that knows itself watched.”²³ Although she cannot see, she learns to feel and sense the threat in her surroundings.

Coetzee presents power dynamics as a result of the face-to-face encounter with the other, whose alterity challenges one’s power and the constant desire to grasp, comprehend, and possess. Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, defines the term ‘alterity’ as “the heterogeneity of the other”²⁴ that defies assimilation and totalisation, which can be read as a manifestation of power. Ethics of the other is the cornerstone of Levinas’s philosophy, which he claims to be the first philosophy that is pre-intentional and pre-reflective.²⁵ The face of the other, full of life and vividness, instantly calls one’s freedom into question and asks for an immense duty and responsibility that precedes rationalisation, which he calls ethics. The moral urgency arises from the instantaneous experience of the other’s face not filtered or mediated via intellect – “a primordial mode.”²⁶ He confronts the traditional system of philosophy built upon conceptualisation and universalisation: “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of the being.”²⁷ This philosophy, which perceives the world through mechanisms of representation, constantly views reality in terms of a subject-object relationship, where the subject absorbs and dissolves the object

²³ Coetzee, 34.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 36.

²⁵ Bettina Bergo, & Emmanuel Levinas, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published on July 23, 2006; last modified on July 13, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=levinas>.

²⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.

²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

in concepts. The alterity in the face of the other disrupts the subject that constantly attempts to assimilate the world into itself by processes of neutralisation and totalisation:

But theory also designates comprehension [intelligence] – the logos of being – that is, a way of approaching the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes. [...]. This mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being [...]. This third term may appear as a concept thought. Then the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought.²⁸

Levinas's ethics is rooted in the concreteness of being that can only be construed through the other, stressing the intersubjective instead of objective nature of reality. Intersubjectivity is the condition for understanding reality. The existence of others is necessary to establish, confirm, and correct the norms: "Thus the constitution of the Other in my sphere of ownness must bring with it not merely the sense of another consciousness, but the sense of the normative, of standards against which the validity of my experiences can be judged."²⁹ The other is essential to comprehend the very notion of sameness. Levinas also argues that "we witness death only in the death of the other"³⁰ – the other teaches us the truth of mortality.

He emphasises the tremendous teaching value that the other can offer, which can transcend one to infinity in his philosophy: "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to

²⁸ Levinas, 42.

²⁹ Steven Crowell, "Why Is Ethics First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context: Why Is Ethics First Philosophy?", *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (September 2015): 574, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2012.00550.x>

³⁰ Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas"

have an idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught.”³¹ By welcoming the other, one surpasses the boundaries of a self-enclosed world and faces radical differences that overflow one’s intellectual capacity to comprehend and hence, broaden one’s horizon to infinity.

As an interpretation of Levinas’s philosophy, the oppression of one group over another takes root in the pride and fear of a self-contained world, a culture or a nation that seeks comfort in encompassing and assimilating others. It is because resemblance and homogeneity provide a sense of safety and comfort, while the alterity of others threatens and causes insecurity. Alterity challenges one’s conviction and beliefs formed by prejudice and dogmatism, rather than truth: “How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid?”³² Oppression means to erase or refuse to recognise the face of the other whose differences go beyond one’s comprehension. It stems from the discomfort of not knowing and the fact that this otherness is unknowable. Levinas stresses the ethical significance of accepting the other’s alterity in its fullness, acknowledging their otherness as sacred and impenetrable. Respect for others does not come from one’s knowledge of them, but despite the very lack of this knowledge. The other is an irreducible entity that escapes the capture of one’s intellect: “When simply known, thematised, the substance no longer is ‘according to itself’”³³ *Dusklands* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* represent an allegorical

³¹ Levinas, 51.

³² Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 51.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

journey into otherness that is speculated, misunderstood, violated, distorted and eventually destroyed.

The oppression of the other first manifests itself in physical violation, which is the focal point in Coetzee's description: "A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man's hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks. 'It makes them meek as lambs.'"³⁴ Coetzee's language of description on detailed violation of the body calls into an encounter with the other's existence in blood and flesh, highlighting the sacred nature of destroyed human lives. Crying bodies critically oppose abstract ideology in the name of which lives are sacrificed. In *Dusklands*, Coetzee illustrates the appalling atrocities committed in the Vietnam War with graphic descriptions of rapes and tortures delivered through the obsessed voice of Eugene Dawn, a fanatic expert in mythography who works on the Vietnam Project's propaganda. He justifies the erasure of the other with uncompromised, obscene physical violence by the belief that sacrifices and sufferings are necessary to attain paradise, turning sufferings of burnt, torn, severed bodies into a mere allegory: "I am neat and polite, but I am the man of the future paradise. Before paradise comes purgatory."³⁵ Coetzee reveals the danger of abstract myths, metaphors that lead people to commit violence against the other, not by desensitising them to reality, but by inspiring them with a belief in an absolute, ultimate goodness that retrospectively transcends and justifies their acts. Moral detachment does not stem from a lack of conscience, but from a conscience immersed in ideology yet detached from reality. Dawn insists on accelerating the war and annihilating Vietnam into dusklands so that victory and peace can eventually dawn on his people. Dawn's perverse perception of the other in

³⁴ Coetzee, 103

³⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (Penguin Books, 1982), 27

one extreme leads to the opposite extreme in his actions. His dehumanisation of the Vietnamese people takes root from an initial idealisation later betrayed by the reality of war. He is frustrated by the realisation that his enemies are not some powerful foreign gods, as mythicised in his imagination, but mere mortal beings. Waking up from his Quixotic dream, he faces a reality without a monster or a hero, only dead bodies:

We landed on the shores of Vietnam clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality. [...] But like everything else they withered before us. We bathed them in seas of fire, praying for the miracle. In the heart of the flame their bodies glowed with heavenly light; in our ears their voices rang; but when the fire died they were only ash. We lined them up in ditches. If they had walked toward us singing through the bullets we would have knelt and worshipped; but the bullets knocked them over and they died as we had feared. We cut their flesh open, we reached into their dying bodies, tearing out their livers, hoping to be washed in their blood; but they screamed and gushed like our most negligible phantoms.³⁶

Coetzee juxtaposes the fragile corporeality of human existence against abstract ideology, ironically exposing the futility of war and its detachment from the essence of life.

A more subtle, yet equally potent form of oppression is the attempt to distort and impose narratives onto the other. Nietzsche's philosophy detects the danger of power in shaping and determining the ethical discourse about the other, which is, in turn, used to justify its own power in a self-perpetuating manner. His understanding of ethics is entrenched in the "hermeneutics of suspicion", questioning the traditional moral system that is proven to be primarily determined by the power of the privileged class throughout history: "Understood according to the good/bad pattern, the idea of goodness originated in social class privilege: the good were first understood to be those of the higher social order, but then

³⁶ Coetzee, *Dusklands*, 17-18

eventually the idea of goodness was “internalized”—i.e., transferred from social class itself to traits of character and other personal excellences that were typically associated with the privileged caste.”³⁷ And later on, this good/bad pattern evolves into a new concept of evil, transformed into “moralistic condemnation of those enemies.”³⁸ The changes in the connotations of moral terms indicate that ethics is not objective, but rather a discourse constantly invented, reshaped, and utilised to accommodate the political agenda of those in power. They attempt to distort the other's narrative through physical violence, such as torture or coercion, to reshape and convert the other to their truth, exemplified by Colonel Joll. He asserts that truth cannot emerge by itself without the exertion of power and production of pain as its result: “First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.’ Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.”³⁹

The effort to impose a particular narrative on the other can be prominently observed in the relationship between the protagonist, a magistrate of the Empire, and the barbarian girl. He offers her refuge and charity in exchange for a narrative. Exploitation disguised as patronage is one of the recurrent themes in Coetzee’s works. She is viewed not as an individual but as a barbarian victimised by the tortures of Colonel Joll. The Magistrate attempts to force open her initial wound and subjects her to his investigation. Her body becomes a text like

³⁷ R. Lanier Anderson, “Friedrich Nietzsche”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published March 17, 2017; last modified on January 15, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=nietzsche>.

³⁸ Anderson, “Friedrich Nietzsche”

³⁹ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 5

many ancient writings he excavates in the Empire and laboriously dissects: “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her.”⁴⁰ In response, her existence defies, baffles him with her utterly foreign and enigmatic nature – a blankness that refuses any form of interpretation: “But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. [...] how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!”⁴¹ He diminishes her by treating her as a source of information to be analysed, decoded, and interpreted, a mystery to be solved, rather than an ordinary human being: “So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her.”⁴² The “net of meaning” symbolises the colonial discourse that captures and gives meaning to those subjugated, depriving them of autonomy.

This theme reemerges in *Life and Times of Michael K.*, in which K. views himself as a mere gardener who happens to stumble through history, experience war camps, lose his mother, and feed the local guerilla group: “It struck him too that his story was paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge. Or else he simply did not know how to tell a story, how to keep interest alive.”⁴³ On the other hand, others view life as made up of intentions, meaningful decisions, and purposes; they attempt to elicit a life story from him with events of significance: “You’ve got a story to tell and we

⁴⁰ Coetzee, 31

⁴¹ Coetzee, 43

⁴² Coetzee, 81

⁴³ J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K.* (Penguin Books, 1985), 176

want to hear it. Start anywhere. Tell us about your mother. Tell us about your father. Tell us your views on life.”⁴⁴ However, he does not have a coherent and truthful life story to tell since events happen to him as they are, without interpretation or the need for a narrative that forces its way into his existence. Narrative requires power to assert a specific type of truth, which K. does not have and refuses to have. Coetzee offers a critical treatment of others, viewing them as complex individuals rather than simplifying and reducing them to stories and events happening to them. As Marais pointed out, Coetzee problematises the ethical rhetoric of bestowing voice upon the other, speaking for/on behalf of marginalised people as a moral obligation of those in power: “Coetzee's fictional project should not be understood in purely political terms as an attempt to 'give voice' to the other, but rather in ethical terms as a refusal to do so”⁴⁵

Coetzee also explores the self-destructive nature of colonialism, demonstrating how the violation of the other is inflicted back onto oneself. Subjecting himself to the gaze of the barbarian girl, the Magistrate understands that he is the other to her as much as she is to him. The destruction of her central vision casts its reverse effect back to the coloniser, blurring his own image in her gaze: “When she does not look at me, I am a grey form moving about unpredictably on the periphery of her vision. When she looks at me, I am a blur, a voice, a smell, a centre of energy that one day falls asleep washing her feet and the next day feeds her bean stew and the next day – she does not know.”⁴⁶ He is pushed from the centre and

⁴⁴ Coetzee, *Michael K.*, 140

⁴⁵ Mike Marais, “Writing with Eyes Shut: Ethics, Politics, and the Problem of the Other in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee,” *English in Africa* 25, no. 1 (May 1998): 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40238856>.

⁴⁶ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 29

falls into the periphery of the barbarian girl's vision. The subject's wound becomes the mirror of the master's image. He attains self-awareness by viewing himself from her perspective, recognising and acknowledging their equality: "More ordinary than I like to think, she may have ways of finding me ordinary too"⁴⁷ In *Dusklands*, Coetzee exposes how Western civilisation constructs and legitimises its power by presenting itself as a dawn of enlightenment on so-called inferior cultures. However, America's bombardment of Vietnam, Europeans' massacre of indigenous people in South Africa, ironically and paradoxically, thrust these other cultures into darkness and turned them into dusklands. The colonial and imperial mentality requires the darkness of the other against which a professed superior culture asserts its light. And once the darkness cannot be found in the first place, it is engendered.

Coetzee underscores the idea of mutual definition in the colonial power dynamic. The coloniser is equally subjected to the gaze of the colonised since one requires the other to validate its existence. In *Dusklands*, Dawn articulates a desperation for recognition from the Vietnamese people deeply seated in American violence and perversion. The truth revealed at the end of the story about Dawn as a product of war, a child born out of war tragedies, represents perpetrators of war, literally and metaphorically, as wounded, insecure children not knowing how to communicate with the world properly. They seek connection, love, admiration, and respect through the only 'language' they know, the language of weapons:

Why could they not accept us? We could have loved them: our hatred for them grew only out of broken hopes. We brought them our pitiable selves, trembling on the edge of inexistence, and asked only that they acknowledge us. We brought with us weapons, the gun and its

⁴⁷ Coetzee, 56

metaphors, the only copulas we knew of between ourselves and our objects. From this tragic ignorance we sought deliverance.⁴⁸

Coetzee likens the relationship between the coloniser and colonised to a mirror or a mirage: “‘Are they reflections of us, is this a trick of the light?’ I wonder. We cannot close the gap. How long have they been dogging us? Or do they think we are dogging them?”⁴⁹ The projection of evil onto the other points to the evil within oneself. Coetzee criticises the “black flower of civilization”⁵⁰ that projects its own evil on the barbarians against whom they complacently measure their illusion of goodness and superiority:

It always pained me in the old days to see these people fall victim to the guile of shopkeepers, exchanging their goods for trinkets, lying drunk in the gutter, and confirming thereby the settlers’ litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid. Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian, virtues, and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization⁵¹

The barbarians, like Godot, never come, yet their absent presence is vital to feed into the Empire’s quixotic fantasy. The barbarians serve as the shadow of the Empire, a projection of its own fears and insecurities deeply rooted in its power. By attacking the barbarians, it in fact defends against itself, like a snake devouring its own tail. The story’s ending reverberates a scepticism towards civilisation, questioning the identity of the barbarians: “every civilization that accepts being—with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies—merits the name ‘barbarian’.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Coetzee, *Dusklands*, 17

⁴⁹ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 68

⁵⁰ Coetzee, 79

⁵¹ Coetzee, 38

⁵² Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas”

1.3 The Guilt of Complicity

Power can be comprehended as an ego's urge to impose itself onto others and encompass them into its self-enclosed world. Coetzee shows that both the coloniser and the colonised, the oppressor and the oppressed, are equally imprisoned by the power structure, like the Magistrate, who realises his entrapment and complicity in the iniquities committed by the Empire. Coetzee describes the guilt of complicity and the psychological mechanism of its development as a sign of ethical crisis. The Magistrate's consciousness functions as a voice of conscience, drawing the novel to a focused examination of ethics. His entanglement in the Empire's power structure places him in an ambivalent position, both as a perpetrator and a victim, an outsider and an insider, simultaneously in the centre and on the periphery. Introspection on one's involvement in the suffering of others is an indicator of conscience that characterises Coetzee's ethics, for which the Nobel prize was awarded to him: "[He] in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider"⁵³ He opens up a liminal space of ethics that fosters connection and empathy with others. He confronts the brutal nature of colonisation and provides a critique of power structures in general.

Coetzee perceives guilt as a reflective emotion that resists power as it compels the subject to step outside and reflect on itself as an object. Guilt indicates concern for the other and the ability to perceive oneself as the other. This idea emphasises the fundamental role of the other, which establishes the I in a relative position with the world, allowing it to perceive itself in the third person. The feeling of guilt reinforces self-consciousness, linking it to the

⁵³ The Nobel Prize, "Nobel Prize in Literature 2003", <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/summary/>

notion of conscience, defined as “a faculty that judges what is good and what is bad” (c1165), “a person’s inner feelings, thoughts, and desires” (12th century), “a person’s awareness of his or her own mood and actions”⁵⁴ (1762).

Coetzee highlights the connection between conscience and consciousness, emotion and intellect, ethics and critical thinking. Emotions such as guilt and sympathy arise from the capacity to think about the other. The guilt of complicity prompts the Magistrate to examine the system he inhabits and sacrifice his self-interests. Initially, his stance is to carry out his duties and keep a distance as a complete outsider, neither hunting for the barbarians nor saving them: “I did not mean to get embroiled in this. I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire.”⁵⁵ He deliberately shuts down his senses and acclimatises them to the pain inflicted on others:

Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing. At every moment that evening as I go about my business, I am aware of what might be happening, and my ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain...the noise of life, the noise that all these souls make on a warm summer evening, does not cease because somewhere someone is crying. (At a certain point I begin to plead my own cause)⁵⁶

Coetzee questions how far one can push moral boundaries, adjust his conscience, and eventually grow accustomed to the pain of others. The expression “tuned to” effectively describes moral erosion as a gradual process of adjustment to the pain of others, which over time

⁵⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “conscience,” accessed September 14, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/conscience_n?tl=true&tab=etymology

⁵⁵ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 8

⁵⁶ Coetzee, 5

becomes a tune, a kind of music that blends in and harmonises with the noise of life. A degraded conscience, as he points out, does not stem from an emotional deficit but from the fear of knowledge and a lack of critical thinking. In fear of specific emotions and thoughts, the Magistrate consciously stifles his conscience and suppresses his knowledge of the surroundings. He shows that ethical judgment is a deliberate choice that entails personal responsibility. Thus, conscience is a state of self-consciousness that is constantly on guard, not against an apparent radical evil, but against incremental moral compromises that weaken one's moral compass. Coetzee approaches moral compromise with caution, showing how once the ethical boundaries are crossed, people can unknowingly further descend into the realm of evil without turning back, exemplified by Colonel Joll, who plunges himself into the art of torture: "Looking at him I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden?"⁵⁷

Coetzee criticises the power system that incentivises people to compromise for the sake of following commands, turning them into mechanical beings of duty that are devoid of critical thoughts and emotions. This idea resonates with Hannah Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil."⁵⁸ This term comes from her experience at the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the most prominent figures of the SS, whom she expected to find the depth of a radical evil. However, she is struck by how ordinary he is, leading her to conclude that his villainy comes from intellectual shallowness rather than a mysterious depth of evil, as Amos Elon

⁵⁷ Coetzee, 12

⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Books, 2006)

interprets it: “Evil comes from the failure to think. It defies thought for as soon as thought tries to engage itself with evil and examine the premises and principles from which it originates, it is frustrated because it finds nothing there. That is the banality of evil.”⁵⁹

However, the Magistrate’s urge to know the truth saves him from becoming someone like Eichmann, Colonel Joll or the young Warrant Officer, “the kind of man who moves his body like a machine.”⁶⁰ His moral awakening occurs when he is determined to know what happened in Joll’s torture sessions: “But alas, I did not ride away: for a while I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary where the tools are kept, then in the night I took a lantern and went to see for myself.”⁶¹ Taking a bite into the fruit of knowledge, he can no longer rest in the Empire’s paradise of ignorance. This knowledge renders him restless and troubles his conscience: “I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering. I ought never to have taken my lantern to see what was going on in the hut by the granary. On the other hand, there was no way, once I had picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again.”⁶² This event marks a turning point in the character’s development, prompting him to question his role in the Empire and his implied responsibility.

On the one hand, his relationship with the barbarian girl is a form of oppression. On the other hand, it can also be seen as an act of repentance and an effort to redeem himself from his complicity with the Empire: “I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make

⁵⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, xiv

⁶⁰ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 77

⁶¹ Coetzee, 9

⁶² Coetzee, 21

reparation: I will not deny this decent impulse, however mixed with more questionable motives: there must always be a place for penance and reparation.”⁶³ His choice to protect and return her to her tribe turns him into the enemy of the Empire, leading to his downfall. However, in the moment he is captured, he experiences a euphoric freedom from the oppressive regime he serves: “I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man”⁶⁴ As a part of the Empire, he has never been a free man but always confined within its power structure and ideology. He has always been simultaneously an oppressor and an oppressed. His sympathy with the barbarians brings him closer to the realisation of their similar positions as subjects of the Empire’s power.

The other becomes the source of his ethical awakening, urging him to reassess the power system he serves. His guilt of complicity comes from a heightened awareness that prompts him to challenge those in authority and observe those marginalised. The Magistrate reflects Coetzee’s position in South Africa, echoing the undercurrent of collective guilt and expiation echoing in his works.

1.4 Embodied Ethics

Coetzee’s writing talent lies in his capacity to translate the abstraction of his philosophical investigations into a concrete description of reality grounded in materialism, using a language heavily rooted in physical bodies. He constructs a bridge between abstract ideas and

⁶³ Coetzee, 81

⁶⁴ Coetzee, 78

their physical manifestations. Embodied ethics accentuates the bodily existence and experience as the foundation and condition of life. Levinas contemplates the profound influence of the other's body that precedes intellectual reflection: "We have always already been impacted by the expression (or face) of another. Yet, because the immediacy of this impact resists conceptualisation, we tend to overlook the force the other's address has on us (as facial expression or words). The other's facial expression or bodily posture affects me before I begin to reflect on it."⁶⁵ Similarly, Coetzee foregrounds the primacy of the other's bodily presence.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate's conscience is awakened by sensory absorptions of the others' sufferings: the cry of a baby in prison that wails one day and stops the next, the scream of those tortured in the granary, the stench of bodies pressed against one another in incarceration. He presents the body as the locus of life from which empathy arises. Empathy and acknowledgement of others originate from the urge to relate to how it feels or what it means to inhabit and move through life in their body, with the weight of their experience. The barbarian girl's body stands as a counterpoint to the Magistrate's intellectualism. Transcending the cultural differences, they are bonded physically through the foot-washing ritual, grounding his ethics in physicality and giving his prose a universal touch:

I begin to wash her. She raises her feet for me in turn. I knead and massage the lax toes through the soft milky soap. Soon my eyes close, my head droops. It is rapture, of a kind. When I have washed her feet, I begin to wash her legs. For this she has to stand in the basin and lean on my shoulder. My hands run up and down her legs from ankle to knee, back and forth, squeezing, stroking, moulding.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Bergo

⁶⁶ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 30

His language evokes a harmonious rhythm of their physical closeness, like music, that directly unites them. Unlike verbal language tainted by cultural differences, their bodily interaction is unmediated. Listening to the workings of the barbarian girl's body reminds him that it is a temple of wonders, an emblem of sacred existence that is constantly in a magical process of healing: "So I lie beside this healthy young body while it knits itself in sleep into ever sturdier health, working in silence even at the points of irremediable damage, the eyes, the feet, to be whole again."⁶⁷ A close encounter with the other's body makes conceiving the humiliation and dehumanisation of it impossible; the awareness that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you"⁶⁸ calls forth a sense of responsibility to the other. The physical touch with another being precedes generalization, abstraction, and allegory: "Levinas speaks of the face of the other who is 'widow, orphan, or stranger.' While these are biblical figures, he argues that we encounter them concretely even before transcribing them into religious allegory."⁶⁹

Unlike the Magistrate, Eugene Dawn deliberately rejects being in touch with the physical reality of the other: "When I joined the Project, I was offered a familiarization tour of Vietnam. I refused, and was permitted to refuse. We creative people are allowed our whims."⁷⁰ He denies the face of the other in favour of his theorisation of it. As a scholar, he asserts that the truth about Vietnam, like the truth of any subject, can be apprehended through hours of meticulous academic study. Yet this intellectualism is merely a veneer for his

⁶⁷ Coetzee, 33

⁶⁸ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>.

⁶⁹ Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas"

⁷⁰ Coetzee, *Dusklands*, 14

perverved fantasies. His mind recoils from the reality of Vietnam, lest it deprive him of the pleasure of freely mythicising and thematising this exotic other. He consciously admits that: “Watching this film I applaud myself for having kept away from the physical Vietnam: the insolence of the people, the filth and flies and no doubt stench, the eyes of prisoners, whom I would no doubt have had to face, watching the camera with naive curiosity, too unconscious to see it as ruler of their destiny.”⁷¹ At the beginning, Coetzee subtly describes how early signs of Dawn’s madness are manifested in his relationship with human bodies: “During the past year relations between my own and other human bodies have changed”⁷²

Embodied ethics against ideology is also illuminated by the contrast between the Lacanian symbolic father representing ideological authority and the physical, biological father, who is tortured and taken away from children by the allegorical father. In *Dusklands*, Dawn centres his propaganda on “programming the father-voice”⁷³, reconstructing and supplanting the father figure in the Vietnamese mythology with a Western counter-myth of a Hydran autocrat father figure. Outside the Vietnam project, Dawn himself is a father who fails his marriage and abducts his son from his wife. Engrossed in his world of abstract ideas and more familiar with the symbolic father, he cannot provide the comforting presence of a birth father to his child. He only knows a father of power, not one of love. Dawn pleads his cause by asserting that his violence stems from an inherent love: “Is there not some incandescent

⁷¹ Coetzee, 16

⁷² Coetzee, 10

⁷³ Coetzee, 22

fervour of speech that will convince the child that however abrupt or tyrannical I seem, my motives are pure?”⁷⁴

During his mental breakdown, he stabs his own son, which the psychiatrists attribute to his obsession with violence in the Vietnam War. While he attempts to rationalise his actions, the end of the story suggests a deeper cause in his troubled fatherless childhood. He is left alone with his mother who “is spreading her vampire wings for the night”⁷⁵ while his “father is away being a soldier.”⁷⁶ Eugene is also a victim of war, which robs him of his biological father and turns him into a child of war, of an allegorical father whom he worships and whose authority he reinforces, thus repeating this vicious circle. His moral detachment and adherence to the allegorical father of war come from the absence of a birth father’s physical presence in real life. Coetzee employs the writing of embodied ethics to confront the immorality of war, which reduces human beings to abstract, negligible forces in history, rather than viewing them as fathers and children.

Similarly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, he contrasts the Magistrate, who wishes to become a father figure to the barbarian girl, with her biological father, who is tortured and killed by Colonel Joll. By contrasting these two father figures, Coetzee sharply confronts colonial paternalism and accentuates the irrevocable damage caused by the Empire:

I gave the girl my protection, offering in my equivocal way to be her father. But I came too late, after she had ceased to believe in fathers. [...] They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them (on a day I spent occupied with the ledgers in my office). Thereafter she was no longer fully human,

⁷⁴ Coetzee, 38

⁷⁵ Coetzee, 49

⁷⁶ Coetzee, 49

sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her.⁷⁷

While demonstrating how the body can foster ethical emotions such as empathy and how withdrawal from it leads to moral indifference, Coetzee also explores how one's moral ideals are challenged by physical limitations. An ethical stance requires commitment through lived experience, demanding both mental and physical endurance. After a fleeting elation of freedom, it dawns on the Magistrate that he must confront the brutal reality of imprisonment to uphold his ethics. He recognises that to sustain moral ideals, one must first live, and to live means to occupy a body, face its vulnerability and needs:

But my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself.⁷⁸

Coetzee's vivid description of his coercive state underscores the impact of the body on the mind. The Magistrate realises how his ideas of justice and freedom are proportionate to the cramped space he inhabits. The carceral space oppresses and radically transforms his mind: "But now I begin to comprehend how rudimentary freedom is. What freedom has been left to me? The freedom to eat or go hungry; to keep my silence or gabble to myself or beat on the door or scream. If I was the object of an injustice, a minor injustice, when they locked me in here, I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy."⁷⁹ However, the physical torture does not lead him to reject truth or ethics but transforms his idea

⁷⁷ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 80-81

⁷⁸ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 115.

⁷⁹ Coetzee, 85.

of it. His ethical commitment until the end is not to an ideal of justice but to the truth of suffering that he himself lives through as a victim of the Empire. He understands injustice not as an idea but as a reality his body experiences. The body is an ethics against ideology. Ideology is a danger not only for the oppressed but also for those who serve the systemic oppression of others. Ideology dehumanises others by reducing them to abstract categories, stripping away their complex individuality and depriving them of relatability and empathy. Hannah Arendt's idea of "banality of evil" as "a failure to think" can be further interpreted as the inability to think on the concrete level - a blindness caused by the abstract erasure of the face of the other. They are totalised and reduced to their race, nationality, ethnicity, or gender.

This resistance to ideology is a predominant theme in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Michael neither participates in war nor protests it in conventional ways; he suffers from it yet rejects any ideology related to it. Instead, he champions the sacred nature of life whose eternity transcends the transitory sufferings of wars and deaths. Sustaining himself on an abandoned land, K. forms a profound connection with the earth, living like plants and animals and uniting with a nature untouched by history: "'The pigs don't know there is a war on,' he said. 'The pineapples don't know there is a war on. Food keeps growing.'"⁸⁰ The pilgrimage journey to bury his mother's ashes in her hometown entirely transforms his life. He becomes a hunter-gatherer and a gardener whose life is centred on growing and living from the earth's abundance, which knows nothing of history. His ethics is to live, to exist

⁸⁰ Coetzee, *Michael K.*, 16

like “a worm [that] began to slither towards its hole”⁸¹, like “a termite boring its way through a rock”⁸², like “a snail without its shell.”⁸³ Coetzee's recurrent use of animal metaphors to describe K. serves two functions. On the one hand, he illustrates the dehumanisation of people's lives during the war. On the other hand, he contemplates a pristine state of existence not blemished by intellect and its tendency to divide and categorise. His existence is deeply grounded in the somatic experience: he spends his time labouring in the garden, but most often he sleeps, listens to his body's hunger and silence when he is awake. This way of living saves him from the “cauldron of history”⁸⁴: “Evading the peace and the war, skulking in the open where no one dreamed of looking, [he] has managed to live in the old way, drifting through time, observing the seasons, no more trying to change the course of history than a grain of sand does.”⁸⁵

Delving into the physicality of life, Coetzee meditates on the indifferent nature of objects that do not know of history. There is no difference between *kairos* and *chronos*, as all moments are equally valued. The moment that Felicity, a wartime nurse, sweeps the floor holds as much significance as wartime: “Unless I mistake her, Felicity does not think of herself as a castaway marooned in a pocket of time, the time of waiting, camp time, wartime. To her, time is as full as it has ever been, even the time of washing sheets.”⁸⁶ This yearning to escape from history also resonates at the end of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the

⁸¹ Coetzee, 107

⁸² Coetzee, 66

⁸³ Coetzee, 112

⁸⁴ Coetzee, 151

⁸⁵ Coetzee, 152

⁸⁶ Coetzee, 158

Magistrate expresses the frustration towards history that divides, disrupts, and transforms time:

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history.⁸⁷

Coetzee's argument on history establishes a relationship between time and ethics. He suggests a notion of goodness as equivalent to living in time, neither rushing nor resisting its natural course. While tending his garden, K. does not mind his lost perception of time. He does not mind resting without anything to do while waiting for his fruit to ripen. By contrast, Eve's impatience to obtain the fruit of knowledge thrusts her into history. Felix Ó Murchadha analyses Manoussakis's idea on the temporal aspect of sin:

Creation initiates change and movement, time and history, and, for Manoussakis, central to why this is, is the problem of evil. He argues that the fall and creation need to be thought as contemporaneous (sin at the beginning of time). Sin arises from a kind of impatience: "the first man sinned insofar as he wanted to achieve without waiting what was promised to him anyway but in due time."⁸⁸

Similarly, with its impatience and uncontrollable will to power, the Empire forces itself on time by trying to mark and change it, hastening or impeding its flow with rises and falls. K.'s garden, located at his long-forgotten mother's birthplace on his pilgrimage journey, symbolises a longing to return to Eden, to a state of timeless and ahistorical innocence.

⁸⁷ Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 133

⁸⁸ Felix Ó Murchadha, review of *The Ethics of Time: A Phenomenology and Hermeneutics of Change*, by John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, July 9, 2017, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-ethics-of-time-a-phenomenology-and-hermeneutics-of-change/>

2 Ethics and Writing

This chapter analyses the ethical issues in the act of writing, considering both the productive and receptive processes in the author-reader relationship. It examines writing and ethics in relation to other aspects within a larger complex scheme of aesthetics, arts, language and power. Investigating the ethics of writing in Coetzee's oeuvre opens a gateway to approach Coetzee as a writer and his implied moral stance on his lifelong profession. The analysis is focused on one of Coetzee's notably experimental novels, *Foe*, in which he reflects on power and art through the medium of language. The allusions to other novels, such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K.*, investigated in the previous chapter, are also employed to elucidate the continuation of thematic development in Coetzee's works and the coherence of this thesis.

2.1 Ethics, Language, and Power

Coetzee writes, dissects, and reflects on the writing process itself as well as the nature of language in relation to reality. Language is essential for understanding ethics, as it is the foundation, means, and condition for establishing relationships, society, and culture, which are deeply intertwined with ethics and power. Language is a conceptual bridge to approach reality, and a writer, who exercises the art of writing, not only manipulates language as a means and material to describe, reveal thoughts and emotions about reality, but also constructs and shapes it. As an author, Coetzee provides his critique of language as a means of oppression that divides people and obstructs accurate understanding of reality.

Language is inevitably infused with culture, politics, and ideology. Words are not merely words; they carry power and manifest a will to influence reality and others. When uttered or written, they direct specific intentions and attempt to achieve particular purposes. According to the speech act theory established by Searle and Austin, beyond the literal meaning of an utterance (locutionary act), the speaker deliberately performs an action to affect the listener in a certain way, for example, it can be a request, command, or promise (illocutionary act). The effects of this act (perlocutionary act) render the changes in the listener's behaviours in a given situation.⁸⁹ In *Foe*, Coetzee demonstrates colonisation and oppression achieved through the manipulation of language, symbolised by Friday's mutilated tongue, which represents both the physical and metaphorical loss of voice. Friday cannot articulate his thoughts and emotions as well as assert his will over others, as they do over him, leading to a power imbalance. He is enslaved by the language of his masters, namely Cruso, Susan, and Foe. Friday reveals his knowledge of the language to readers only through his response to the commands of his masters. His actions confirm the perlocutionary effect of the master's language:

One evening, as I was preparing our supper, my hands being full, I turned to Friday and said, "Bring more wood, Friday." Friday heard me, I could have sworn, but he did not stir. So I said the word "Wood" again, indicating the fire, upon which he stood up, but did no more. Then Cruso spoke. "Firewood, Friday," he said; and Friday went off and fetched wood from the woodpile. [...]. "*Firewood* is the word I have taught him," said Cruso. "*Wood* he does not know."⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Tore Nordenstam, "On Austin's Theory of Speech-Acts," *Mind* 75, no. 297 (1966): 141.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2251720>.

⁹⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (Penguin Books, 1987), 21

Cruso teaches Friday a minimal stock of words that are necessary for him to command and for Friday to accommodate his needs. Friday is given only the language of his master's desires:

“How many words of English does Friday know?” I ask
“As many as he needs,” replied Cruso. “This is not England; we have no need of a great stock of words”⁹¹

Compared to Cruso, who merely focuses on the practical and functional aspects of language for the sake of exchanging needs and commands, Susan Barton exercises language as a form of colonisation in a more covert and romanticised manner:

“You speak as if language were one of the banes of life, like money or the pox,” said I. “Yet would it not have lightened your solitude had Friday been master of English? You and he might have experienced, all these years, the pleasures of conversation you might have brought home to him some of the blessings of civilisation and made him a better man. What benefit is there in a life of silence?”⁹²

Coetzee creates in *Foe* two forms of oppression through the figures of an authoritative, dominant coloniser (explicit form) and a lenient one (covert form), whose control is disguised in the colonial patronage as a subtler form of exerting power over the other, exemplified by Susan in *Foe*: “I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will.”⁹³

⁹¹ Coetzee, *Foe*, 21

⁹² Coetzee, 22

⁹³ Coetzee, 60

Despite the good intentions rooted in the relationships between Susan and Friday, the Magistrate and the barbarian girl, they represent the problematic attitude of colonial patronage. These characters, whether knowingly or unknowingly, impose their narratives on those they support, trying to shape them into the idealised image of a victim or a “noble savage” and claiming to know what is best for them. Coetzee is concerned of two moral extremes, one dehumanising and the other idealising the other. Canepari-Labib expresses this idea through his analysis of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands*:

In spite of their conscious contempt, though, both protagonists have a secret, romantic and mythicised vision of the natives, by whom they would like to be accepted and recognised, and with whom they would like to live in what they perceive as an Eden. [...]. Consequently, recognising that the natives were not the semi-gods they were seeking, they were not the "noble savages" they had hoped for, both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee blame them for their loss of Paradise and, now driven merely by a hatred grown "out of broken hopes" (17), they long to kill them, in so far as it is only through a purgatory of violence that, from the protagonists' perverse perspective, Paradise might be re-attained.⁹⁴

Languages and narratives of those in power are facilitated by depriving the other of their abilities to perceive or communicate about a shared reality, as seen in Friday's loss of speech or the barbarian girl's blindness. The imposition of narratives enabled by the subjects' disability in the first place further diminishes the other, reinforcing a vicious circle of power imbalance. Friday's mutilated tongue is an ideal condition for the masters' narratives, ensuring their permanent control due to his complete helplessness: “We deplore the barbarism of whoever maimed him, yet have we, his later masters, not reason to be secretly grateful?

⁹⁴ Michela Canepari-Labib, “Language and Identity in the Narrative of J. M. Coetzee,” *English in Africa* 27, no. 1 (May 2000): 114

For as long as he is dumb, we can tell ourselves his desires are dark to us, and continue to use him as we wish.”⁹⁵ The voice of resistance is impossible; there are no dialogues, but merely the tyrannical monologue of those in power. Furthermore, one in authority devalues the legitimacy of the other’s speech to gradually drown out and eventually completely strip the other’s voice, as exemplified by Foe’s appropriation of Susan’s story. While Friday’s story is entirely written/rewritten at the outset by his masters, Susan’s story is gradually overwritten by Foe.

Language is an efficacious medium not only to foist ideologies of the dominant group onto the other, but also to shape the identities of the oppressed. They are not able to speak for themselves but are spoken about/for by their masters on their behalf. Friday emerges without the capability of language, like a blank paper over which the coloniser poises his pen with ideas of a complete fresh start, like a pristine land without history: “Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken”⁹⁶ Lacan’s works delineate the fundamental role of language in constructing identity and determining one’s perception of reality. He claims that a child steps into the world through a threshold of recognition of itself as an object: “In other words, the ego, despite conscious senses to the contrary, is not a locus of autonomous agency, the seat of a free, true ‘I’ determining its own fate. This portrait of the ego-as-object is at the heart of Lacan’s lifelong critical polemics against Anglo-American ego psychology.”⁹⁷ The

⁹⁵ Coetzee, *Foe*, 148

⁹⁶ Coetzee, 23

⁹⁷ Adrian Johnston, “Jacques Lacan,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published on April 2, 2013; last modified on May 15, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/lacan/>.

formation of an alienated ego results from the child's recognition of its unified self in the mirror stage as the other, which is facilitated by discourses of people around him, for example, his caregivers, who prompt him to perceive himself in the third person:

This means that the imagistic nucleus of the ego is suffused from the get-go with the destinal "discourse of the other"—in this case, fateful significations (in Lacanese, "unary traits") coming from caregivers' narratives articulated simultaneously along with their encouragements to the child to recognize him/her-self in the mirror ("What a handsome boy!," "What a beautiful girl!," "You're going to grow up to be big and strong, just like your daddy," etc.)⁹⁸

The external force of other voices gradually breaks through the self, disintegrating its wholeness into fictional fragments, described by Coetzee as 'cracks' and 'chinks:

We yield to a stranger's embrace or give ourselves to the waves; for the blink of an eyelid our vigilance relaxes; we are asleep; and when we awake, we have lost the direction of our lives. What are these blinks of an eyelid, against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness? Might they not be the cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices, speak in our lives.⁹⁹

And after the mirror stage, the child becomes distanced from the true nature of reality (the Real), as the world as they perceive it is mediated by fictional stories about themselves and others (the Imaginary), as well as by culture and language (the Symbolic). The fall into the symbolic order is one of the central concepts in Lacan's philosophy, accentuating the state of being trapped in language, which resonates deeply with Coetzee's works. This idea erodes the notion of free will and the illusion of a self-determined ego, as Susan Barton voices her scepticism and despair: "Do we of necessity become puppets in a story whose

⁹⁸ Johnston, "Jacques Lacan".

⁹⁹ Coetzee, *Foe*, 30

end is invisible to us, and towards which we are marched like condemned felons? [...] Have we cause to believe that the lives it is given us to live proceed with any more design than these whimsical adventures?"¹⁰⁰ Coetzee describes the ego as an object that is constantly reshaped by others, especially by those in authority, signified by "the law of the father" in Lacan's theory or Freud's superego. The father figure can be the colonisers in the colonial discourse or men in the patriarchal system. Applying these concepts to read Foe, Friday's existence, as shown to readers, is a fictional character purely made by the words of his masters, who are the authors of his life story:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself? — how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him.¹⁰¹

Friday is created out of the words of his masters and also imprisoned by them. Not only his identity, but his entire freedom, rests upon the master's language. Susan frees Friday by having "written a deed granting Friday his freedom and signed it in Cruso's name."¹⁰² This poignant and ironic scene of Friday's 'liberation' paradoxically highlights his essential lack of freedom since he has no autonomy to determine it himself. Susan's words in Cruso's name bestow this freedom onto him. She does not wonder whether he needs or wants it, and even if she asked him, he could not articulate his idea of what freedom means. The written

¹⁰⁰ Coetzee, *Foe*, 135

¹⁰¹ Coetzee, 121-122

¹⁰² Coetzee, 99

document, as an independence declaration, is “sewn into a little bag and hung on a cord around Friday’s neck”¹⁰³, evoking an image of a chain made of letters tightening around his neck, underscoring the illusory state of Friday’s freedom.

Being an author of Friday’s story, Susan, in turn, has her story written by Foe, her intended author at first, and later her lover and master. However, Foe’s distortion of her story thrusts her into an identity crisis. She questions whether one’s identity is a mere image intricately woven by numerous threads of others’ narratives, not dissimilar to a fictional character, whether such illusion is her blood-and-flesh existence, whose every fibre of being is made out of nothing but words: “if I were a mere receptacle ready to accommodate whatever story is stuffed in me, surely you would dismiss me, surely you would say to yourself, ‘This is no woman but a house of words, hollow, without substance’?”¹⁰⁴ Her despair conveys the destructive and violent nature of language that can strip away one’s existential substantiality, eventually rendering one to fade away as if one did not exist in the first place (Coetzee intertextually plays with the complete absence of Susan Barton in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*).

Coetzee creates a multi-layered power dynamic in which each character, arguably except for Friday, is both a master and a slave, of language and of others. While imposing narratives on Friday, Susan Barton’s narrative is neutralised or depreciated by Foe’s, which is in turn challenged by an unknown narrator in the final chapter. Coetzee’s experimental narrative structure formally mirrors the novel’s complex power system. He demonstrates a

¹⁰³ Coetzee, 99

¹⁰⁴ Coetzee, 130-131

symbiotic relationship between narrative and power: power is a structure of narratives and vice versa.

Coetzee's formal experiment effectively unites form and content. The novel's form functions as an allegory of the content it attempts to address. Coetzee explores the semantic nuances of the word '*author*', delving into a semantic network of various related concepts, including author, authorship, authority, and authoritarianism. On the most literal level, the story revolves around Susan Barton's struggle for authorship, which drives the plot forward. On a metaphorical level, it is an allegory of struggles for power, particularly under the light of colonial and gendered readings. On the textual level, the subjugation of the coloniser over the colonised, men over women, mirrors the tyranny of a traditionally depicted author over the text and readers.

Michael Marais offers a fruitful reading by extending its analytical scope from the relationship between the novel's characters to the author-reader-text triadic dynamic, elucidating 'interpretative authoritarianism' from the novel's structure. From his analysis, both the writer and the reader exert their power over the text, subjugating it under their interpretation. Both writing and reading processes place the text in a subject-object relationship.¹⁰⁵ The writer, by partaking in the story on equal terms with their characters, "subverts the subject-object relationship, the two coalesce, and author and text merge into a single situation."¹⁰⁶ The author's descent into the text signifies "a renunciation of authority."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Michael Marais, "Interpretive Authoritarianism: Reading/Colonizing Coetzee's *Foe*," *English in Africa* 16, no. 1 (1989): 15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40238630>

¹⁰⁶ Marais, "Interpretive Authoritarianism": 14-15

¹⁰⁷ Marais, 15

Likewise, the reader subjects the text to his consciousness and overwrites it with his interpretation. Thereby, Coetzee criticises a hegemonic form of reading that leads to the “danger of colonising the text by accusing it of not telling the story they [readers] want it to tell”¹⁰⁸

Susan’s struggle against Foe’s story also represents a battle against ‘interpretive authoritarianism’. Foe is first the reader of her story and later becomes an author who rewrites her story. He intends to write his interpretation of her story, as Culler said: “To speak of the meaning of a work, is to tell a story of reading”¹⁰⁹ Susan represents a feminist figure, who insists on having her story told according to her truth, not Foe’s. Susan demands the control of her life story to sustain her existential substantiality and regain her autonomy against Foe’s subjugation of her voice: “I am not, do you see, one of those thieves or highwaymen of yours who gabble a confession and are then whipped off to Tyburn and eternal silence, leaving you to make of their stories whatever you fancy. It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be father to my story.”¹¹⁰ However, her choice of the word “father” shows the limits of her feminist ideals drawn by language. Hereby, Coetzee touches on the crucial idea that true freedom is the freedom from language infused with ideology. He raises the question of how women can write their stories in a patriarchal society written by/in men’s language. This idea is constituted in Derrida’s term of “phallogocentrism”, defined as “a structure or style of thought, speech, or writing (often considered as typical of traditional western philosophy, culture, or

¹⁰⁸ Marais, 15

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Cornell University Press, 1986): 35.

¹¹⁰ Coetzee, 123

literature), deconstructed as expressing male attitudes and reinforcing male dominance; phallogentrism implicitly communicated in or through language.”¹¹¹ For example, Barton questions the term ‘muse’, which implies the secondary and supportive role of women as an inspiration for the creative writing, which is destined to be solely for men:

Do you know the story of the Muse, Mr. Foe? The Muse is a woman, a goddess, who visits poets in the night and begets stories upon them. [...] When I wrote my memoir for you, and saw how like the island it was, under my pen, dull and vacant and without life, I wished that there were such a being as a man-Muse, a youthful god who visited authoresses in the night and made their pens flow.¹¹²

However, she asserts herself as the true creator whose ideas generate the story, reversing their roles. While she is the father, the begetter, Foe is the mother, who delivers the story: “But now I know better. The Muse is both goddess and begetter. I was intended not to be the mother of my story, but to beget it. It is not I who am the intended, but you.”¹¹³ Her statement simultaneously points out the flaws in the language system while expressing her inability to escape it. Coetzee’s dealing with intellectual coercion rooted in language echoes ideas of many writers, such as Beckett, and most notably, Wittgenstein, with his famous saying in the *Tractatus*: “the limits of language mean the limits of my world.”¹¹⁴ Language draws the limits on what can and cannot be thought, hence, imprisoning people in the ideology of which it is made.

¹¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “phallogentrism,” accessed September 22, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/phallogentrism_n?tl=true&tab=meaning_and_use.

¹¹² Coetzee, *Foe*, 126

¹¹³ Coetzee, 126

¹¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Odgen (Project Gutenberg, 2010): 74, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf>.

Language is not innocent but ethically complicit in violence and oppression by unconsciously instilling ideologies of the powers that be. As opposed to Freud who views the unconscious as a chaotic, pristine realm, Lacan's unconscious is already determined and structured: "the unconscious as 'structured like a language'"¹¹⁵ Since the mediation through language is unconscious, it fosters an illusion of freedom, hindering people's escape from a prison they are unaware of. This covert form of subjugation is termed by Gramsci as "hegemony", power gained by consensus among subaltern group: "hegemonic rule, characterised by the predominance of consensus over coercion, represents in broad terms a balance, an equilibrium between 'political society' and 'civil society'"¹¹⁶ Ideologies of the privileged class is sustained through institutions in which information is delivered in the ruling class's language.

Coetzee's critical perspective on language calls forth a nostalgic return to an Edenic state before language, which is God's punishment for mankind's arrogance. In a conversation on "The Languages of Art", Coetzee brings up the allegory of the tower of Babel, stressing the divorce from reality caused by languages:

It [the tower of Babel] stands for the confusion of languages and nations. [...]. We speak different languages as a punishment. If we had remained humble before God, we would all speak the same language and that language would presumably be the original language, the language of Eden in which all things had their natural names, their true names. After Babylon, things lost their true names. [...]. All of these words, English and Spanish, by God's standards, are false words; words that have lost

¹¹⁵ Johnston, "Jacques Lacan"

¹¹⁶ Valeriano Ramos, Jr., "The Concepts of Ideology, Hegemony, and Organic Intellectuals in Gramsci's Marxism," first published in *Theoretical Review* No. 27 (March-April 1982), *Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line*: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/tr-gramsci.htm>.

contact with the reality of the world. Between the word and what it points to there is now an empty space.¹¹⁷

This critique of language leads to an ethics of silence, the reflection on the space between words said and words unsaid, recurrently expressed in many of Coetzee's works. On the one hand, K., Friday, and the barbarian girl's silence can be interpreted as a fully subjugated state. On the other hand, it resists power by leaving the master's narrative incomplete and invalidated: "On the island I accepted that I should never learn how Friday lost his tongue [...] But what we can accept in life we cannot accept in history. To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is not better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret is the tongue he has lost!"¹¹⁸ The indeterminacy of silence negates and challenges the coloniser's confidence in his truth. While these gaps can be omitted or bridged by fictions, as Foe does, Susan is haunted by the knowledge of a hidden truth that renders the story forever incomplete, leaving only a gestalt illusion of a whole story. Meanwhile, the story is deprived of its life and substantiality, like a shadowless entity: "if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue"¹¹⁹

While Friday's silence represents an inaccessible knowledge of truth regardless of his intention, K. and the barbarian girl's silences are deliberate, indicating a withheld truth. They resist the interpretation and thematisation of their existence. They assert themselves as substantial beings in silence, refraining from stories to justify their existence. And for K., words

¹¹⁷ J.M. Coetzee, "'The Languages of Art' by John Coetzee and Mariana Dimópulos," July 31, 2023, YouTube video, 13:17 – 15:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDddAcY8A-E>.

¹¹⁸ Coetzee, *Foe*, 67

¹¹⁹ Coetzee, 117

are always insufficient since they distort and diminish truth: there are always ineffable gaps of understanding: “Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong.”¹²⁰ Any linguistic attempt to surmount the unspeakable is nonsensical, as Wittgenstein said: “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. [...]. The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense”¹²¹ Meanwhile, Susan Barton’s silence is an intended selection of which part of the story should be told and which should not, hence, asserting her agency and authority over her story. She contrasts the nature between her silence and Friday’s: “Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born. Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence.”¹²² Susan’s silence signifies an underlying existence of the unsaid that covertly structures the said; one foregrounds the other and vice versa. *Foe* can be read as an interpretation of silence, a hypothetical unsaid in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Coetzee’s reading of Defoe is the reading of a lack, viewing Crusoe’s story as a subtraction of an original whole, as a censored and oppressed discourse: “In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not

¹²⁰ Coetzee, *Michael K.*, 110

¹²¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 23

¹²² Coetzee, *Foe*, 121-122

come to the heart of the story”¹²³ Coetzee provides an ethical and political reading of Defoe’s text, viewing it as a result of a hypothetical censorship and suppression of truth by Defoe’s authorial voice of power, which reflects the colonial ideology of his milieu. Reading and suspecting in texts a present absence or an absent presence of an oppressed voice reflects on both the power structure of the text itself and that of the social context in which it is written, linking writing to power and ethics.

Coetzee describes the profound presence of silence across many of his novels. Friday’s presence is entirely signified by his silence: “when I lived in your house I would sometimes lie awake upstairs listening to the pulse of blood in my ears and to the silence from Friday below, a silence that rose up the stairway like smoke, like a welling of black smoke. Before long I could not breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke”¹²⁴ A similar linguistic pattern is observed in *Life and Times of Michael K.*, in which Coetzee describes silence as a sound, or as a substance that occupies space and time in such expressions: “miles and miles of silence”¹²⁵, “the silence reverberated from horizon to horizon”¹²⁶, “a silence so dense that I heard it as ringing in my ears”¹²⁷ Coetzee’s emphasis on the unsaid in relation to the said, which tends to be prioritised, relates to Derrida’s deconstruction of dichotomies in which one extreme is considered superior to the other. Coetzee, like Derrida, also tackles “logocentrism”, the priority of speech over the

¹²³ Coetzee, *Foe*, 141

¹²⁴ Coetzee, 118

¹²⁵ Coetzee, *Michael K.*, 47

¹²⁶ Coetzee, 106

¹²⁷ Coetzee, 140

written form. He shows that one form constitutes and supplements the aspect of the other. On the one hand, the silence in writing constitutes the unspoken speech in our mind: “Letters are the mirror of words. Even when we seem to write in silence, our writing is the manifest of a speech spoken within ourselves or to ourselves.”¹²⁸ On the other hand, writing can also arise from absolute silence, as Coetzee suggests that this is how the world may begin. He reverses the order by questioning its origin from God’s speech, proposing the idea that the world is instead written in the depths of silence:

Be attentive to yourself as you write and you will mark there are times when the words form themselves on the paper *de novo*, as the Romans used to say, out of the deepest of inner silences. We are accustomed to believe that our world was created by God speaking the Word; but I ask, may it not rather be that he wrote it, wrote a Word so long we have yet to come to the end of it? May it not be that God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it?¹²⁹

Coetzee perceives silence as a foundation of truth that is either suppressed, reduced, distorted by various forms of power or simply ineffable due to the limits of language.

2.2 Ethics and Aesthetics

Coetzee also examines the notion of truth in relation to aesthetics, examining the complex dynamics between ethics and arts, truth and beauty. While ethics deals with what is right, aesthetics concerns what is beautiful or pleasant. An ethical perspective of truth points to a factual, faithful presentation of reality. In contrast, truth in an aesthetic view tends transcend reality in search of beauty that arises from sensory and emotional satisfaction or intellectual

¹²⁸ Coetzee, *Foe*, 142

¹²⁹ Coetzee, 142-143

stimulation of meaning-making. One comes from the realm of rationality, the other from emotion and cognition. The differences between Susan's and Foe's treatment of storytelling reflect the conflict in these two approaches. Coetzee challenges the boundaries between reality and fiction constituted by the interplay of fact, truth, and beauty. Fact is defined as a neutral and objective presentation of events while truth points to the nature and significance supposedly underlying these events. Truth is often viewed as objective, a constant value or a fixed meaning that has always existed under the surface of facts to be discovered. However, the discourse of truth is problematic since it frequently contains words that carry the connotation of an interior realm, such as "behind", "underlying", or "deep down". However, truth as an act of evaluation and ascription of meaning, which lies on top of fact instead of behind it, puts its objectivity into question. It is argued that truth comes from outside instead of inside facts. It is imposed on facts externally in the meaning-making process, acquiring its status of objectivity through the cultural or political consensus. Problematic truths are prominently seen in disputes on historical facts, as Salman Rushdie points out:

During the British Empire, the military revolt of 1857 was known as the Indian Mutiny, and, because a mutiny is a rebellion against the proper authorities, that name, and therefore the meaning of that fact, placed the "mutinying" Indians in the wrong. Indian historians today refer to this event as the Indian Uprising, which makes it an entirely different sort of fact, which means a different thing. The past is constantly revised according to the attitudes of the present.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Salman Rushdie, "Truth, Lies, and Literature", *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/truth-lies-and-literature>

Susan Barton faces a dilemma in her writing process when realising that truth is something more than a sum of facts, and that her faithful account of facts does not amount to truth, which can only be achieved by Foe's touch of fiction:

For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth (I see that clearly, we need not pretend it is otherwise). To tell the truth in all its substance you must have quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through; and then the knack of seeing waves when there are fields before your eyes and of feeling the tropic sun when it is cold; and at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it fades. I have none of these, while you have all.¹³¹

She requires adherence to facts, yet truth is a composition of polished and filtered facts – an emotive truth. This substance of truth blurs the demarcation between reality and fiction. Not only is fiction able to tell the truth but, to put it the other way, fiction lies in the very essence of truth. It is because the truth of a story is not only the truth of events but the truth of the experience of these events, the truth of the perception of reality mediated through emotions and intellect: “Without desire how is it possible to make a story? It was an island of sloth, despite the terracing. I ask myself what past historians of the castaway state have done – whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies”¹³² Subjective perception structures, shapes, and gives meaning to a series of causes and effects that are otherwise considered random, chaotic, and meaningless. Furthermore, the adherence to mere facts is unattainable because an event is made up of an infinite series of facts that can again be broken down into an endless series of causes and effects. And ethical evaluation is viable only in the account

¹³¹ Coetzee, *Foe*, 52

¹³² Coetzee, 88

of truth, not mere facts. Wittgenstein demonstrates this idea in his “Lecture on Ethics” with his example of a “world-book” that contains “all relative judgments of value and all true scientific propositions and in fact all true propositions that can be made”¹³³ He questions how a murder can be morally judged if the description of the event constitutes merely facts: “If for instance in our world-book we read the description of a murder with all its details physical and psychological, the mere description of these facts will contain nothing which we could call an *ethical* proposition. The murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone.”¹³⁴

Viewing truth as an arrangement and evaluation of facts, truth is composed in the manner a work of art is. Giving an account of an event is a process of selecting facts, choosing which are considered essential, which serve one’s intentions best, and which are pleasurable to hear or tell, turning it into a matter of aesthetics: “The storyteller [...] must divine which episodes of history hold promise of fullness and tease from them their hidden meanings, braiding these together as one braid a rope”¹³⁵

The beginning and structure of Susan’s life story led to her dispute with Foe. The teleological difference results in two divergent trajectories of the story. From Foe’s perspective, the story should be zoomed out and placed in a larger narrative structure of a mother searching for her daughter. The island is merely a footstep on a longer path to a higher purpose:

¹³³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics”, *The Philosophical Review* 74, no.1 (January 1965): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2183526>

¹³⁴ Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics”: 6

¹³⁵ Coetzee, 88-89

We therefore have five parts in all: the loss of the daughter; the quest for the daughter in Brazil; abandonment of the quest, and the adventure of the island; assumption of the quest by the daughter; and reunion of the daughter with her mother. It is thus that we make up a book: loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end. As to novelty, this is lent by the island episode - which is properly the second part of the middle - and by the reversal in which the daughter takes up the quest abandoned by her mother.¹³⁶

By contrast, from Susan's perspective, she chooses to zoom in and focus solely on the island not as an episode or chapter but a whole story in itself. And other events in her life are there to justify and supplement the island story:

The story I desire to be known by is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right. It commences with my being cast away there and concludes with the death of Cruso and the return of Friday and myself to England, full of new hope. Within this larger story are inset the stories of how I came to be marooned (told by myself to Cruso) and of Cruso's shipwreck and early years on the island (told by Cruso to myself), as well as the story of Friday, which is properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative.¹³⁷

What underlies truth is in fact a gaze that claims to have the correct perception of reality. If truth is an authoritative evaluation of facts, and values are inevitably measured by the parameters of beauty and pleasure, then truth is also necessarily linked to aesthetics. This thread of logic leads to an argument that truth is the taste of those in power: "More is at stake in the history you write, I will admit, for it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers too. Will you not bear it in mind, however, that my life is drearily suspended till your writing is done"¹³⁸ Susan trusts that Foe can elevate her truth with his taste and power

¹³⁶ Coetzee, 117

¹³⁷ Coetzee, 121

¹³⁸ Coetzee, 63

as a male writer. The novel provides a critical insight into the complexity of truth in personal stories and history as an interplay of power, ethics, and aesthetics.

3 Ethics and Animals

This chapter examines Coetzee's attempt to incorporate animals into his investigation of ethics, broadening its scope to include non-human species and challenging the anthropocentric approach to morality. *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*, both of which were published in 1999, are subject to textual analysis in this chapter. The former, which was delivered as lectures at Princeton University in 1997-1998, was written in a philosophical and essayistic style. The latter was his first and only novel that directly deals with the complex social tensions in the process of reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa, marking it as one of the central works in his oeuvre.

3.1 Animals, Reason, Otherness

Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist in *The Lives of Animals*, starts her lecture with a linguistic dissection of the Holocaust discourse, showcasing how animal similes and metaphors are employed to signify the utmost level of dehumanisation. She emphasises that it is precisely because this dehumanisation is done by humans towards other humans, members of their own species, that the Holocaust becomes one of the most appalling war crimes. Its greatest crime is to violate the sacred nature of human rights, shaking to the core a conviction in humanity that has been standing for centuries:

‘They went like sheep to the slaughter.’ ‘They died like animals.’ ‘The Nazi butchers killed them.’ Denunciation of the camps reverberates so fully with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse that it is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison I am

about to make. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals.¹³⁹

While the crime degrades both the human perpetrators and the victims, this argument fails to take into account the degradation of animals, whose placement at the base of the anthropocentric hierarchy nullifies the very possibility of speaking about their debasement. While such comparisons implicitly acknowledge the brutality committed to animals, they simultaneously reject their ethical significance. The fact that the same cruelty is negligible when done to animals, while it is unacceptable and hideous when done to humans, raises the question of where and how the moral line is drawn. Costello traces the dismissal of animals in the ethical discourse to a so-called “natural order” established by the humanist Western tradition and the Enlightenment rationalism. She discusses Plato, Descartes, and Kant as prominent figures in the long-standing Western tradition that champions human superiority as unique creatures who possess reason, in contrast to so-called inferior animals regarded as soulless machines trapped in their bodies. The common assumption is that animals follow natural laws mindlessly and revolve their lives solely around struggling for survival due to their lack of conceptual reasoning and free will.

These arguments raise two essential points for discussion here. The first argument shows that morality reflects a spectrum of power and otherness in which dominant groups are allowed to subjugate and even commit atrocities against other groups, provided they are perceived to be sufficiently inferior to have their moral significance disregarded. The logic humans use to justify their treatment of animals is also evident in the darkest episodes of human history. Colonisation, slavery, and war crimes are often committed on the basis that

¹³⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 20

one group is radically other and that its otherness is inherently inferior. Othering is typically associated with the dehumanisation of the other, involving the comparison and ascription of primitive, animalistic qualities to their culture in contrast to the more “civilised” society of the dominant group. Once the other group is duly animalised and stereotyped, a corresponding treatment as done to animals follows as a logical conclusion. Costello gives an example of how the brutal treatment of animals is replicated and applied to other humans: “Chicago showed us the way; it was from the Chicago stockyards that the Nazis learned how to process bodies.”¹⁴⁰ A familiar, yet noteworthy linguistic expression is that the other is “stripped of their human face”, one that cries for an urgent sense of sympathy and responsibility in Levinas’s ethics. However, it somehow implies that once the “human face” is denied or unrecognised, any atrocity becomes conceivable. Calina Ciobanu tackles this problem in her paper “Coetzee’s Posthumanist Ethics”, in which she recognises Levinas’s influence on Coetzee’s works while drawing attention to the limitations of his notion of ‘the face of the other’: “If we ever attribute faces to dogs, Levinas implies, it would be because they remind us of ourselves. This reasoning, coupled with his declaration that the prototype for the ethical treatment of animals is always already human ethics, signals the implausibility of responding to animals as such on their own terms.”¹⁴¹

Coetzee addresses a similar problem in animal ethics, demonstrating how concerns for the improved treatment of animals stem from anthropocentric motives that benefit human

¹⁴⁰ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 53

¹⁴¹ Calina Ciobanu, “COETZEE’S POSTHUMANIST ETHICS,” *Modern Fiction and Politics* 58, no.4 (Winter 2012): 676, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287306>

society. Costello alludes to “Saint Thomas’s argument that, because man alone is made in the image of God and partakes in the being of God, how we treat animals is of no importance except insofar as being cruel to animals may accustom us to being cruel to men”¹⁴² Departing from that, Coetzee attempts to approach animal ethics in its true sense: an animal ethics for animals’ sake, without assimilating them into the humanist frameworks.

Reason, one of the cornerstones of humanist ethics, poses the second problem in the aforementioned arguments. Costello challenges reason with scepticism shared by Foucault and Nietzsche when questioning power. They critically expose the tautology of power: power justifies itself through knowledge whose truth is validated by its own prevailing power structures, thereby creating a self-reinforcing circle of knowledge and power that controls and shapes the societal system of values, including ethics. In the same light, Costello criticises the tautology of reason and human self-proclaimed supremacy as the possessors of reason:

For, seen from the outside, from a being who is alien to it, reason is simply a vast tautology. Of course, reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe—what else should it do? Dethrone itself? Reasoning systems, as systems of totality, do not have that power. If there were a position from which reason could attack and dethrone itself, reason would already have occupied that position; otherwise it would not be total.¹⁴³

Humans perceive and absorb the world into their self-enclosed, anthropocentric systems of knowledge, giving themselves the right to judge other species according to their subjective standards while asserting their supremacy over others as an objective truth. Costello shares

¹⁴² Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 22

¹⁴³ Coetzee, 25

her deep scepticism of reason, regarding it merely as “one tendency in human thought”, “a certain spectrum of human thinking”¹⁴⁴ that flourish in a “rather narrow self-regenerating intellectual tradition”¹⁴⁵ Supposing humans have found reason as a language to translate the universe so far effectively to a certain extent, they are still confined within that language, which filters and diminishes the world. Costello deconstructs and decentralises this anthropocentric model, suggesting the limits of human reasoning and equally positioning humans as one among other species.

She also appeals to the psychologist Köhler’s experiment on his chimpanzee Sultan, underscoring the fact that when people say animals cannot think, they mean that animals do not think in the same way humans do, which is supposedly the only proper way of thinking. In these experiments, without his knowledge of humans’ language, Sultan first had to figure out what exactly was being tested, and he could only do so by decoding “how the man’s mind works”¹⁴⁶:

Sultan knows: Now one is supposed to think. That is what the bananas up there are about. [...] But what must one think? One thinks: Why is he starving me? One thinks: What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? One thinks: Why does he not want these crates anymore? But none of these is the right thought. [...] The right thought to think is: How does one use the crates to reach the bananas?¹⁴⁷

He was forced to observe, learn, and adapt to the language of those who had separated him from his home and confined him to their space. There was no other way but to push his intellect to the limits to grasp and assimilate himself into a different mode of thinking, or

¹⁴⁴ Coetzee, 23

¹⁴⁵ Coetzee, 21

¹⁴⁶ Coetzee, 28

¹⁴⁷ Coetzee, 28

else he would be left to starve. Costello argues that such experiments do not elevate but, in reverse, lower Sultan from an intuitive to a pragmatic mode of being: “At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought. From the purity of speculation (Why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled toward lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get that?) and thus toward acceptance of himself as primarily an organism with an appetite that needs to be satisfied”¹⁴⁸ By designing such experiments that target animals’ survival needs, humans reconfirm their biased view of animals as beings limited to mere survival instincts and then use this perception to justify their superiority. As seen in other forms of oppression, such as colonisation, the dominant group first demeans the other and then uses their demeaned state as proof of its own prejudice to justify its further subjugation and exploitation.

As opposed to reason, Costello proposes embodied ethics as an alternative moral approach to animals, from which genuine empathy emerges. She accentuates the penetration into their somatic state, into how it feels to occupy the space with their body, rather than the external analysis of their behaviours that may lead to what they think. She challenges Descartes’s conviction in thoughts and mind-body dualism by referring to Spinoza’s notion of the “affects”, defined as “affections of the Body by which the Body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.”¹⁴⁹ Embodied ethics inclines towards a comprehensive mode of being, a united state of the body and the mind:

¹⁴⁸ Coetzee, 29

¹⁴⁹ Benedict de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: the Ethics and Other Works* (Princeton University Press, 1677): 153

To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes’s key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell.¹⁵⁰

And sympathy arises from the capability to imagine oneself into the life of another, being a dweller of a different body, of a different consciousness. It resonates with Bergsonian ethics, which emphasise an open morality that transcends the social obligations and survival priorities of one's own group, reinforced by closed morality. Open morality extends sympathy towards other individuals and societies. Imaginative sympathy is linked to Bergson's notion of a “creative emotion”, an “impetus of love”¹⁵¹ that lays the foundation for morality. Creative emotion frees people from social constraints and cultural prejudices, facilitating love and compassion towards the other. It allows individuals to act morally out of freedom, rather than out of Kantian obligations, guiding them with intuition and ‘*Élan vital*’¹⁵² — a force of life, rather than social and political forces.

3.2 Animals, Race, Gender

Coetzee furthers his investigation of otherness in *Disgrace*, characterised by the mellowness in his writing style. Coetzee's polemical portrayal of social conflicts parallels the colonial and gender dynamics with the human-animal relationship. He distils and perfects ideas seeded in previous works, fusing politics, arts, and animals in his project of ethics. The

¹⁵⁰ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 33

¹⁵¹ Lawlor, “Henri Bergson”

¹⁵² Lawlor, “Henri Bergson”

protagonist, Lurie, echoes the image of Foe, occupying a position of power as a white male intellectual at a university. The relationship with his daughter Lucie, who is subjected to political violence, echoes the dynamic of Dostoevsky and his son in *The Master of Petersburg*. His intersection of racial and gender dynamics in *Foe* also emerges in this novel. Among these footprints emerges a new subject, the animals, which are integrated into his constructed power structures for a comprehensive view of ethics.

First, he parallels the domination of men over women with that of men over animals. Coetzee uses animal metaphors to highlight the objectification of women. Being a professor of Romanticism, Lurie detaches himself from the reality of his sexual harassment of his female student, Melanie, glamorising it with an analogy between a fox and a rabbit and justifying his power abuse as natural domination: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck”¹⁵³ Women and animals are both subject to this language of objectification made evident throughout the novel, highlighting the undercurrents of ideology running deep in language that foster social and ethical norms. There are instances in which the linguistic similarities are apparent and deliberate, one echoing the other to accentuate this parallelism:

Why? Because a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it. [...] She does not own herself: Beauty does not own itself.¹⁵⁴ (description of Melanie)

¹⁵³ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (Secker & Warburg, 1999), 25

¹⁵⁴ Coetzee, 16

Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry.¹⁵⁵ (description of the sheep)

He shows how their values are both judged by the extent to which they can be exploited as resources for men's benefits, as well as their lack of control and power. This idea echoes Barton's critique of the muse figure, an allegory of women who fulfil men's fantasies. Lucie, his daughter, shares with him her deep concern for the objectification of animals: "They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things"¹⁵⁶

Animal images progressively populate his narratives, especially those of dogs, mirroring human violence that intersects the racial, colonial, and gender power dynamics. He also showcases the extreme extent to which animals are subjected to humans' use, not only physically but also culturally and ideologically. People use them as political weapons, ingraining them with human's racial discrimination and hatred and turning them into racist dogs that "are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man."¹⁵⁷ Romain Gary also efficiently employs this image in his novel *White Dog*, in which he reflects on the mutual victimhood shared by white dogs with both black and white people, as they are all ideologically chained in racial ideology and indoctrinated to hate through centuries. Looking at the helplessness of the white dog's incorrigible state, he expresses his compassion for dogs and humanity alike.

¹⁵⁵ Coetzee, 123

¹⁵⁶ Coetzee, 78

¹⁵⁷ Coetzee, 110

Coetzee reflects on the linguistic use of dogs as a symbol of dehumanisation and disgrace. Echoing K.'s death "like a dog"¹⁵⁸ in *The Trial*, Lurie and Lucy's humiliated and dehumanised state is characterised by their plunge into so-called dog lives. Lurie assists Bev's animal service as a dog-man, as Petrus ironically introduces himself at the beginning, while Lucie asserts to start her life over again "like a dog."¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, the rapists are also dehumanised through their acts, which Lucie compares to those of dogs: "They spur each other on. That's probably why they do it together. Like dogs in a pack."¹⁶⁰ Coetzee portrays a racial dynamic of mutual dehumanisation, both before and after the Apartheid, highlighting the present struggles of political reconciliation against the shadows of the past. In these relentless battles between humans, Coetzee captures the helpless gaze of dogs, whose suffering goes unnoticed due to the subjugation by all humans. Ironically, all humans are equal and united in front of dog, like in front of God, but not in their submission, but in their subjugation. They degrade dogs, ascribe this degraded state to them as their natural and inherent quality, and then use it as a symbolic insult, projecting upon each other the image of degradation they make themselves. Coetzee presents a complex, multi-layered power system in which humans are both the subjugated and the subjugators. Dogs, representing animals at the bottom of the power structure, are used to exhaustion, physically, linguistically, and culturally.

Lurie's trial and disgrace, like Josef K.'s, are also part of his journey in search of grace, whether morally or spiritually, which is reflected in the transformation of his relationship

¹⁵⁸ Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Schocken Books, 1956), 229

¹⁵⁹ Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 205

¹⁶⁰ Coetzee, 159

with animals, especially dogs. Initially, he asserts his view of human exceptionalism and suggests that kindness to animals should be viewed as a mercy, not as a moral obligation: “We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution.” However, a drastic change occurs after the attack, during which he witnesses the killings of dogs with their “blood and brain splatter[ing] the cage.”¹⁶¹ After the attack, his sympathy for a different species emerges due to shared suffering under a racially motivated attack inflicted by men of his own kind. He encounters the agony of their faces being shot in front of him, recognising in them the image of his own as the marginalised other. However, his sympathy for dogs at this moment remains anthropocentric, as it still stems from his ability to relate their suffering to his own. His animal ethics begins with his devotion to the service of a dog-man: he accompanies them before their euthanasia, carries their corpses, prevents their bones from being crushed and beaten by shovels before being delivered into the incinerator, ensuring that they die with dignity. Those are no longer done out of a sense of superiority, but out of a sympathy for other equal beings, with whom in silence he shares the disgrace of their existence – the suffering of desires, ageing, and death:

The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: because we are too *menny*. That is where he enters their lives. He may not be their saviour, the one for whom they are not too many, but he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves, once even Bev Shaw has washed her hands of them. A dog-

¹⁶¹ Coetzee, 95

man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man:
a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*.¹⁶²

At the beginning, the word ‘dog-man’ symbolically signifies his disgrace as a reversal of power relations: his failure in his relationship with women and his downfall within the political system, in which he exchanges positions with Petrus, who initially refers to himself as a “dog-man” – a servant of whites. The word ‘dog’ carries a secondary meaning to the head ‘man’, indicating a negative, demeaning connotation. Towards the end of the novel, the word gains a more positive, or at least neutral, sense. He is a “psychopomp”, a spirit that can be both good and evil, a *harijan*, the “untouchable” bottom caste, who comes to terms with his powerless and mortal self. The word ‘dog’ accompanies the word ‘man’ on an equal footing, signifying his shift away from the anthropocentric viewpoint. The change from interpreting “dog-man” as an endocentric compound noun to an appositional one symbolises Lurie's transformation. The linguistic transformation mirrors an ethical change, showcasing Coetzee's mastery of language.

Similarly, Lucie accepts her new life like a dog, not only in a dehumanised sense, but also in a subversive sense, challenging the current power structure and presumed human values of the constructed anthropocentric civilisation: “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”¹⁶³

¹⁶² Coetzee, 146

¹⁶³ Coetzee, 205

Starting over like a dog also means looking at the world through its eyes. Lurie's observation of the dogs' deaths puts into question his knowledge of them. The vivid fear rushing through their body, their knowing looks of the coming end speak to him a Levinasian "face of the other": "He is convinced the dogs know their time has come. [...] They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying [...]. On the table some snap wildly left and right, some whine plaintively; none will look straight at the needle in Bev's hand, which they somehow know is going to harm them terribly."¹⁶⁴

In the last chapter, he decides to live in a boarding house among the dogs and between them occurs a mutual assimilation: "he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog. Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows." His disgrace from human society ultimately leads him to a sense of grace, not as the opposite of disgrace, but as the very acceptance of the ultimate state of being the other among many. A new mode of being emerges in this new ethical relation that transcends culture, language, and power.

¹⁶⁴ Coetzee, 143

4 Ethics and the Ideal

Later in his writing career, Coetzee gradually inclines himself towards a more philosophical and experimental approach, both thematically and stylistically. This tendency culminates in his latest novels, the Jesus trilogy, densely packed with ideas that intersect ethics, ontology, religion, aesthetics and mathematics. The characters cross a river on a boat to a new city called Novilla, meaning “no-town”, “washed themselves clean”¹⁶⁵ of memories and “old attachments”¹⁶⁶ in the previous life to make a fresh start: “None of us has a past. We start anew here. We start with a blank slate, a virgin slate.”¹⁶⁷ The protagonists, Simón and David, are characterised by the existential state of thrownness. They are stranded at a camp called Belstar on their arrival, in ‘limbo’¹⁶⁸, where they are assigned new names in their passbooks before gradually learning Spanish and adapting to the customs of Novilla’s socialist state. People in this utopian/dystopian society work to the best of their ability while curbing their needs. The public buses are free; they are provided with basic diets made of bread and beans. Regarding lifestyle, most people abide by the law; they champion manual work while abstaining from sex and appetite. In other words, it represents an idealistic world, specifically on the model of the Platonic ideal, with various evident references to Plato’s philosophy. Coetzee’s characters emerge as anti-ideal figures who disrupt the social norms, pointing out the problematic aspects of the new world’s moral purity. Simón accompanies David, an allegorical figure of Jesus, who has lost his mother on the boat to Novilla. Simón later

¹⁶⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (Vintage Books, 2014), 24

¹⁶⁶ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 33

¹⁶⁷ Coetzee, 116

¹⁶⁸ Coetzee, 23

recognises Inés, a virgin, by instinct as David's true mother and hands him to her care. David's childhood showcased his struggles with the forgotten past and lost parents. David's aberrant way of thinking challenges the social norms and gravitates him towards characters symbolizing evil and temptation. Following David's journey, his experiences as a child in a new world raise ethical questions about "how one lives. And how one is to live."¹⁶⁹ This last chapter of the thesis will focus on the textual analysis of the first novel in the trilogy, *The Childhood of Jesus*, in which Coetzee deals particularly with the question of how to confront and compromise the ideal with reality.

To begin with, the world of the ideal is characterised by Coetzee's multi-layered allegory of the shadow. Firstly, it stands for Simón's mental residues of passions and physical desires in a previous life, from which he suffers: "I have no memories. But images still persist, shades of images. How that is I can't explain. Something deeper persists too, which I call the memory of having a memory."¹⁷⁰ The shadow indicates not only a substantial existence of a lost world or a lost world of a substantial existence, but also the connotation of its suppression in the new world. The suppressed history follows him like a phantom to this new world: "Well, I am not like you. I suffer from memories, or the shadows of memories. I know we are all supposed to be washed clean by the passage here, and it is true, I don't have a great repertoire to call on. But the shadows linger, nevertheless. That is what I suffer from. Except that I don't use the word suffer. I hold onto them, those shadows."¹⁷¹ Secondly, Simón's allegory of shadows simultaneously evokes and opposes Plato's allegory of the

¹⁶⁹ Coetzee, 65

¹⁷⁰ Coetzee, 116-117

¹⁷¹ Coetzee, 77

ideal. Plato illustrates his theory of Form, the absolute, transcendental image whose shadow is the physical reality merely viewed as an imperfect copy and illusory phenomenon. Therefore, to acquire proper knowledge of the world is to step by step escape the shadows of the illusory materialistic world to ascend to the ideal: “He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves.”¹⁷² Coetzee reverses this thought experiment by creating an intriguing situation in which a material reality in the previous life casts its shadow on the ideal world in the next life. He presents a descent, rather than an ascent, into the ideal – a process of filtering out particularities of reality to exist as an abstract, faint shadow, lacking weight and substance:

Things do not have their due weight here: that is what he would like, in the end, to say to Elena. The music we hear lacks weight. Our lovemaking lacks weight. The food we eat, our dreary diet of bread, lacks substance—lacks the substantiality of animal flesh, with all the gravity of bloodletting and sacrifice behind it. Our very words lack weight, these Spanish words that do not come from our heart.¹⁷³

Coetzee challenges and problematises Plato’s idealism through the allegory of the shadow, opposing the real and the ideal while unifying them. The interdependence between an entity and a shadow represents the complex interrelation between the real and the ideal. On the one hand, shadow frequently stands for an insubstantial existence. Such an expression as ‘living like a shadow’ evokes a negative connotation of a meaningless life without agency or purpose, living as a secondary imitation of something or someone else. However, on the other

¹⁷² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Project Gutenberg, 1998), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>.

¹⁷³ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 77

hand, shadow signifies the existence of an entity and verifies its substantiality. For example, shadowless characters depicted in literature are usually viewed as otherworldly, lacking soul and real existence. In other words, while shadow itself is insubstantial, it is essential to verify an entity's substantiality. Shadow both negates and affirms the existence of light and a real entity. It represents a complex space of interplay between light and darkness, the real and the ideal. Plato's idealism as the process of abstracting, reducing, and draining materialistic aspects can be visualised as a descent into fainter realms of shadows before eventually becoming a shadow itself – a concept. And Coetzee also points out the problematic representation of the ideal, relating to the problem of self-predication and infinite regression in Plato's theory of Form. The world outside the cave or Novilla is just one ideal world in an infinite chain of approaching the ideal: "What if, beyond the ideal chair, there is a yet more ideal chair, and so forth for ever and ever?"¹⁷⁴ He links this infinite regression of the ideal to the notion of reincarnation: "A bad infinity is like finding yourself in a dream within a dream within yet another dream, and so forth endlessly. Or finding yourself in a life that is only a prelude to another life which is only a prelude, etcetera."¹⁷⁵ Coetzee raises the problem of presenting a reality of the ideal. If one is reincarnated into a reality of the ideal, meaning to find oneself in another world of particular physical manifestations of the ideal, one also realises that this is not the ultimate ideal. One can perceive the ideal embodied in its imperfect physical form but to truly exist in a reality of the ideal is unattainable.

Coetzee contrasts materialism and idealism as two opposite approaches of reality. From the idealist viewpoint, the ideal precedes and begets its imperfect and inferior versions in

¹⁷⁴ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 146

¹⁷⁵ Coetzee, 297

reality. From the materialistic approach, physical reality precedes and frames one's understanding of it, laying stress on empirical experience. The ideal is attained later through mental meditation of the reality that exists in the first place. This stark contrast is showcased through the philosophical debate between Eugenio and Simón:

‘Has your teacher ever told you,’ says he, Simón, ‘about the man who, when asked how he knew a chair was a chair, gave the chair in question a kick and said, That, sir, is how I know?’
‘No,’ says Eugenio. ‘But that isn’t how you learn a chair is a chair. That is how you learn it is an object. The object of a kick.’¹⁷⁶

Tackling the overlap between ontology and ethics, Coetzee shows how idealism frames the morality of the Novilla’s denizens. Their view of physical world as illusory and inferior leads them to the Platonic ideal of asceticism and self-abnegation. Body is viewed as an obstacle to understanding reality as it is, the thing in itself, like a mirage shrouding the ideal. The ideal body is perceived in an isolated state, “the body as body”, not a body as an object of physical and emotional experience:

‘If you want to learn about the human body, wouldn’t a course in anatomy be better?’ he asks.
The boy disagrees. ‘Anatomy tells you only about the parts of the body. If you want to learn about the whole you need to take something like Life Drawing or Modelling.’
‘By the whole you mean...?’
‘I mean first the body as body, then later the body in its ideal form.’
‘Won’t ordinary experience teach you that? I mean, won’t spending a few nights with a woman teach you all you need to know about the body as body?’
The boy blushes and looks around for help. He curses himself. These stupid jokes of his!

¹⁷⁶ Coetzee, 145

‘As for the body in its ideal form,’ he presses on, ‘we will probably have to wait for the next life before we get to see that.’¹⁷⁷

Bodily needs are regarded as irrational forces that need taming. First, they abstain from satisfying their hunger: “Adapt to a moderate diet, I mean. Hunger is like a dog in your belly: the more you feed it, the more it demands.”¹⁷⁸ Second, they refrain from passion and sexual urges:

‘But don’t you sometimes find yourself missing plain old physical contact?’ [...]

‘Do I miss it? I am not the kind of person who suffers from memories, Simón. What you speak of seems very far away. And—if by sleeping with someone you mean sex—quite strange too. A strange thing to be preoccupied with.’¹⁷⁹

Plato subsumes these two physical needs into the category of the appetites (*epithumêtikon*)¹⁸⁰

Elena perceives Simón’s “storm of passions” as irrational feelings rooted in an illusion of a lack: “This endless dissatisfaction, this yearning for the something-more that is missing, is a way of thinking we are well rid of, in my opinion. Nothing is missing. The nothing that you think is missing is an illusion. You are living by an illusion”¹⁸¹ Her viewpoint coincides with Plato’s and Spinoza’s critique on passion as a confused state: “emotion or passion of the soul is a confused idea. For we have shown that the mind is only passive, in so far as it

¹⁷⁷ Coetzee, 146

¹⁷⁸ Coetzee, 33

¹⁷⁹ Coetzee, 69

¹⁸⁰ Julian Dutra, “What did Socrates, Plato, Aristotle Think About Wisdom?”, The University of Chicago, June 12, 2022, <https://wisdomcenter.uchicago.edu/news/wisdom-news/what-did-socrates-plato-and-aristotle-think-about-wisdom>

¹⁸¹ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 75

has inadequate or confused ideas.”¹⁸² Simón’s attachment to passions in the previous life is considered a contaminated state as opposed to the “washed clean” and “perfected”¹⁸³ state of other Novilla’s denizens. In terms of emotions, they refrain themselves from anger and pride, Plato’s second category called the spirited (*thumoeides*)¹⁸⁴ part in his tripartite theory of the soul. This is characterised by Daga, whose actions aim to achieve pride and honour by slashing out anger on those who deny his worth: “Like all of us, señor Daga thought he was special; but he didn’t keep the thought to himself. He wanted to be singled out. He wanted to be recognized.”¹⁸⁵ Novilla’s denizens champion peace and comradeship, viewing everyone as equally important, demoting individualism while promoting social welfare, benevolence, “warmth and goodwill”¹⁸⁶. Coetzee raises his ethical concern of totalization and thematisation of the other in what comes across as a good intention. He problematises the notion of benevolence and goodwill in *The Childhood of Jesus* as he does charity in *Life and Times of Michael K.* or the colonial patronage in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Simón voices his struggle as the battle between the universal and the personal, abstract ideal and particular reality:

Is he hoping to seduce her, because in memories that are not entirely lost to him seducing one another is something that men and women do? Is he insisting on the primacy of the personal (desire, love) over the universal (goodwill, benevolence)? And why is he continually asking himself questions instead of just living, like everyone else? Is it all part of a

¹⁸² Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (Project Gutenberg, 2009), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm>.

¹⁸³ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 68

¹⁸⁴ Dutra, “What did Socrates, Plato, Aristotle Think About Wisdom?”

¹⁸⁵ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 59

¹⁸⁶ Coetzee, 66

far too tardy transition from the old and comfortable (the personal) to the new and unsettling (the universal)?¹⁸⁷

The emotional and physical detachment leads to Simón's alienation in the new world. He opposes an engineered social order that bonds people by artificial rules and laws instead of authentic connections on both physical and emotional level: "Benevolence, I must tell you, is what we keep encountering here. Everyone wishes us well, everyone is ready to be kind to us. We are positively borne along on a cloud of goodwill. But it all remains a bit abstract. Can goodwill by itself satisfy our needs? Is it not in our nature to crave something more tangible?"¹⁸⁸ Simón views universal goodwill through the lens of totalization and abstraction of the other, undermining the other's alterity.

While Simón criticises emotional sterility, other characters disrupt the ideal world in other aspects. For example, Daga and Dmitri, in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus* respectively, represent divergent and anti-social behaviourism. They demonstrate complex and multi-faceted personality as opposed to the two-dimensional denizens in the new world. They come across as both charismatic and antagonistic, complicating ethical judgement by their ethical ambivalence. The incongruence between natural idiosyncrasies, imperfections in human nature and the new world's rigid universal standard negates its viability. Daga's psychopathic and Dmitri's passion-driven crimes draw David's attraction because of their inexplicable nature. Evil is presented as both banal and transcendent, as something that evades full understanding, particularly through the lens of rationality. David's distinct way of viewing life challenges the tyranny of rationality in the new world and

¹⁸⁷ Coetzee, 68

¹⁸⁸ Coetzee, 67

questions the border between sanity and madness, reality and imagination. He refuses to conform to the symbolic order which he is thrown into by immersing himself into fantasies and creating his private language, to which Simón attributes David's alienation from the real world. Simón explains to David that language is impossible without collective consensus, an idea shared by both Derrida and Wittgenstein: "Language has to mean something to me as well as to you, otherwise it doesn't count as language"¹⁸⁹ Living with others through the means of language is to submit oneself to this symbolic order. Simón likens reading to living, fiction to real life in the sense that both are bounded by social conventions: "You can look at the page and move your lips and make up stories in your head, but that is not reading. For real reading you have to submit to what is written on the page. You have to give up your own fantasies. You have to stop being silly. You have to stop being a baby."¹⁹⁰ When Simón asks David to stop being a child, it is not only a directive but also an affirmative statement of the fact that entering language and society means giving up one's pristine state to descend into the world of symbols.

David also treats numbers differently than others. He does not view numbers as belonging to the realm of rationality but to a kind of religion, which is mysterious, irrational, and transcendental. David challenges Simón by asking him to prove his empirical experience of numbers:

"Wrong. 889 is bigger because 889 comes after 888."
"How do you know? You have never been there"

¹⁸⁹ Coetzee, 221

¹⁹⁰ Coetzee, 196

“What do you mean, been there? Of course I haven't been to 888. I don't need to have been there to know 888 is smaller than 889.”¹⁹¹

David approaches number as a matter of spiritual practice, as a leap of faith he takes to overcome the abyss between one number and the next:

He won't take the steps we take when we count: *one* step *two* step *three*. It is as if the numbers were islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness, and he were each time being asked to close his eyes and launch himself across the void. What if I fall? - that is what he asks himself. What if I fall and then keep falling forever? [...] If getting from *one* to *two* is so hard, I asked myself, how shall I ever get from *zero* to *one*? From nowhere to somewhere: it seemed to demand a miracle each time.¹⁹²

When David attends a dance academy in Estrella, he learns to dance across the infinity between numbers and visit them, overcoming Zeno's paradox. In addition, David also struggles with addition and multiplicity since he rejects to totalize and homogenise singular objects: “Put an apple before him and what does he see? An apple: not one apple, just an apple. Put two apples before him. What does he see? An apple and an apple: not two apples, not the same apple twice, just an apple and an apple.”¹⁹³ David is troubled by the singularity and heterogeneity of numbers as opposed to what Henri Bergson terms as “quantitative multiplicity”. Quantification requires one to ignore the alterity of individual objects and focus simply on their commonalities: “To constitute a quantitative multiplicity, which is always done out of a practical or utilitarian interest, one ignores the content of the space the items occupy, which results in the space being homogeneous. In the case of the flock of sheep,

¹⁹¹ Coetzee, 178

¹⁹² Coetzee, 295

¹⁹³ Coetzee, 295

one ignores the fact that the pasture in which they are feeding is beautiful and the fact that the sheep are not strictly identical to one another.”¹⁹⁴ Coetzee already touches on this idea of practical enumeration as an exercise of power, limiting and absorbing the other in *Dusklands*, discussing the colonial obsession with dispossessing and possessing the other:

We cannot count the wild. The wild is one because it is boundless. We can count fig-trees, we can count sheep because the orchard and the farm are bounded. The essence of orchard tree and farm sheep is number. Our commerce with the wild is a tireless enterprise of turning it into orchard and farm. When we cannot fence it and count it we reduce it to number by other means. [...] I am a hunter, a domesticator of the wilderness, a hero of enumeration.¹⁹⁵

David’s transcendental approach to mathematics can be extended to an ethical refusal to totalize and thematise the other for utilitarian purpose.

While each character struggles against the new world in his own way, they all share the ethical critique of universalization and physical abnegation. Starting with ontological questions, the story gradually shifts from whether there is an ideal to how one can come to terms with a non-ideal reality. Even if it is a mere imperfect copy, it is not inferior. And even if it is inferior, it is the only one there is right now. There is a clear transition from ontological to moral struggles, the dilemma of how to curb but not suffocate one’s desires.

Coetzee tackles the overlap between ontology and ethics. On the one hand, to learn how to live ethically and treat things according to their nature is to understand what things are in the first place, on the ontological level, to a certain extent. This reflects Spinoza’s

¹⁹⁴ Leonard Lawlor and Valentine Moulard-Leonard, “Henri Bergson”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published March 18, 2004; last modified on October 22, 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=bergson>.

¹⁹⁵ Coetzee, *Dusklands*, 80

view of ethics as the correct understanding of the world. On the other hand, ontology is insufficient to determine ethics. Knowing what a thing is as a fact does not determine what one should do to that fact. Ethical judgment requires ascribing values to facts, to which one expresses certain attitudes that direct actions. Furthermore, Coetzee points out the existential crisis of having to live, to occupy this physical world, act and make decisions, before figuring out its essence. Thrown into the world, one is more likely to sin rather than have a knowledge of sin in the beginning. Confronting Platonic idealism, he accentuates David Hume's idea that passion plays a fundamental role in ethics as "reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions"¹⁹⁶

However, Coetzee neither rejects the ideal nor glorifies passions and physical desires. He shows the detrimental effects of both ascetism in Novilla and overindulgence in passion and desires seen in Dmitri. He recognises that people equally partake in both realms:

"We are not like poo that has to stay behind and be mixed again with the earth."

"What are we like?"

"What are we like if we are not like poo? We are like ideas. Ideas never die. You will learn that at school."

"But we make poo."

"That is true. We partake of the ideal but we also make poo. That is because we have a double nature. I don't know how to put it more simply."¹⁹⁷

The shadow allegorises humans' double nature as opposed to the unnatural, flat life in Novilla. In the shadowless world of the ideal, there is no irony or doubleness, no distinction

¹⁹⁶ Amy M. Schmitter, "David Hume", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published May 25, 2006; last modified on April 8, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=emotions-17th18th>.

¹⁹⁷ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 157

between appearance and reality: “Álvaro does not trade in irony. Nor does Elena. Elena is an intelligent woman, but she does not see any doubleness in the world, any difference between the way things seem and the way things are”¹⁹⁸ One-sided perspective is insufficient and incomplete, and even inhumane.

The Childhood of Jesus also addresses the ethical problems in lawful institutions that suppress individual authenticity and interpersonal connections. David’s journey demonstrates the hardship of growing up, being thrown into a completely new world and learning to navigate ethical codes in a morally ambivalent world. Coetzee’s depiction of David humanises Jesus: he is an exceptional and gifted child with an original way of thinking, yet he is eventually a child. Like other children, he has a fresh imagination of the world and likes to make up his own rules and reality in a quixotic spirit. While he challenges social conventions and offers his critical thoughts on common sense, he does so not only out of curiosity for the world but also out of stubbornness and self-grandiosity. He is both divine and banal: he finds divinity in the banal life in Novilla, yet one eventually finds his mental tricks quite banal. He challenges people but does not like to be challenged; he likes to save people, like Quixote, when they do not ask for it. He has to learn the rules as much as he challenges them to function in society and live with others: “If a child is continually indulged and told he is special, if he is allowed to make up the rules for himself as he goes, what kind of man will he grow up to be? Perhaps a little discipline at this stage of his life won’t do young David any harm”¹⁹⁹. He must also curb his ego and learn humility: “I think you have been teaching

¹⁹⁸ Coetzee, 76

¹⁹⁹ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 298

yourself a little too much of late. That is half the problem. A little more humility, a little more readiness to learn from others, is what is called for.”²⁰⁰ There is an ironic undertone here. While he constantly challenges social conventions, David himself is a social construct; he is made of the voices of others telling him that he is an exceptional child destined for something special. Coetzee also humanises Jesus by placing his mythical origin in a psychological framework of reality. The lack of knowledge of his biological parents is not treated as a sign of divinity but as a psychological cause of his learning problems.

Living as an orphan with socially assigned parents, Simón and Ines, David is unconsciously troubled by an inherent lack:

Let us rather concentrate on David’s experience and David’s understanding of the real. The real, I want to suggest, is what David misses in his life. This experience of lacking the real includes the experience of lacking real parents. David has no anchor in his life. Hence his withdrawal and retreat into a fantasy world where he feels more in control.²⁰¹

By demythologizing Jesus, Coetzee pulls readers closer to Jesus as a more relatable figure in David’s existence. He represents the double nature of human existence, oscillating between moments of epiphany and banality.

Coetzee also raises the ethical concern about historical amnesia in his depiction of the new world. People here regard history as illusory: “history is not real. Because history is just a made-up story.”²⁰² On the one hand, it represents the Platonic ideal of a timeless, unchanging world. On the other hand, it raises the moral question about how one should live without reckoning with history: “What history I had I left behind. I am simply a new man in a new

²⁰⁰ Coetzee, 254

²⁰¹ Coetzee, 246

²⁰² Coetzee, 137

land, and that is a good thing. But I have not let go of the idea of history, the idea of change without beginning or end. Ideas cannot be washed out of us, not even by time. Ideas are everywhere. The universe is instinct with them.”²⁰³ Reading it through a political lens, it can be interpreted as Coetzee’s concern for the fates of refugees whose existence is disrupted and cut off from their homeland by political violence. Reading it from a more universal perspective, it may indicate his caution towards deliberate suppression of history as a political act, a survival mechanism in a contemporary world.

²⁰³ Coetzee, 136

Conclusion

In conclusion, Coetzee's moral inquiry shows a discernible trajectory of shifting from urgent concerns for political violence in the Apartheid-era in South Africa to a more universal, abstract quest for the ideal in the fictional landscape of the Jesus trilogy. His writing of ethics is essentially linked to power, language, and philosophy, forming a complex dynamic, at the centre of which lies the fundamental notion of the other.

Dusklands (1974), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983) are exemplary for the political ethics in the beginning phase of Coetzee's career, investigating power in relation to otherness. He attributes moral corruption to power, understood as a will to control and protect a self-enclosed world (an individual, a nation, a culture) whose security is threatened by the alterity of the other's face. He examines the violation of the other through physical coercion and conceptualisation of the other. His writings accentuate corporeality of human existence and problematise the detachment of ideology from it. The bodily suffering of the other strikes moral conscience with guilt and a sense of complicity that calls forth an immense urge to take responsibility.

In *Foe*, Coetzee continues to investigate ethics as a discourse shaped by the mutual interaction between power and language, which is infused with ideology. He deals with the colonisation of the other's voice as an exertion of will and power through language. Confronting the destructive aspects of language in violating and subjugating the other, he delves into the ethics of silence, viewed not as a helpless, passive submission to power, but as an impenetrable fortress of the other that subverts power. Silence renders the master's discourse incomplete, exposing the double-edged and self-destructive nature of colonialism. He is also

concerned with the moral responsibility of a writer who masters language as an art, attempting to speak truth through fiction while struggling to reconcile it with aesthetic choices. Furthermore, he investigates power on the textual level, revealing a complex, multi-layered power structure in reality.

The Lives of Animals extends Coetzee's ethical scope by taking into account the moral significance of other species. He challenges humanity's conviction in reason, questioning its tautology and significance in relation to other modes of thinking. His relationship with animals is rooted in embodied ethics and imaginative sympathy, resonating with Bergsonian 'creative emotion' as the elemental force of life and morality. *Disgrace* intersects humanist ethics including racial and gender inequality with animal suffering. Coetzee underscores the complex nature of power structures in which agents are separated or united as the subjected or the subjugators, and one can occupy these two positions simultaneously.

The Childhood of Jesus confronts the ethics of the ideal, particularly the Platonic ideal, from an interdisciplinary approach. Coetzee subverts Plato's theory of form to question the viability of an ideal world, examining moral struggles against societal standards that totalize individual alterity. He also employs mathematical concepts of infinity and multiplicity to stress the significance of intuition and imagination in a utilitarian and rational society. The novel portrays an ongoing battleground between asceticism and hedonism, materialism and idealism, and rationalism and sentimentalism. He problematises the ideal, pointing to an ethical acceptance of discomfort in a world full of moral ambiguities.

These identified key elements are not examined in isolation within individual works but always in interplay with one another across Coetzee's oeuvre. His fundamental ideas are already present in *Dusklands*: the violation and thematisation of the other, destructive power

allegorised in the father figure/father's voice, the destructive nature of language, the failure and danger of the ideal, the problematic side of patronage and charity. They are the seeds of his later works, each of which blooms and reaches its prime in particular pieces, yet always in dialogue with the others. Each work is built upon the foundation of the previous one, incorporating, bringing into focus, or innovating certain aspects through a different approach. For example, *Foe* incorporates gendered and textual readings into its analysis of colonialism, the central theme in *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Life and Times of Michael K*. This approach complicates power through the hermeneutic approach and the higher textual order of metafiction. In later works, he intersects ethics with philosophy, mathematics, and religion in the Jesus trilogy and with animal ethics in *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*. He shifts from historically specific settings, such as the Vietnam War or Apartheid in South Africa, to the realm of ideas and universals, as characterised by the Platonic utopia in *The Childhood of Jesus*. However, such recurrent themes as the subversion of power structures and the totalisation of the other persist as an indicator of a thematic continuity in his works.

Coetzee often revisits and exercises metaphorical experimentation on his core themes. For example, while father figure through Lacanian reading represents Western domination over the so-called inferior cultures, it stands for the colonial patronage in the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl, the oppression of the authority in K.'s life, Foe's voice in Susan's life or Susan and Foe's voices in Friday's life. Another recurring theme is the violation of the other. While he highlights the physical violation of the other in *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, or *Life and Times of Michael K*., he focuses on the

thematization and totalization of the other in *Foe* through the allegory of the mutilated tongue.

His writing career is not perceived as a sum of separate themes that accumulate gradually through individual novels, but as a simultaneous growth of themes in a symbiosis. They overflow and interpenetrate one another, creating a comprehensive, coherent discourse in his writing career.

Bibliography

- Anderson, R. Lanier. "Friedrich Nietzsche". In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Article published on March 17, 2017; last modified on January 15, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=nietzsche>.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- Bergo, Bettina. "Emmanuel Levinas". In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Article published on July 23, 2006; last modified on July 13, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=levinas>.
- "Biography of J.M. Coetzee." *J.M. Coetzee: Biography* (webpage). Central Oregon Community College. Accessed August 29, 2025. <https://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/CoursePack/coetzee.htm>.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. Secker and Warburg, 1997.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Life and Times of Michael K*. Penguin Books, 1985.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Penguin Books, 1982.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Dusklands*. Penguin Books, 1982.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Foe*. Penguin Books, 1987.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. Secker & Warburg, 1999.
- Coetzee, J.M. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton University Press, 2016
- Coetzee, J.M. *The Childhood of Jesus*. Vintage Books, 2014
- Coetzee, J.M. "J.M. Coetzee and Valerie Miles. Europe and the world outside." October 28, 2024. YouTube video, 1:16:12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhs9G2EF7Fs>.
- Coetzee, J.M. "'The Languages of Art' by John Coetzee and Mariana Dimópulos." July 31, 2023. YouTube video, 1:02:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDddAcY8A-E>.
- Crowell, Steven. "Why Is Ethics First Philosophy? Levinas in Phenomenological Context: Why Is Ethics First Philosophy?" *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (September 2015): 564–588. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2012.00550.x>
- Canepari-Labib, Michela. "Language and Identity in the Narrative of J. M. Coetzee." *English in Africa* 27, no. 1 (May 2000): 105-130.

- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Ciobanu, Calina. "COETZEE'S POSTHUMANIST ETHICS." *Modern Fiction and Politics* 58, no.4 (Winter 2012): 668-698. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287306>
- Dutra, Julian. "What did Socrates, Plato, Aristotle Think About Wisdom?" *The University of Chicago*, June 12, 2022. <https://wisdomcenter.uchicago.edu/news/wisdom-news/what-did-socrates-plato-and-aristotle-think-about-wisdom>
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "African National Congress", updated August 21, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/African-National-Congress>.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "apartheid," last updated August 19, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/apartheid>.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Sharpeville massacre", updated August 2, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Sharpeville-massacre>.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Soweto uprising", updated August 21, 2025, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Soweto-uprising>.
- Foucault, Michel. "'Panopticism' from *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*." *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 1–12. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25594995>.
- Head, Dominic. "Coetzee's life." In *The Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee*, 1–10. Cambridge University Press, 2009. https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/67474/excerpt/9780521867474_excerpt.pdf
- Johnston, Adrian. "Jacques Lacan." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Article published on April 2, 2013; last modified on May 15, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/lacan/>.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Schocken Books, 1956
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979.
- Leonard Lawlor, Leonard and Valentine Moulard-Leonard. "Henri Bergson." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published March 18, 2004; last modified on October 22, 2025. <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=bergson>.
- Marais, Mike. "Writing with Eyes Shut: Ethics, Politics, and the Problem of the other in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee." *English in Africa* 25, no. 1 (May 1998): 43–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40238856>.

- Nordenstam, Tore. "On Austin's Theory of Speech-Acts." *Mind* 75, no. 297 (1966): 141–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2251720>
- Ó Murchadha, Felix. Review of *The Ethics of Time: A Phenomenology and Hermeneutics of Change*, by John Panteleimon Manoussakis. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (July 9, 2017). <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-ethics-of-time-a-phenomenology-and-hermeneutics-of-change/>
- Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Project Gutenberg, 1998. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>
- "Pass Laws." *South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy* (website). Accessed August 29, 2025. <https://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?kid=163-582-15>. "President F.W. de Klerk Announces Whites-only Referendum Results," *South African History Online* (website), March 13, 2012. <https://sahistory.org.za/dated-event/president-fw-de-klerk-announces-whites-only-referendum-results>
- Rushdie, Salman. "Truth, Lies, and Literature." *The New Yorker* (May 31, 2018). <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/truth-lies-and-literature>
- Ramos, Valeriano, Jr. "The Concepts of Ideology, Hegemony, and Organic Intellectuals in Gramsci's Marxism." First published in *Theoretical Review* No. 27 (March-April 1982). *Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line*: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/tr-gramsci.htm>
- Spinoza, Benedict. *The Ethics*. Translated by R. H. M. Elwes. Project Gutenberg, 2009, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm>.
- Schmitter, Amy. "David Hume." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Article published May 25, 2006; last modified on April 8, 2021. <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=emotions-17th18th>.
- "The Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1980s." *Forward to Freedom* (website). Accessed August 29, 2025. <https://www.aamarchives.org/history/1980s.html>.
- "The Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1990s." *Forward to Freedom* (website). Accessed August 29, 2025. <https://www.aamarchives.org/history/1990s.html>
- Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version>
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. "A Lecture on Ethics." *The Philosophical Review* 74, no.1 (January 1965): 3-12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2183526>
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by C.K. Odgen. Project Gutenberg, 2010. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf>.