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柯慈小說中的書寫倫理：
文學潛能與書寫責任

Ethics of Writing in J. M. Coetzee's Novels:
Literary Potentiality and Writerly Responsibility

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摘　要

本論文探討南非小說家柯慈小說中的書寫倫理。在閱讀柯慈的作品時，大多數批評家將書寫和倫理視爲二個獨立的概念，認爲柯慈的作品具有倫理的面向是因爲其作品討論了倫理議題。本論文批判此概念的謬誤。柯慈的書寫本身即是倫理的展現：文學無法被固化而具有重塑現實觀的潛能，而倫理挑戰我們重新思考自我與他者的關係，二者緊密結合。第一章透過閱讀《壞年頭日誌》討論文學的潛能如何去本體化。此文本特殊的結構——每頁分爲三層並有三段的不同敘述同時進行——使其成爲幾乎無法（以正常方式）閱讀的文本，然而此特殊的寫作結構揭露所有系統的“彷如”狀態 (the “as-if”)。第二章處理書寫責任的問題。責任應被理解成德希達所談的絕對責任。我將閱讀《聖彼得堡的文豪》和《伊莉莎白．卡斯特洛》二個文本，討論柯慈的書寫如何回應他者。第三章探討在《鐵器年代》中柯慈如何書寫無法言說和再現的受苦經驗。然而柯慈並不將受苦視爲屬於他者的問題，受苦是全人類共有的經驗，受苦促使我們重新思索自我與他者的倫理關係。最後一章討論《耶穌的童年》中的記憶倫理問題。對柯慈來說，書寫本身就是見證，書寫的倫理性根植於見證歷史中被遺忘的他者和被遺忘的記憶。新的國家建立在和歷史的決裂，記憶歷史卻成爲遺忘歷史。此文本促使我們思考，在處理歷史記憶時，是否能不被制式化和實證的價值標準所匡限，而能夠看到記憶最獨一的面向。

關鍵字：書寫、潛能、責任、倫理、受苦、記憶

Abstract:

This dissertation investigates the ethics of writing in Coetzee's novels. Ethics and writing are not two separate notions yoked together in the reading of Coetzee's writing. I argue that writing and ethics coincide as both have the performative dimension and exceed the constative order. Chapter I addresses the question of how literary writing has the potentiality to deontologize and reconfigure the order of actuality through reading *Diary of a Bad Year*. *Diary* is known, or notorious for its exceptional three-tiered structure of narrative, making it impossible to read in a conventional fashion. But this exceptional narrative structure reveals the fictionality, or the modality of the "as-if" structuring all ontological order of actuality. Chapter II engages the issue of writerly responsibility. This responsibility is to be understood as absolute responsibility "before the law" in the Derridean sense, and I will look into how Coetzee's writing responds to the other in *The Master of Petersburg* and *Elizabeth Costello*. In Chapter III, I will read Coetzee's *Age of Iron* to see how Coetzee writes the unspeakable suffering that resists representation and analytical framework. Perhaps the way to read and to listen to the suffering is through the "maimed language." But Coetzee does not see suffering as other's question. Suffering is a question that concerns us, and he shifts the discussion from the perception of suffering as other's question to the site of pre-subjective ontological vulnerability where it is possible to reconceive a new and ethical self-other relation. In the last chapter, I will investigate the ethics of memory in *Childhood of Jesus*. If the state deals with history always in the past tense (the past as another country) and produces national archive in order to close the gate to the past, *Childhood* raises the singular in personal memory as a way to resist the national amnesia.

Keywords: writing, potentiality, responsibility, ethics, suffering, memory

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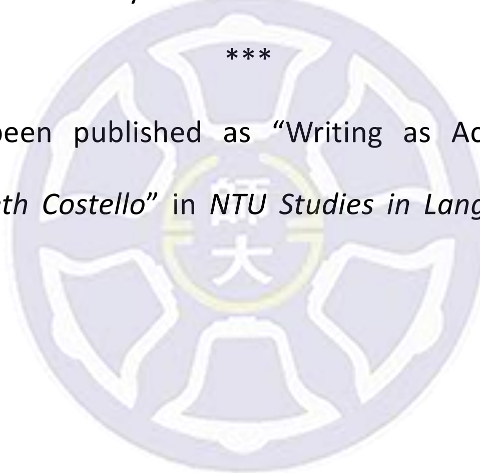

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Introduction: Writing and Ethics in Coetzee's Writing

The writing of J. M. Coetzee has earned critical acclaim in the academic world mainly because it has reconfigured the nature of literary writing and the way we perceive the phenomenological world, and has touched on many ethical issues that demand our attention. The literary criticism of Coetzee's works has a few characteristics: Critics have chosen to read his literary writing as literary theory,[1] political allegories, or modernist and postmodernist experimental works. Very different disciplines have also claimed Coetzee's texts for their own purposes besides literary studies: Trauma and memory studies, disability studies, film and photography, psychoanalysis, women studies, postcolonial studies, philosophy, geography, history, biopolitics, and even anthropology have enlisted Coetzee's works to illustrate their specific concerns. These readings, to a great extent, are invested in the use (if not abuse) and efficacy of literary texts, without paying sufficient attention to the essential question of literature: Most critics simply graft Coetzee'ss works to a set of debates in different fields and fail to understand his writing on its own terms (Ogden 2).

In the field of literary studies, postcolonial approach was the dominant mode of reading before the emergence of ethical criticism.[2] As for the Coetzee

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[1] Coetzee's novels have been assigned in a number of literary and critical theory courses mainly due to the coupling facts that he wrote a dissertation on Beckett's *Watt* by employing structuralist methods and that he has been teaching English for many years. Critics further point out that his writing features highly self-conscious appropriation of theoretical concepts while it also resists the uncritical application of critical terminology.

[2] When postcolonial criticism was the dominant literary practice, much emphasis was placed on the roles history and politics played in the reading and interpretation of literary texts. Within that context, Coetzee was highly regarded as a representative postcolonial novelist, and critics have practiced political and historical reading of Coetzee's writing, focusing particularly on the political events in South Africa, including colonization, apartheid, and post-apartheid violence. Having said this, though, I do not reduce all postcolonial readings of literary texts to political and historical interpretations. For instance, Peter Hallward's *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific*

scholarship, the ethical reorientation occurred because critics started to become aware of the provincialism of postcolonial reading, which imposes meta-narrative of historical and political consciousness on Coetzee's novels to distill and extract the interpretation that would cater to history narrative and political cause.[3] Another reason was that the writing style and the concerns, particularly in Coetzee's later novels, have far exceeded the scope of postcolonial criticism. The turn toward the ethical draws our attention to what Levinas called "ethical alterity," to the irreducible otherness in the self, and more importantly to the new ethical relation between the self and the other.

This ethical turn in the Coetzee scholarship was mainly inaugurated by Derek Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Attridge argues for the ethics in reading Coetzee's writing: "Coetzee's works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?" (xii). Influenced by Attridge, critics have been paying greater attention to the ethical issues in Coetzee's writing, mainly through Levinas' and Derrida's ethical thinking, such as hospitality and responsibility (*The Age of Iron*, *Slow Man*, *Life & Times of Michael K*.), forgiveness (*Disgrace*), animal rights (*The Lives of Animals*), the event of writing (*Elizabeth Costello*), violence in the wake of the September 11th attacks (*Diary of a Bad Year*), and the ethics of memory and the meaning of singularity (*The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Good*

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attends to the singularity at the heart of literary texts.

[3] By distinguishing an ethical reading from socio-historical reading, I do not mean to underestimate the discussion of historical events. Some of Coetzee's novels have specific historical reference, while some do not, and the point is not to draw the nexus of historic-political events and their literary representation in his writing, thus reducing his writing to texts of social realism. This project will engage with historico-political events, in the sense that it will bear witness to history, to the vulnerable and silenced in history. History, but not historicism, is important.

Story).[4] A prodigious amount of work on ethics has been generated. James Meffan and Kim L. Worthington maintain that "Coetzee himself continually resists the simple collapse of ethics into politics" (32). Kalpana R. Seshadri offers an original reading on the "silence" in *Foe* by using Derrida's notion of literature's ethical secret. Mike Marais focuses his comprehensive reading of Coetzee's writing on the issue of hospitality by drawing upon the ethical philosophies of Levinas and Derrida, and his reading specifically concerns "alterity, responsibility, engagement," as he writes, "Coetzee's writing is informed by his sense of responsibility for what is not yet present in history, by the sense that it is the writer's task to make of the text a home for the other. The text must *host* the other and so enable it to interrupt history" (15). Stephen Mulhall gives a multifaceted study of *Elizabeth Costello* by bringing into view many relevant issues, among which the philosophy of literature and our moral relations to nonhuman animals are related to the ethical discussion. *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*, edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer, is probably the most ambitious collection of essays on the ethical discussion. While the essays in this volume address different aspects of the ethical and philosophical character of Coetzee's writing, the two editors, in their introduction, maintain that "the work of John Coetzee seems especially promising both because he stands at a transitional point between modern and postmodern literature and because of the philosophical character of his writing," and they propose a few key terms in reading Coetzee both philosophically and ethically: the typical style of "literalness," "ethics of social relationships," "a phenomenological ethics of the other," and "metaphysics of the other" (6-9). Benjamin Ogden engages with the idea of "form" in *Diary of a Bad*

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[4] Published in 2015, *The Good Story* is an exchange on truth, fiction and psychoanalytic psychotherapy between Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, a psychotherapist.

Year, and his argument is that Coetzee's experiment of literary form, particularly in this novel, underscores his exposition on political forms/structures. The form, be it literary or political, can be reconfigured, but he seems to stop at this point without further elaborating its ethical significance.

This ethical turn since the 1990s should not obscure the fact that the ethical has always been a focus in Coetzee's writing.[5] We can register two levels of the ethical in Coetzee's writing—on the level of *the ethical nature* of his writing, and on the level of *the ethical issues*, such as hospitality, justice and responsibility that his work engages, although it is difficult to distinguish the two. A major problem with ethical criticism is that it remains on descriptive terms: Some critics seem to preoccupy themselves with "the ethical issues" and sidestep the exigency of investigating the ethical nature of Coetzee's writing. As J. H. Miller points out, "the text read may make thematic statements which have ethical import, which is not at all the same thing [giving a properly ethical dimension to the act of reading]" (43). It happens not infrequently that some critics claim to identify the themes of animal care or hospitality for the refugees when reading a Coetzee novel and subsequently adopt some ethical discourses related to these issues to advance some "ethical" reading of Coetzee's texts. Epistemologically speaking, employing some ethical discourses to read a text is not so different from a political or historical reading that an ethical reading has set out to criticize: One uses the text to explicate or evidence the ethical discourses.[6] It is more often than not that we read literary criticism in

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[5] Despite their reception as postcolonial classics, Coetzee's early novels are irreducible to mere postcolonial reading, which perhaps explains why they are re-visited by critics after the ethical turn.

[6] Writing about the nature of deconstruction, Jonathan Culler tells us, "Critical categories are not just tools to be employed in producing sound interpretations but problems to be explored through the interaction of text and concept" (180). It is not that ethical discourses are useless, but that they are not to be taken for granted. As critics, we need to resist the instrumental propensity of theoretical and ethical discourses and retool them to read the ethical dimension, rather than the ethical issues, in

which we find critics employ literary works to illustrate their concerns—race, gender, class, etc. These "uses" of literature are taken for granted in that the critics overlook the ethical in Coetzee's text.

Another problem with the ethical criticism in the Coetzee scholarship is that the essential question of literature has not received sufficient attention. We need to examine how the literary bears on the ethical, how literature works to deconstruct ontological actuality before ethical possibilities can be made possible. For some critics, literature is embodied in the representation of the world, and literary works are immobile aesthetic objects with accessible meaning. In this instance, literature is used to answer a certain request or to offer a possible solution to a specific social problem. They apply philosophical discourses or "theories" to stabilize a text by imposing a predetermined meaning. As Frank Kermode writes, "To read a novel expecting the satisfactions of enclosure and the receipt of a message is what most people find enough to do; they are easier with this method because it resembles the one that works for ordinary acts of communication" (38). In this way, they "consume" a text by deriving some moral lessons that conform to our pre-conceived worldview.

Reading Coetzee's works is an experience of innocence and freedom.[7] This dissertation turns away from an "ethical" reading that gets disabled in the mere explication of ethical issues and investigates how literary potentiality deconstructs

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Coetzee's writing.

[7] Blanchot tells us that reading is both an experience of innocence and freedom: "Reading is ignorant. It begins with what it reads and in this way discovers the force of a beginning. It is receiving and hearing, not the power to decipher and analyze, to go beyond by developing or to go back before laying bare; it does not comprehend (strictly speaking), it attends. A marvelous innocence." (*Infinite Conversation* 320). "Reading does not produce anything, does not add anything. It lets be what is. It is freedom: not the freedom that produces being or grasps it, but freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes . . ." (*The Space of Literature* 194).

ontological actuality, and how this potentiality gives rise to ethical possibilities. The ethical and the literary have something in common: Both are performative, exceeding the constative order. We register this ethical dimension of literature in Coetzee's writing: It does not offer comfort, confirmation, or certainty; it challenges, disrupts, surprise and trembles, and even reframes the entrenched ontological worldview; it also invents and potentializes the possibility that has not been realized.

I follow Jacques Derrida's understanding of ethics as an ethical relation with the other. This is a simple claim, but with formidable consequences. Ethics is irreducible to some humanist assumption of universal good, positivist assumption of the good based on logics, moralism that stipulates some coercive codes or religious dogmatism, or legal understanding that ethics is established upon law-abiding principles. All these ideas are grounded in a code of repressive and life-denying conventional values. We should be careful not to confuse the ethical with the moral. The latter designates the empirical realm in which people are subject to legal jurisdiction and biopolitical rule, while the former refers to the place where people suspend old ties with dogmatism and rethink the moral values that have structured human existence, such as the self-other relation, community, forgiveness, and so on. In this sense, the force of Coetzee's writing is felt not on descriptive or normative moral terms—for instance, how the political system should be reconstituted, how the Black citizens should be treated more equally, or how the law should be changed to allow the minority groups in society to voice their concerns. Ethics, as reconceived by Levinas and Derrida, is irreducible to subject-centered moral decrees that would eventually petrify ethical thinking as

dogmatism. Ethics is about the radical opening of the philosophical foreclosures anchored in logocentrism or metaphysics of presence, to borrow two familiar terms from Derrida, so that the welcome of the other is not only possible, but the absolute responsibility for us. Ethics is about responsibility, about the way we respond to the call of the other.

Literature works on this level of ethics, opening the ontological stability to more ethical possibilities. Here, I also follow Derrida's understanding of the literary, which is impossible in the sense that it is irreducible to the institutional edifice of literature. The literary event is inaugural and exceptional, and it trembles and traumatizes the ontological order of actuality as it disrupts and invents. Literature does not serve as a moral manual or guideline to change the world. It acts upon the world in the sense that it challenges our entrenched thinking and received moral opinions so that we may respond to the demand of the other in the society. The intervention of literature can reconfigure the ontological actuality through radical openings for the coming of the other.

Writing is inaugural, as it works to deconstruct ontological actuality to occasion ethical relation with the other, while the ethical is figured in Coetzee's resistance to the institutional demand on literature and in his commitment to the responsibility for the other in his writing. The point of departure for this dissertation is a focus on "ethics in writing," on the coincidence between literary potentiality and ethical responsibility that have been treated insufficiently by critics. By "ethics in writing," I resist "J. M. Coetzee's writing and ethics," which seems to imply an antecedent division between writing's potentiality and ethical consideration, and an "ethical reading" of Coetzee's works, which gives the

mistaken idea of employing a reading strategy that is called "ethical reading" in approaching Coetzee's writing. My argument is that writing and ethics coincide because writing's potentiality to reconfigure ontological actuality converges with the possibility of reconceiving the self-other relation in ethics. For me, it is imperative to bring together the question of literature and ethics in Coetzee's writing, as the poetics of literary singularity is bound up with the force to inaugurate ethical transformations.

The literary event in Coetzee's writing—giving rise to "innovation, invention, violation, and inauguration" (Hallward 335)—comes in new forms and vatical narrative voice. The act of writing disrupts the grounds of fixed moral and cultural assumptions and inaugurates the welcome of the unknown other. Literature's potentiality is bound up with its ethical responsibility. Coetzee's writing at the limit challenges us to think how the literary bears on the ethical, how writing can be seen as a space of hospitality, and how it is possible to reconceive self-other relation. The question of literature—not what literature is, but *what literature does*—remains at the heart of this dissertation. I situate literary writing in the order of presence without being made fully present in that order, or as Stefan Helgesson puts it, "History . . . determines writing, but it is the task of writing to exceed that determination, to differ, to imagine something other than what the historical present already has articulated for them" (18). Writing has the potentiality to shake, deframe, and derealize the ontological construction of actuality, and thus it is very much about the experience of the shakenness of all foundations, certainties, and principles upon which ontology relies heavily for its stability. Texts are writer's creative responses to socio-historical contexts, and Coetzee's writing is embodied

in his ethical responses to the absolute demand coming from the other in the context of history without being appropriated by it, and without being conditioned by the ideological, nationalistic or religious discourses. Along the way of the research, Coetzee's texts will be the basis, while literary theories will help to clarify, rather than codify, my investigation of the ethical in Coetzee's writing. In the following, I will look into the question of literature, and then I will provide a plan for the main chapters.

The Question of Literature

Literature is autonomous, and it has its potentiality in the order of actuality. However, starting from Plato, literature has been excluded from the "republic" of reason and presence, into the realm of mysticism. We have also witnessed, on the contrary, the attempt to house literature within academic institutions, to bring literature into the social arena by turning it into another social discourse and using it as a pedagogical instrument to promote nationalist cause. One instance of defending the value and use of literature at a time when the call to prove the pragmatic value of various disciplines is urgent is found in Rita Felski's manifesto *Uses of Literature* (2008),[8] which promotes the idea of bridging the gap between "scholarly reading" and "lay reading." Resisting this pragmatism, postmodern and other approaches would turn literature into pure means of linguistic play, or linguistic idealism. For instance, the value of "linguistic idealism" lies at the heart of Richard Gaskin's *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defense of Literary Humanism*.

[8] Felski argues for "an expanded understanding of 'use'" "to engage the worldly aspects of literature in a way that is respectful rather than reductive, dialogical rather than high-handed" (7). However, as Nicholas Royle tells us, "Felski offers very little critical reflection on the utilitarian, humanist and anthropocentric conceptions of 'use' that inform and structure her account" (*Veering* 96-97).

A worse scenario is seen in which literary writing is turned into ironies or cynicism. On the other end of the spectrum, critics, like Peter Lamarque, have attempted a systematic study of literary writing to defy the claims that literature does not fit the criteria of rigorous study. Lamarque calls our attention to the categories of "authors," "practice," "fiction" and "truth," and "value" to approach the study of literature in his *The Philosophy of Literature* (2009). More sympathetic efforts have been to acknowledge the possibilities opened by literature, but still situated it outside the realm of presence and reason, viewing literature as irreducible to the logocentric order. Critics who value and yet are suspicious about these possibilities, however, would question how long these possibilities can sustain in our daily life, and how real and how effective these possibilities can be in the movement of resisting logocentricism.

These approaches cast literature as either purely fictional, in the pure outside, in the transcendental model, or in an institutional mode, as if literature were some tangible aesthetic object available for political or pedagogical manipulation, or as if it could be treated as something of irrelevance. We need another way of thinking literature. Derrida proclaims that we need to "think a writing without presence and without absence, without history, without cause, without archia, without telos, a writing that absolutely upsets all dialectics, all theology, all teleology, all ontology" (*Margins of Philosophy* 67). Although Derrida was writing more in the spirit of philosophical thinking, this notion of writing "without presence and absence" can describe a new mode of literary writing that displaces itself in the institution of literature. A writing that "upsets all dialectics, all theology, all teleology, all ontology" cannot be confined within any institutional edifice. It causes the

disruption of any boundaries and irruption of alterity into the ontological system. The literary turn is singular in the sense that its relation to meaning and interpretation is suspended. Writing is about the event of saying, about the event of invention. Derrida writes again: In writing we witness an imperative "to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consists in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing language, change more than language" ("The Strange Institution" 55). Instead of giving literature an identity, which is an act of epistemological violence that reduces it to a state of being, of self-presence and representation, we should perceive writing as a force,[9] an event that will potentialize the ontological ordering of the present

We need to read literature in the realm of presence without reducing it to its ontological properties or institutional elements. The workings of literary writing are felt most intensely in the order of presence, but literary writing is not a thing that can be made fully present in presence, so we should refrain from asking the ontological and epistemological question of "what is literature," which is apparently an invalid question in the sense that literature is not, that literature is irreducible to some ontological properties. Literature resides in the threshold between the inside

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[9] The notion of literary writing that informs this dissertation is that it is a force, an event to come. Writing does not remain static; nor does it attempt to stabilize meaning. In *Veering: A Theory of Literature*, Nicholas Royle employs the idea of "veering" to understand the "force or play of forces" in literary writing (5). Writing veers, turns, twists and makes detours. As veering entails an "event of difference" (4) that "call[s] into question the very notion and possibility of a state, of stability or stabilization" (7), a new way of thinking about literary writing "goes beyond any traditional enclosure of 'literature' and that cannot be confined or reduced to any kind of 'mere theory,' 'linguisticism' or 'word play'" (5). As Royle suggests, the "veering" in literature generates "a sense of the swerving, whirling, flickering, proliferating affects and possibilities" (28).

and the outside, the possible and the impossible, the commensurate and the incommensurate, between what the world is and what it could have been, as Derrida puts it, "This is perhaps what gives tension to the writing: dispersing, dividing, decentering, delegating (legare) and simultaneously gathering, collecting but also choosing, electing, selecting, thus again dividing, privileging (legere)" (*Without Alibi* xx). Literature is the site of this limit experience, rendering the distinction between the inside and the outside, the possible and impossible indistinguishable. By saying literature is the site of the limit experience, I mean text resides in the constellation between the irresistible demand from the other and the institutional, social, political, and historical forces and effects.

The literary event does not occur in an evanescent or transitory fashion; nor does it exist in a pure "elsewhere" or "outside." Literature looks for an "elsewhere" that inheres in the ontological grounds of possibility. The literary event is excess, overflowing the confines of the presence. Writing is marked by the productive ambivalence and aporia inaugurated by the literary "as-if" (there will be more discussion of the "as-if" in Chapter I), and we should not attempt to bring the incommensurability and the exorbitance of literature into the metaphysics of presence and house it in the state apparatuses. In this sense, writing is both possible and impossible in this aporetic complexity—not only to write the present and the reality, but to write unrealized possibility, to write the present that is to come, that is open to the coming of the other. Writing is a sustained effort in deontologizing the order of actuality, to make the order of actuality open to the coming of the other.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, I will address the fundamental question of form and opening. In "Realism," the first lesson in *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello says, "There is first of all the problem of the *opening*, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank" (1; italics added). Opening is a central question in Coetzee's writing. Writing has the potentiality to render the ontological order of actuality open, and I attempt to show that Coetzee's writing performs "opening" beyond a closed and conventionalized form and a coherent and unified narrative. I will investigate the text *Diary of a Bad Year*. Some critics refrain from naming it a novel due to its exceptional three-tiered layout on each page, and this unusual topographical structure upsets the conventional form of narrative and the readerly expectation of a stable meaning. The multi-layered narrative structure and the polyvocality of narrative voice expose the fictionality of ontological system. The possibility to approach the text through multiple beginnings and the detour along the narrative progression testify to the working of the modality of the "as-if": While ontological system attempts to hide its historicity and contingency, Coetzee in this text exposes them. I will read this "unreadable" text as a critical and ethical engagement with ontology. *Diary* manifests itself not only as an act of resistance against authority and ontological order of actuality but, more importantly, as an act of potentializing ontology. If writing writes the singularities and differences, it bears the potentiality of opening the ontological order of actuality for intervention and reinvention.

In the first chapter, I explore Coetzee's move beyond form, and in the second chapter I will look into his *writerly responsibility* toward the other. "Writing as acts

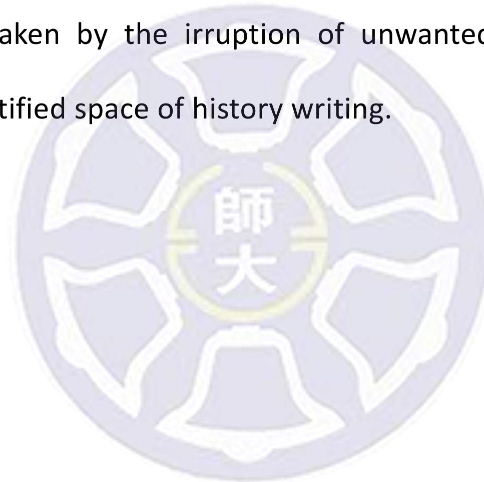
of responsibility" does not suggest writing should participate in the socio-political realm to give voice to the cause of social movements against oppression. Rather, in Coetzee's writing, the literary event comes as a performative act that disrupts the grounds of fixed moral, cultural and political assumptions in order to respond to the other. In Coetzee's novels, if responsibility means anything other than the parochial understanding of duties and obligations, it is the promise to and welcome of the other. I will investigate the literary event in Coetzee's writing by referring to Jacques Derrida's notion of literature as a "duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers" ("This Strange Institution" 38). Absolute responsibility is irreducible to moralism and reason. Through Coetzee's (re)invention of the writer-figures of Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* and Elizabeth Costello in the eponymous novel *Elizabeth Costello*, we see how writers have to betray the law in order to be responsible for and respond to the call of the other.

Chapter III is devoted to the ethics of writing suffering in *Age of Iron*. In a world of what Levinas calls "useless suffering," Coetzee's writing is committed to the unspeakable suffering of those denied their voice and presence. However, Coetzee's commitment distinguishes itself from the movement of committed writing in South Africa. What the committed writing is committed to is an archetype of black people suffering violence and injustice under the regime of apartheid. This committed writing serves the cause of black resistance, and Coetzee feels petrified in seeing writing reduced to the service of a political cause. For Coetzee, suffering cannot be treated as a political question; if it were, the victims would be subjected to biopolitical rule. *Age of Iron* is a novel about suffering and

powerless, and in this novel Coetzee writes suffering with an ethical concern: Suffering cannot be comprehended through the "science of victims," and he shifts the question of suffering from a political concern to the state of ontological vulnerability in which each self is unadorned with any protection or privileges. Perhaps, it is possible to rethink the self-other relation only in this state of existential vulnerability. In this chapter, I will look into how Coetzee's writing of suffering plays a dissonant tune with the South African committed writing's hegemonic reaction toward the apartheid violence, how suffering refrains from being reduced to a political question and resolved through the liberalist solution of empowerment, how suffering cries out for its own expression through the "maimed language" in defiance of the view that extreme suffering cannot be represented, how *Age of Iron* performs a novelistic occasion to explore inter-human ethics in the relations formed between Mrs. Curren and the alterity figures, and how the life grounded in ontological vulnerability is more open than the life that biopolitical rule allows.

Chapter IV engages with memory and forgetting in Coetzee's writing. The question that I attempt to investigate in *The Childhood of Jesus* is how we can attend to the singular in memory that resists nationalist amnesia. This novel portrays an anomalous utopian state in which everyone, having washed themselves clean of the past, begins anew, with a new name, a new identity, and even a new birth date. Without naming post-apartheid South Africa, the issues of political forgetting and the singular in personal memory that are raised in the novel are highly relevant to the post-apartheid South African society. In my reading, this novel bears witness to the perpetuation of the violence of historical forgetting in

post-apartheid South Africa. South Africa established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with the legacies of violence and trauma, yet the teleological historiographical principle of closure structuring the TRC attempted to close the chapter of apartheid regime. The TRC's remembrance of the past, ironically, amounted to national forgetting, and we see continuity in the structure of history between the apartheid regime and the post-apartheid democratic government: both capitalized on the forgetting and silencing of certain others. In the face of political forgetting, to attend to the singular of personal memory is to redeem memory from historical wreckages. The nationalist narrative of the "normalized" state is constantly shaken by the irruption of unwanted singular and elliptical memories into its sanctified space of history writing.



The Decreation of the World:
Literary Potentiality in *Diary of a Bad Year*

> And if we human beings made it, can we not unmake it and remake it in a kindlier form?
>
> —*Diary*

Diary of a Bad Year is divided into "Strong Opinions" and "Soft Opinions." In the first piece of "Strong Opinions" with the title "On the Origins of the State," JC writes that the problem with any form of political system, from the medieval kingdom to contemporary democracy, is that "the form" is "accomplished" and "not open to discussion" (8). During the times when the king ruled by divine rights, people had no influence over the form and formation of the political system; even in the contemporary democratic system in which people seem to enjoy the freedom to express their opinions through the ballots and the right to alter the political system if necessary, what they have indeed is a pseudo-choice: They merely choose either A or B, or neither in elections or referendums. This closure of the political system derives from the presupposed adequation and completion of ontology that is founded on discursive coherence and stability. It is an enclosed space with a rigidified hierarchical division of class, tightly regulated distributions of power, and a clear demarcation between the inside and the outside, meaning and nonsense, the knowable and the unknowable, self and other. The latter entities of this series tend to be either appropriated or dissolved to secure the system's

firmness and stability, as Derrida informs us, “For ontology, meaning is founded on acts of exclusion and repression” (*Limited Inc* 149).

But Derrida also alerts us, “A stability is not an immutability; it is by definition always destabilizable” (ibid 151). Logically speaking, when the need of closure arises, it entails that non-closure precedes the occurrence of closure, and that the possibility of (re)opening ensues. To account for the stability of ontology is thus to look into how that stability is made possible in certain context, that is, how the discourses and relations of power in the social arena have contributed to the ontological stability. If ontology grounds itself on the mastery of the limit so that it is able to decide who or what to be allowed in the order of presence, then the question that concerns us is to think the possibility of (re)opening the system through reading the traces, and here writing comes into play. Writing attends to the traces excluded and repressed in the ontological act of stabilizing meaning. In this sense, writing is inexhaustible as it does not look for the adequation of meaning. The need of closure in any ontological system and the possibility of its opening by the literary event underlie the pivotal question of this chapter: What potentiality does literary writing have to stage interventions in the order of actuality and to reconfigure the form of the system?

As I pointed out in “Introduction,” the question of literature is not determined by the logic of instrumental reason and does not reside in the quest of the ontological status of literature or its pedagogical value. In reading Coetzee, we see how literature is inscribed in the modality of the “as-if” that exposes the fictionality (or performative construction) of all ontological order of actuality (I would say *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Foe* are two outstanding examples to illustrate this point),

and as such the question of literature is tied to the irreducible potentiality of literary writing to intervene in and reconfigure the ontological order of actuality although Coetzee is also aware of the constant threat coming from the institutional attempt to subdue literary potentiality and to stabilize the dynamic movement of writing by giving literature a name, an identity, and a status.[1]

Writing is not purely a performance of linguistic games, or a matter of representation. Writing is opened to the process of (re)inscription; to be more precise, it is about the question of trace, of what cannot appear in the order of presence, of how one experiences that which one cannot experience. This deconstructive dimension is closely linked to the possibility of the literary event to tremble and displace the order of actuality. The fundamental question is, then, invested in the "complicity" between literature and the ontological order, as both are grounded in the modality of the "as-if." While literary writing preserves this force of the fictional, politics forgets its own constitutive fictionality by erasing this epistemological creativity and contingency. As politics attempts to rein in literary writing by emphasizing the latter's mimetic representation, writing resists this attempt by exposing the opening in ontology and gap between what is and what could have been. This resistance gives rise to the possibility of deontologizing the totality of the present.

Attridge characterizes Coetzee's writing as refusing to adhere to the normal expectations of readers: "One consistent aspect of Coetzee's technique as a

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[1] Gerald Gaylard writes that teaching and writing about Coetzee offers the potential to "counter" four closures: Firstly, literature and its reception in South Africa is not immune from "a certain Anglo-empiricist materialism and instrumentalism." The second closure is "the sociopolitical overdetermination of South African society, culture, and literature," and this closure is inevitably linked to "the struggle heritage of the apartheid years," which forms the third closure. The last one is "the great rationalization" ushered in by globalization (Gaylard 112-113).

novelist is to deny the reader any ethical guidance from an authoritative voice or valorizing metalanguage. We are left to make the difficult judgments ourselves" (*Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 7). In reading Coetzee, we are exposed to the literary potentiality manifested in literature's status of ambivalence and undecidability, paradoxes and aporias, as the meaning is never fixed.[2] In this sense, writing is both reassuring and disquieting: It offers meaning and destabilizes that meaning at the same time. Put in other words, it offers the meaning that it destabilizes. While Coetzee writes in the literary tradition, his writing is full of revisions of canonical texts, gaps, fragmentations, silences, and paradoxes, and his unique writing styles and rhetorical devices demand an*other* reading that resists the ontological efforts to impose logocentric stability of meaning.

Diary of a Bad Year is an "unreadable" text that upsets any readerly expectation of stable meaning. This text consists of two main parts: "Strong Opinions" and "Soft Opinions," while the three-tiered structure on most pages contains the "opinions" written by JC for a German publisher, Anya's narrative (Anya is JC's enamored typewriter), and JC's personal narrative. The diverse narrative voices in these three bands compete and at times compromise with one another. This text's exceptional three-tiered structure, topographically, makes it an almost impossible text to read: Its meaning is elusive, and its categorical status undecidable; read in different ways, it will generate diverse interpretations; the multiple narrative voices that parallel, crisscross, intersect, and interface disrupt any expectation of authority in narrative voice. This text resists reading in a

[2] There are many instances in Coetzee's writing that suggest this productive ambivalence. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, "[T]hey form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further each slip can be read in many ways" (112), and in *Michael K*, "[Y]our stay in the camp was an allegory . . . of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (166).

coherent rhythm: Reading vertically or horizontally always leaves one unsatisfied, as Marco Roth calls *Diary* "a novel that can be read three different ways, none of them wholly satisfying. You can't read any one part without becoming aware that you're ignoring the others. If you tried to read them all at once, you'd go nuts."

This "disturbing" text has sparked diverse critical responses. Rebecca L. Walkowitz reads *Diary* along with Woof's *Three Guineas* and defines *Diary* as a work of "transnational fiction" (244) and "comparison literature" (245), by which she means "a genre of contemporary fiction that uses narrative structures of comparison to generate new paradigms of transnational collectivity" (245). Eric Paul Melja sees the borderlines separating the narratives as "thresholds" (96). H. Porter Abbott argues that this text demands "cognitive re-orientation" (192), and Paul Patton proclaims that the decision to take a certain course in reading at one time is "genuinely undecidable" (54). Johan Geertsema maintains that the text "constitutes an attempt to move towards a position beyond politics, to an impossible, ironic position" (71). Stuart J. Murray makes the observation that *Diary* is a "polyphonic text" and that this text calls for "a style of thought that could interrupt traditional and institutionalized bioethics discourse and help us to think ethics otherwise, in a more human and humane idiom" (324). David Attwell draws our attention to the "experience of *fictionality*" the text attempts to give (*J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing 211*). The essential idea that structures these readings is the undecidability of *Diary*, as exemplified in the disidentification of the subject, the loss of authority, the instability of generic categorization, and the polyvocality of narrative voice. Ambivalence is the condition of the text: Everything is iterable and undecidable at the same time. No claim of certainty and stability is

possible; no assertion of full knowledge is assured.

In my reading, I see *Diary* as an "unreadable" text, and I will read this impossible text as a critical and ethical engagement with ontology. I register Coetzee's attempt to look for opening in all ontology through the potentiality in the literary event. *Diary* manifests itself not only as an act of resistance against authority but, more importantly, as an act of potentializing ontology. When ontology closes, it turns into a system of totality and totalitarianism. It becomes inhospitable and causes homelessness for the others in the system. If writing writes the singularities and differences that overflow the ontological structure, it bears the potentiality of opening the ontological order of actuality for intervention and reinvention. *Diary*, as an aporetic text that is incomplete and excessive of closure, is irreducible to mimesis and representation, and it exposes the limit of the order of presence. This text defies the conventional analytical strategies to dissect and analyze a text. As a literary event that shakes the ontological order of actuality, this text's unreadability, non-adequation and aporia cause trauma in the ontological order.

Totality and Closure

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes, "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same" (43). As he puts it in another way, ontology is the "identification of the same" (42). Ontology forms totality that turns into totalitarianism because "[o]ntology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power" (46). Western philosophy constitutes a history of violence: Ontology is never a given, and it exercises violence in either exiling or appropriating

the other to fortify its citadel of the realm of the same. Ontology has become a totalizing thinking, or a thinking of totality, by creating a few transcendent abstractions like Being, Unity, Truth, the Good, Reason and Subject to structure the system of thinking, and the dominant principle underlying ontology is "egology" (44): It promotes the image of the self, of the same, and the other either conforms or gets chased away. Peggy Kamuf describes the eternal return to the self and the same this way: "[F]or whatever poses sameness to itself, returns to itself, and claims sovereignty over its selfsame self as over its own homogeneous, undifferentiated domain" ("To Follow" 92). The problem with Western thinking is that the same imposes its will, and the other loses its identity.

Levinas criticizes Heidegger's distinction between Being and being, and his ultimate privileging of Being over beings (45). At the heart of Heidegger's thinking is a solipsistic self-identity of *Dasein*. "Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relationship with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny" (47). Ontology, which amounts to the transcendence of Being, presents itself as a totalizing horizon and comprehends the other in a way that subjects alterity to the order of the same. Ontology, as a philosophy of totality, has founded the disciplines of sociology, psychology and physiology, which Levinas is critical of because they are unwilling to acknowledge the "beyond," the radical heterogeneirty of the other by remaining "deaf to exteriority" (291). Heidegger's quest for the meaning of being misses something fundamental: It always looks for itself, its mirror image, and it eventually "goes home." This thinking of the One, of the Same forms a climate of an "ontological or

transcendental oppression" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 83).

Ontology closes itself against any possibility of the beyond and the Infinite, and this closure of Being can be understood in both temporal and spatial sense (Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction 61). Spatially, closure is maintained by setting clear limits or drawing well-defined boundaries so that we might have the "enclosure of an area" (61). Temporal closure occurs when one imposes teleology. The passage of time is conceived in terms of linear historical succession without disruption. Ontology exists by "the mastery of the limit" (74) both spatially and temporally; it immunizes itself against the passage of time and the claim of exteriority. It also constructs "a conceptual-ideological apparatus" (Zabala and Harder 7) to totalize the self-other relation. In this sense, ontological closure "is no longer simply a technical term designating a finite totality, but rather the terminological name for a problematic that describes the relations between logocentrism and its other" (Critchley 70). Thus, ontology denies the exigency of self-other relation and the possibility of the beyond, and the self is a self of autonomy and alienation.

Heidegger is concerned with "the explanation of the relation between being and beings," and yet Levinas "seeks for the possibility of disclosing the relation to the Other" (Poleschchuk 24). Levinas resists this ontological thinking that actually stifles thinking itself and denies the ethical inter-subjective relationship, and he also refuses to acknowledge the Heideggerian affirmation of Being's primacy over existents. For Levinas, Being does not totalize, as he maintains, "Being is exteriority," (291) that is, "[T]he very exercise of its being consists in exteriority" (290). In Levinas' thinking, we see his departure from the "climate" of Heideggerian

ontological thinking toward an eschatological opening and toward the Infinite. Within this thinking at the limits, exteriority is not thought in a dialectical formula to form a closed system. The eschatological opening unthinks the institutionalized mode of thinking, inviting us to think the unknown and the unthinkable before responsible decisions and actions can be conceived.

While ontology characterizes any relation to the other that is eventually reduced to egology, ethics begins by calling into question the order of the same and the spontaneity of the I (Levinas, *Totality* 143). Injustice occurs when ontology closes, when the "institution of boundaries" is enacted (*Diary* 106), when politics is reduced to "the art of the possible" (*Diary* 125), and when moral principles are compromised as the reality principle of practical political maneuverings. The critical task for thinking is to look for what Levinas names the "beyond" and "infinity," or what Derrida calls "irreducible opening." For Derrida, deconstruction is concerned with the problem of the "irreducible opening" of the metaphysics of presence by "intervene[ing] in the determination of a context from its very inception, and from an injunction, a law, a responsibility that transcends this or that determination of a given context" (*Limited Inc* 152). This "irreducible opening" constitutes the invitation to think the impossible, the otherwise than Being, the trace that is not represented in the order of presence, and the asymmetrical self-other relation. Levinas writes, "the not-able-to-comprehend-the-Infinite-by-thought is, in some way, a positive relation with this thought. . . . The not-able-to-comprehend-the-Infinite-by-thought would signify precisely this condition-or non-condition—of thought" (*Of God* 65). Indeed, this opening keeps thinking possible; it is where thinking and ethics begin, not where they petrify.

In *Diary*, the section of "strong" opinions forms a unity in itself, and we might even say it forms a section of totality of itself, giving shape to the ontological bounds of rational analysis and commentary. These opinions and commentaries are "hard" and "complete" within themselves. The content is a perceptive diagnosis of politics, a powerful critique of "what is wrong with today's world" (21), and the logic and language used to articulate the "strong" opinions remain faithful to the principles of reason and coherence. The style is a straightforward presentation that resembles the philosophical proposition of truth and knowledge. Simon Critchley writes of the commentary that "[it] is the search for the minimal consensus concerning the intelligibility of texts" (24). To read these "Strong" opinions, the reader should master the language, the cultural discourse and the rhetorical strategies to achieve "intelligibility." There is no room for ambivalence, and the reader with access to these opinions will automatically have access to the community based on the "intelligibility."

JC writes in a confident manner, and the issues that he touches on are largely political in nature: the state, political system, terrorism, the law, biopolitical rule, war and intelligence, asylum and immigrants, etc. He exhibits his erudite intellectual thinking, but these opinions remain at a metaphysical level, devoid of "an intuitive feel" (18). They are well-thought and well-crafted expressions of knowledge, with a "know-it-all tone" (70), as JC cites from well-known sources to support his argument, such as Thomas Hobbs and Zeno, making everything convincing, certain and knowable. The separate pieces of the opinion impress the reader with an ethos of authority: The narrative space of the strong opinions allows no other voices other than that of JC; it allows for no possibility of affective

exposure. These strong opinions assume the form of philosophical propositions, *as if* the enclosed and totalized space of these strong opinions were impervious to the personal narratives running along with them. In the well-secluded narrative space of the opinions, Anya seems to be excluded altogether. She types the transcript for JC, yet she gets no sense of meaning from what she types. She participates in the production of opinions by being excluded from them.

Simon Critchely writes about "*clotural* reading" in his discussion of deconstruction's trembling of ontology in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. "*Clotural* reading" is characterized by two moments: the first designates "commentary," while the second is the "moment of alterity" that "opens up within the text which allows it to deliver itself up to a wholly other reading" (89). In *Diary*, Coetzee invites us to *unread* the text—to read against the aim of "intelligibility" and "consensus." The jealously guarded authority of the strong opinions evaporates as they are constantly revised, parodied, and even made of fun by Anya. As JC also admits himself, writing has *other* meaning that is "quite different from what the lexicon says, where the metaphoric spark is always one jump ahead of the decoding function, where another, unforeseen reading is always possible" (23). This "wholly other reading" constitutes an act of unreading that reads the ellipses and the traces in an ethical response to the call of the other. Unreadability is the possibility of opening and reinvention, and in the following section I will explore the possibility emanating from the unreading of this impossible text.

Unreadability of *Diary of a Bad Year*

Diary of a Bad Year is an unreadable text. To say it is unreadable, however,

does not mean to see it as a failed work, or to treat it in a purely negative way. To read *Diary* as an unreadable text is to recognize it as a text that is irreducible to the philosophical mode of questioning. The negative is the enabling condition in which something affirmative is sought in reading this impossible text. The positive force in the unreadibility of *Diary* manifests in the suspension of the norms of reading; it demands an impossible reading, another (an *other*) way of reading other than the onto-epistemological imposition of meaning.

In the encounter with *Diary*, one has the right to read it, but one is simultaneously denied the authority to read and to conclude with a pre-given and determinable meaning. When we encounter a text, we tend to determine its identity and unity by ensuring its boundaries and limits (Derrida, "Before the Law" 183, 184). All possible readings are grounded in the categorical and imperative mode of reading that would treat a text as verification or justification of the ontological Said. Such a reading, in the form of commentary, is a norm-guided reading and follows the "deterministic" law (*Diary* 97) because it coincides the beginning with the end and proves the preconceived proposition: The act of reading is conditioned by the production of acceptable and legitimate interpretations. Such possible readings adhere to the readable within the textual boundaries and the authority of the author-subject with the dream of an adequate and exhaustive interpretation. To read in a pre-given way is to finish reading and enclose the text within ontological boundaries.

Yet, we are denied the comfort of such assurance of meaning in the encounter with *Diary*, a text that can be described as "infinitely open, cryptic and parodic" (Derrida, *Spurs* 137). An ethical reading would be a reading "before" the law, before

a certain ontology turns into an enterprise of monopoly and totalizes the order of actuality. In writing, we find rhetorics, paradoxes, and the undecidable that resist interpretive exhaustion and tremble the edifice of ontology. The singularity of *Diary* "cannot be assimilated into any overarching explanatory conceptual schema" (Critchley, "Derrida: The Reader" 2) and involves the unreadable: Topographically, its three-tiered structure frustrates any attempt to read in a conventional and coherent way; the crisscrossing of the three narrative voices upsets the reader in identifying the authority in the narrative; the confusion between the genres of fiction, "strong" and "soft" opinions, diaries, and reflections causes the difficulty of categorization; the paralleling of the soft and strong opinions results in the constant parodying and even revision of the strong opinions. The unreadable—topographically, narratively, and generically—witnesses the force of the disruptive and strange logic of *différance*, the deferral of meaning. The unreadable attends to the experience of the impossible, to the traces of those denied presence in the ontological order of actuality. The unreadable reads what remains to be read. Paradoxically, the unreadability of *Diary* inaugurates its reading. As Derrida writes, "[u]nreadibility does not arrest reading, does not leave it paralyzed in the face of opaque surface: rather, it starts reading and writing and translation moving again" ("Living On" 116).

The primary task for us in the encounter with an unreadable text like *Diary* is how *not* to read it, that is, how to do justice to a text full of aporias by refraining from applying presuppositions and universally applicable meaning onto it. Paul Patton describes *Diary* as "a paradoxical book" in many ways, "a book containing many paradoxes and aporias" ("Coetzee's Opinions" 53). To do justice to this

unreadable text is not to resolve the textual inconsistency and aporias dialectically; instead, as Derrida alerts us, the experience of aporia "gives or promises the thinking of the path, provokes the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible" (*Memories for Paul de Man* 132). Each time, an aporetic text calls for an unconditional reading that intervenes in the determinations that structure the act of reading in each given context. *Diary* demands the reader to expose him- or herself to the force of the text, to the excess of the literary event that frustrates any act of reading that attempts to achieve consensus in commentary. In this sense the (non)reading is never proper reading and remains a reading to come. In *Diary*, the reading to come begins at the place where narrative stumbles, through the trajectory that transgresses narrative unity and coherence, and never arrives at telos. This act of unreading *Diary* undecides the meaning through the disruption and suspension of established norms, programs, conventions and moral codes. As Nicholas Royle explains, "To encounter the unreadable is not to bring reading to an end, but rather to acknowledge the demand that reading cannot stop, that reading begins again, that reading always and necessarily belongs to another time" (161).

One way to unread *Diary* is to attend to the moment "before the law," before the institutionalization of authority and ontology, in which the modality of the "as-if" undecides meaning, and this moment "before the law" would give promise and bear the potentiality to displace the reified worldview. The literary "as-if" envisions a world "not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself" (Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* 328). *Diary*, as a text that engages with the world yet without the world, is tied to the ontological order of actuality, and it bears the

potentiality to loosen the structures that reify the world. It is a text that thinks both the same and difference: how the same is prevented from forming totality in itself by the presence of the other. In a world in which “the social apparatus has become so hardened that what lies before them as a means of possible fulfillment presents itself as radically impossible,” a non-reading of *Diary* could constitute an ethical promise to reconfigure the world, to envision a world in which “things could have been different” (Adorno. qtd. in De, La Durantaye, Leland. 6)

Literary Potentiality: The “As-If”

Coetzee describes literary potentiality as the possibility “to rediscover fiction’s capacity to reconfigure the rules of discourse, to find a position outside current power relations from which to speak” (*Doubling the Point* 9), which comes close to Derrida’s idea that “[T]he work, the opus, does not belong to the field[;] it is the transformer of the field” (“Before the Law” 215). Coetzee’s description of literary potentiality, in the first place, confirms writing’s critical engagement with the order of actuality, in defiance of the view that literary writing is fundamentally escapist and fictionalist, detached from the world itself. In the second place, it affirms the ethical promise of writing to deontologize, and thus potentialize the ontological order of actuality in the welcome of the other and others who are denied their presence in the order of presence. While social discourse has been dominated mainly by the two powerful and dominant discourses of history and politics in their construction of a hegemonic order of actuality, Coetzee reserves the possibility of change for literary writing.[3]

[3] The historical and political discourses put emphasis on the referential and mimetic aspect of language, upon which the articulation of meaning depends, and the stability of the production of meaning has empowered them to construct a hegemonic worldview. Yet, the hegemony of the

Literary potentiality is seen in "the fold of undecidability that allows all the values to be inverted" and to be reinvented (Derrida, *Given Time* 54). Potentiality names the force of the unrealized and the experience of the impossible. As conceived by Giorgio Agamben,[4] potentiality is synonymous with impotentiality, that is, the *potentiality not to*. The relation between potentiality and impotentiality is not one of dialectical synthesization: Impotentiality is not the negative counterpart or the absence of potentiality. Instead, impotentiality is potentiality in the form of active withdrawal from the act; it is "potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality" (Agamben, *Potentialities* 180). Agamben further explains: "To be potential means: to be on one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity" (ibid 182). Potentiality is potentiality *as such*—Potentiality preserves itself in its own impotentiality, not to be appropriated by and actualized in the order of the same.

In Agamben's thinking, potentiality gives rise to "decreation": "something that brings the contingent—'what could have been but was not'—into view" (De la Durantaye 23). Agamben renders the division between what is and what could have been indifferent: "The creation that is not fulfilled is neither a re-creation nor an eternal repetition; it is, rather, a decreation in which what happened and what did not happen are returned to their originary unity in the mind of God, while what could have not been but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have

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worldview is threatened by the literary discourse, embedded in which is the force of ambivalence. Daniel Just writes, "literary language is forever suspended between the referential and the figural" (1), and we can well imagine that while the referential is the source of the stability of meaning, the figural disrupts that stability.

[4] I am aware of the differences between Agamben's overall project that engages sovereignty and *Homo Sacer* and Derrida's deconstruction project, and I attempt no reconciliation of the two thinkers' differences. In their respective discussion of im/potentiality (Agamben) and the impossible (Derrida), I register the idea of something that is irreducible to the ontological order: Derrida names it the trace, while Agamben calls it the remnant.

been but was not" (*Potentialities* 270). To decreate does not mean to destroy, to nullify what has been created; to decreate is to restore events to their originary potentiality, to their contingency. The contingent refers to the modality in which a being can both be and not be (ibid 261), freed from teleology and the logic of causality. It is *as if* everything were possible: ontology, politics, and history are crisscrossed with other ontology (ontological worldview is not absolute, unique, irreplaceable), other politics (political realism is an illusion), and other histories (objectivity and linearity in history narrative are a myth). In this sense, things could have been different, events could have turned out differently, and the ontological order of actuality could have been structured in a different way. To decreate the world means that "the actual world is led back to its right not to be; all possible worlds are led back to their right to existence" (ibid 271). To be or not to be, that is the question: existence verges on contingency, and beings are "in relation to their own non-Being" (Agamben, *Potentialities* 182). The possibility is reserved for that which is not realized to be realized, as Van der Heiden states in plain language, "[W]hat is, can also not be, and what is not, can also be" (21).

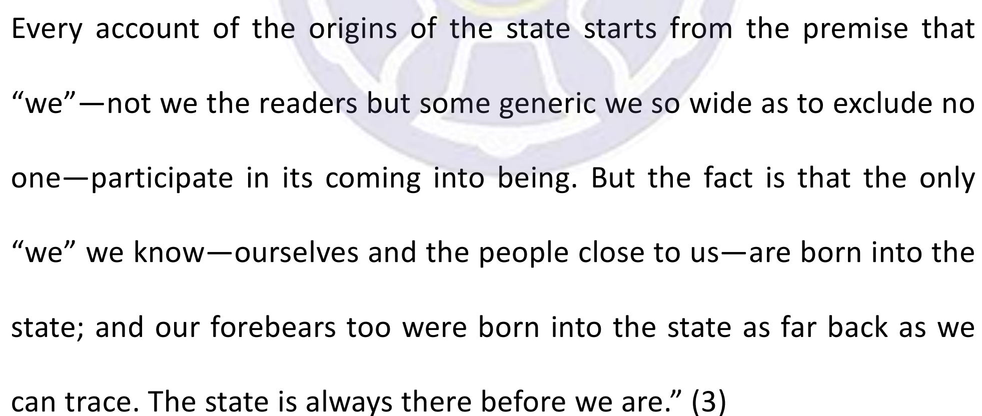
Thus, when we think of potentiality, we also think of impotentiality; when we talk about knowledge, vision, ontology and totality, we should also include ignorance, darkness, exteriority and infinity in the discussion. Literary potentiality names the "potentiality-of-being-otherwise" (van der Heiden 21). Against the will of ontology to stabilize, we see a constant rethinking, realignment, and recalibration of the subject, border, and self-other relation as writing both recedes from and exceeds the ontological worldview and speaks to the incommensurable, the fortuitous, and the undecidable. Through literary intervention, we find that

ontology is founded on its deconstruction, thus open to the possibility of re-inscription.

The exceptional three-tier layout and the juxtaposition of the diverse narrative voices on any single page in *Diary* give us much to think the possibility of re-ordering the paradigm. This unique writing technique is not new, as Eric Paul Meljac informs us that both Gabriel Josipovici's 1974 short story "Mobius the Stripper" and Coetzee's *Diary* "employ horizontal bars to separate different veins of narrative" (92). The juxtaposition of multiple narrative voices in one single page is not simply an antidote to monologism in terms of an articulation of the Bakhtinian polyvocality of narrative voices. We have to go beyond the simple interpretation of dialogism. More urgently, this exceptional structure addresses the questions of form, authority, boundary and ontological paradigm. The "horizontal lines" that separate the different narratives act as "thresholds" (Meljac 96), that is, the space of both connection and separation that differentiate the different narratives and yet invite permeability among them. The threshold designates the impossibility of marking a stable territory, leading to the result that the strong opinions are always tempered with by the soft opinions and personal narratives. For instance, it is hardly possible to resist the temptation to read across the border, to read JC's hard opinion along with Anya's reflections marked by intuitive touch. When JC ruminates in abstraction on Al Qaida, guiding system, terrorism, or democracy, Anya says, "I try to tell him to give it[politics] up. . . . He could write about cricket, for example" (26) because she knows that "[t]he kind of writing you do doesn't work with politics" (35). While JC drives for the pure political reasoning, Anya's reflection keeps haunting his metaphysical rumination with the message that politics is not

about "logic" (35), and that politics is not reducible to well-reasoned argument. In the interfacing between JC's hard opinions and Anya's reflectiona, we see that Coetzee does not attempt to integrate the diverse narratives for the sake of unity, but explores how the different narratives at the "threshold" affect each other, and how the coexistence of different narratives at one particular historical point enacts the opening of ontological structure.

Writing performs the *potentiality not to* by displacing and defamiliarizing the world. In *Diary*, the three-tiered typography, the polyphonic narrative, and the crisscrossing of temporalities embedded in the narrative all contribute to the trembling and possible reframing of ontological order of actuality. At the very beginning, JC posits the theory of the ontological origin of the state and the possibility of the "reinvention" of the state:



> Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that "we"—not we the readers but some generic we so wide as to exclude no one—participate in its coming into being. But the fact is that the only "we" we know—ourselves and the people close to us—are born into the state; and our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace. The state is always there before we are." (3)

He goes on: "We are born subject," and the moment of our birth marks our "subjection" to the social apparatus (4). We are born into the "empirical ontology" in the form of the state (115), into the political system in which we acquire language, identity and the sense of communal belonging, and the state enforces its

sovereignty through biopolitical rule of the population (not people, but the demographic-statistical term population). In a sense, we assume that the system has existed before we were born and will outlast us, and thus that the system remains constant and unchangeable. The population acquiesces to biopolitical rule by "entering the realm (protection) of the law" (*Diary* 3). Those who choose to stay outside the state and the law would become "outlaw[s]" (3).[5] Our existence depends on the smooth operation of the system; if it is disrupted, our existence and identity would be threatened.

The institutionalization of the system is never a neutral thing, as it triggers ethical consequences and repercussions. In a philosophical sense, the system "can be taken to mean a totalization in the configuration, a continuity of all statements, a *form* of coherence (not coherence itself), involving the syllogicity of logic, a certain *syn* which is no longer simply that of gathering in general, but rather of the assemblage of onto*logical* propositions" (Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret* 3-4). The system is founded on the totalization of territory: It partitions space—political, social, economic, and cultural. It puts an "empirical ontology" in place that regulates self-other relation, economic production, socio-political life, etc. When a system is put in place, it includes while it also excludes others.

In *Diary*, if JC's strong opinions form a philosophical totality, Alan (Anya's boyfriend) patronizes the all-encompassing structure of capitalist globalization.[6]

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[5] JC does not go on to elaborate the problem of the "outlawed" person. The truth is that we do not have that freedom to choose whether we want to stay within or without the bounds of the law. As Agamben's elaboration of "bare life" has shed light on this, the state maintains an elaborate mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. "Homo Sacer," being an outlawed citizen, is still subject to the penalty of death, so he is still "included through [his] exclusion" in the sphere of law (*Homo Sacer* 170). This mechanism of inclusive exclusion exempts no one, not even the outlawed person.

[6] At the beginning of *Disgrace*, Coetzee documents the global phenomenon of "the great rationalization" (3) that has taken place in all academic departments. Professor Lurie, a scholar in the field of Romanticism, is integrated into the "rationalized personnel" (ibid) and teaches mainly practical subjects, like "Communication Skills" that will prepare students for their future career in the

He believes that there is nowhere to stand outside this economic system since the whole world is now structured and governed by the law of economic competition. As an "economic rationalist" (118), he fully subscribes to the belief that "[w]e are all players in the global market: if we do not compete, we will perish" (ibid). He sees the world in two dimensions: One is the individual and the other economic (79). Despite the fact that neoliberalism privileges respect for individual freedom and autonomy, "freedom and autonomy are instrumentalized in neoliberal terms" (Murray 322). Alan puts it in a self-complacent way: The economic dimension "not only sums up the individual, it also transcends it" (81). Situated in the networking system of globalization, politics has degraded into "capitalist-parliamentarianism" (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 7), and financial globalization turns into what Badiou calls "the absolute sovereignty of capital's empty universality" (ibid). Thus, the state turns into "the managerial state" that "provide[s] security while we get on with our life-activities, which taken all together . . . constitute the economy. The state wraps a shield around the economy" (*Diary* 96). For Allan, the economic dimension has primacy over the individual dimension: "[I]ndividuals are players in a structure that transcends individual motives." They "work within the system, whether they are aware of it or not" (97). The system, whether you want to call it capitalist modernity or financial globalization, constitutes the market, and people lead their daily life according to the rules of the market.

Politics has turned into management, and justice, in its compromised form, is

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globalized capitalist society. The studies of humanities in the "corporatized university" (Raja 2) is being instrumentalized, subject to the same logic of rationalization that serves the purposes and missions of the global corporations. Neoliberal capitalism normalizes the university, propagating the form of "knowledge for the sake of profit and appropriative drives" (ibid 1) and educating "noncritical, but aware, citizens of the world" (ibid 2). Apparently, Alan represents such a noncritical but aware citizen of the world.

defined as "the safeguarding of individual rights and liberties" according to the rules of financial globalization (Murray 322). We see this very conditional and parochial idea of justice in Alan's absurd misunderstanding of Nietzsche's "beyond good and evil" (98). For him, it simply means that the capitalist system is beyond/transcending "the good and evil," thus that moral concerns have no place in the economic system. Capitalist modernity has resolved all the major conflicts in the contemporary epoch, even if minor ones might go on without disrupting the functioning of the system: "There are no big issues in any modern state, not any more. That is what defines modernity. The big issues, the issues that count, have been settled. . . . Politics is no longer where the action is. Politics is a sideshow" (*Diary* 99). It is simply impossible not to be reminded of Francis Fukuyama's endorsing remarks for America-led global capitalism in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and Derrida's critique of this endist historicist idea. For Alan and Fukuyama, the system is driven by teleology and closed to difference.

To think justice (in its absolute sense) and to respond to the demand from the other, however, it is imperative to think how the spectral excess can shake the onto-epistemological register of identity and presence, and how to reinvent the state and potentialize politics so that "what has been unseen, or unheard, or devalued before can now be perceived as worthy of attention" (Clarkson 2). Against the totality of political system, JC's meditation on the state points to another direction:

> If, despite the evidence of our senses, we accept the premise that we or our forebears created the state, then we must also accept its entailment:

> that we or our forebears could have created the state in some other form, if we had chosen; perhaps, too, that we could change it if we collectively so decided. (3)

Although JC admits that it would be “very hard indeed to change its form,” (3) there remains the possibility that the state could have been created *otherwise*, in another form. Any discussion of the existence of the state cannot be undertaken without considering its historicity. The state convinces the population that the state is a given and hides its historicity, which has helped to contribute to the enclosure of the political system. However, logically speaking, when there is the need of closure, it entails that there is also the possibility of opening and the reinvention of the system in another form. Simply put, one form of the state has been realized, but it does not prevent other forms of the state from being realized. In Ogden’s reading of *Diary*, he argues that “the problem of coming into being” is posed as “the problem of opening” (Ogen 469). Existence is fundamentally subject to the state of becoming. When we address the problem of how the state has come into being in the first place, we need to pay attention to the opening, or the gap, through which we can intervene to retool the dynamics of the form and formation of the political system.

When JC informs us that the state could have been created in another form, we can understand that he is positing “a theory of potency” rather than “a theory of act” (Gulli 223), a theory of possibility rather than a theory of actuality. The essence and foundation of any system is not natural and universal: It has its historicity and contingency. Its coming into being is rooted in “epistemological

creativity," but it "efface[s] that contingency and creative power in favor of their legislative and authoritative power" (McManus 1). This "epistemological creativity" resonates with what Derrida calls the "as-if" that structures literature, philosophy, and law in "Before the Law." One way for writing to intervene, that is, to reconfigure the world is to pay attention to the modality of the "as-if" that underlies all discourses that found the ontology. Derrida writes: "This small word, the 'as' of the 'as if' as well as the 'as' of the 'as such'—whose authority founds and justifies every ontology as well as every phenomenology, every philosophy as science or knowledge—this small word, 'as,' might well be the name of the true problem, not to say the target, of deconstruction" (Derrida, *Without Alibi* 234). The ontological order resides in the "as" by effacing the "if," which means ontology nullifies all the originary possibilities that could have been realized. It justifies its totality by forgetting its historicity and contingency, and it fortifies its sovereignty by means of a self-justifying means-and-end logic, by aligning itself with historical teleology.

This coincidence between origin and end turns into monopoly of the shaping of the order of actuality, and it ultimately voids ontology of its origin and historicity. In his discussion of the universal dictum of Kant's categorical imperative, Derrida was "concerned with the 'as if' in the second formulation of the categorical imperative," (190) as he cites from Kant: "Act as if (*als ob*) the maxim of your action were by your will to turn into a universal law of nature" (ibid). The Kantian categorical imperative works as if the law, by nature, resides in the universe, waiting to be discovered. The law rids itself of provenance and historicity, rendering itself void and turning itself into what Derrida calls "transcendental signified" or

what Gert-Jan van der Heiden names "ontotheology." The law presents itself by "withholding" itself, making itself impervious to time, insular from any access through discursive means. "[T]he law of the law" stipulates that "the law must be without history, genesis, or any possible derivation" ("Before the Law" 191). Ontology "remains out of reach for the praxis of interpretation" (van der Heiden 2) by disguising its existential involvement in historicity and its contingency (that is, it could have been otherwise). Our access to being and exposure to the real are determined in advance by the self-justifying sovereign power and biopolitical rule.

Derrida informs us of the complicity between literature and other discourses in "Before the Law," and he also writes in *Limited Inc* that "literature and the study of literature have much to teach about right and law" (134). He examines the law of fiction and the fiction of law and points out that the "as-if" actually "introduces narrativity and fiction into the very core of legal thought" ("Before the Law" 190). In *Limited Inc*, we learn from Derrida that "the rules, and even the statements governing the relations of 'nonfiction standard discourse' and its fictional 'parasites,' are not things found in nature, but laws, symbolic inventions, or conventions, institutions that, in their very normality as well as in their normativity, entail something of the fictional" (133-34). It turns out that the "natural" order we perceive is accepted as "natural" by people who do not question its normativity and legitimacy. The order is actually imposed on the universe, thus influencing the way we perceive the world. On writing "mathematics," JC alludes to Jorge Luis Borges' fable "Funes the Memorious" and draws this conclusion:

[T]he order we see in the universe may not reside in the universe at all,

> but in the paradigms of thought we bring to it. The mathematics we have invented (in some accounts) or discovered (in others) . . . may equally well be a private language—private to human beings with human brains—in which we doodle on the walls of our cave." (96)

The order is embedded in the human language, built-in in a particular discourse that is universalized. In *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello also maintains that rational thinking is simply one way of coming to terms with the world, and yet we tend to universalize it as *the* way of comprehending the world. (I will say more about this in the following chapter in Costello's discussion of human-animal relation.) When writing on "Intelligent Design," JC exposes the myth of a universal law. He points to the naivety of those who "elevate the operating rules of Western Science into epistemological axioms" (83) by exposing the insufficiency of intellectual or scientific "grasp" of the world (85). The truth is that the world as we perceive it comes down to the representation we have of it. Clive Cazeauz puts it this way: "[T]he order we perceive in the world is a reflection of the order we require for meaningful, intelligible experience" (Clive Cazeauz 5; qtd. in Clarkson 11).

We need to understand the "as" as "artifactuality," and we are not supposed to forget the fact that the order of actuality is actually constructed, thus fictive:

> "[A]ctuality is indeed made. . . . not given, but actively produced; it is sorted, invested, and performatively interpreted by a range of hierarchising and selective procedures—fictitious or artificial procedures which are always subservient to various powers and

> interests of which their 'subjects' and agents . . . are never sufficiently aware." (Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality" 528)

Indeed, the modality of the "as-if" affects all discourse and experience, as Derrida writes again, "an 'as if' that affects all language and all experience with possible fictionality, phantasmaticity, [and] spectrality" (*Negotiations* 354). The "as-if" can neither be conceived as false or fictionalist, nihilist, nor reduced to hypothetical conceptualization, "to the arbitrary, to dream, to imagination, to utopia, to hypothesis" (Derrida, *Without Alibi* 210). The "as-if" names the experience of the impossible; it is the site of difference, of possibility and potentiality. It "articulates the staging, the presentation (*Darstellung*) rather than representation (*representatio*) of that which is neither true nor false but which may be conceived" (Julian Wolfreys 145). It allows one not to see the world ideologically, through colored lenses, that is, as conditioned by logocentric or official perspectives; instead, one redevelops one's rapport with the world, seeing it as it might be, "with a slight adjustment, a meager difference" that makes all the difference (Agamben, *The Time that Remains* 69). In exposing the "as-if" of reality, writing will reconfigure the "as" by bringing back the "if," deontologize the order of actuality by restoring potentiality.

The play of the "as if" marks the experience of the "perhaps," which is inscribed in the risk of non-knowledge, tremor, evasion of consistency and constancy, and disruption of presence and permanence. The "perhaps" names "the possibilization of the impossible possible" (Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* 29). The possibility opened up by the "perhaps" undecides the meaning, unthinks the

thought, and undoes the ontological stability, by "call[ing] into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a proper identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies" (Derrida, *Aporias* 34). The modality of the "as-if" and the impossible experience of the "perhaps" articulate with the "play," the "inappropriate use of the sacred" (Agamben, *Profanations* 75). Ontology protects itself by surrounding itself with a layer of sanctity, thus preventing itself from exposure and free use. For Agamben, "[p]lay as an organ of profanation is in decline everywhere" (76), that is, people have forgotten how to play, and things and events have been divested of their potentiality. To play is to break the mythological aura of the law, to disrespect the rules and transgress the boundaries erected to divide the sacred from the profane. In other words, to play is to free things from the sanctified domain, to put them back to their originary potentiality. In this sense, "play" is a serious matter, as it cuts across all political, legal, social, identitarian, intellectual, and linguistic boundaries, bringing forth "the possibility of the impossible, the 'play' of a certain excess in relation to any mechanical movement, oriented process, path traced in advance, or teleological program" (Derrida, *Without Alibi* xvii).

In *Diary*, Coetzee plays with the idea of ontology and authority. It is a text whose multiple-tiered framing device splits open the ontological enclosure of narrative, and whose "playful" rhetorical force displaces the authority of one single narrative voice. The juxtaposition of three narratives allotted their separate slots on a single page constitutes the first difficulty, but also new possibility of reading *Diary*. The choice of which narrative to begin with, and how to proceed makes all

the difference in reading this unconventional text. The first difficult choice is whether one should read horizontally or vertically. To proceed horizontally as one is used to reading a normal text is to submit to the expectation of unity within a complete unit. If one reads the first piece "On the Origins of the State" horizontally, one gets a complete and overall picture of JC's meditation on this subject. One will identify the main argument and note the supporting ideas with the illustrations. However, one might feel tempted to read vertically—to read part of the opinion and move on to JC's personal voice observing the world with a more affective and intimate tone. Perhaps one can choose not to follow the prescribed "top-down" principle by beginning with JC's personal narrative that runs on to the following pages, and then coming back to the first page and read his opinions. However, one feels uncertain about whether one will miss anything if he or she makes the decision to read horizontally, or whether one will get any new ideas if one reads vertically.

The scenario becomes all the more complicated when one gets to the sixth piece of opinion, where JC's authoritative narrative and his more personal voice are joined by Anya's voice. *Perhaps* the reader can begin with JC's hard opinion, or with his personal narrative, or with Anya's personal narrative. If the reader begins with Anya's personal narrative, he or she can read JC's personal narrative next and see how the two personal narratives entangle with each other. *Perhaps* the reader can read JC's hard opinions next and observe how she comments on the opinions. But a word of caution here: To list the possible ways of reading this text does not intimate the logical need of mathematical permutation; rather, the point is that if one begins *otherwise* than the prescribed beginning, one goes on a different path

that opens onto a rhizomatic plane.

Perhaps does not name the pseudo choices available to people to choose from Candidate A, or B, or C in a ballot. It undecides the meaning at each decisive moment and haunts the whole system with the possibility of what JC calls potential reinvention. The system has to be profaned, as Agamben suggests, so that the potentiality to reinvent the system promises new hope and allows for the reinscription of the laws and rules that structure the system. The initially two-tiered and then three-tiered topographical layout reveals the fictionality, the artifactuality of onto-epistemological representation of reality. It is always possible to seek new hope and possibility within finitude by always beginning anew, and each choice of a new beginning leads onto a different path, which contributes to heterogeneous readings that defy a unified meaning. If the reader can always begin anew as if each time it were a new beginning, it is indicative of the fact that the worldview constructed by onto-epistemological representation is neither fixed nor stable. The possibility that we can always begin otherwise suggests that ontology can be reframed, teleology reconfigured, and the system reinvented. The enclosure of narrative space is no longer guaranteed by a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the legitimacy to proclaim its sanctity is equally disrupted by the loss of authority.

Ontological construction of actuality cannot remain immune from the questioning and intervention of the other. As I suggested above, JC's hard opinions form a universe of totality in itself. Yet, JC's enclosed strong opinions are haunted by his and Anya's personal narratives. Anya complains that the strong opinions are "out of touch" (222), and at the encouragement and inspiration from Anya (35), JC

"put[s] together a second gentler set of opinions" (45). The "soft" opinions address many of the issues dealt with in "strong" opinions, but with an affective tone. Anya suggests writing "reminiscences" (67), stories "with human interest" (77). In contrast to writing commentary that facilitates a sense of certainty, mastery and instant satisfaction, JC cannot expect what is to come in writing stories, as stories write themselves. He includes more personal themes, such as memories and dreams, his father, emotions and kisses, ageing, birds, boredom, etc. In writing the soft opinions, JC dewrites his strong opinions, and his insulated ego is affected by Anya.

Anya's seemingly innocent question "Who listens to my opinions?" (101) raises the question of the poetics of listening. Totality of a system can be secured only through the imposition of single narrative authority. The problem with the political system, including democracy, is that the structure essentially totalizes while it allocates rooms in which different voices can be heard, but eventually neutralized.[7] Totality is reinforced by tolerance:[8] Political systems offer conditional hospitality in the form of tolerance, in which the regime has set all the conditions by which the population should abide before they are allowed to express their opinions. In this sense, hospitality is more like technique of control than the opening toward alterity. As JC observes, disagreement, cynicism, and contempt are allowed and "accommodated within the system" (15), if not eventually overlooked. You have

[7] JC describes his opinions on politics as "pessimistic anarchistic quietism, or anarchist quiestic pessimism, or pessimistic quietistic anarchism" (203): anarchistic because he distrusts politics as relations of power; quietistic because he withdraws from a self-will that falls in love with power; pessimistic because he feels overwhelmed in a world of totality and totalitarianism.

[8] Maria Bolesti informs us that Wendy Brown sees the concept of tolerance as the crux of contemporary "civilizational discourse." The emergence of "a global renaissance in tolerance talk" has coincided with multiculturalism underlying the discussions of liberal democratic citizenship (53). In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Derrida discusses tolerance as a paternalistic gesture and sees it as synonymous with conditional hospitality.

your say, and we respect your opinions, but the structure remains unchanged.

Any political system that is unwilling to listen turns itself into a totalitarian regime. Even democracy is also a "totalitarian" regime that pretends to listen to people's opinions in the form of free elections because it is not only closed but also maintains an authority to rule (*Diary* 15). The authority usurps the enunciating power by adopting the role of active and even aggressive interlocutor, always dictating orders, prescribing norms, announcing rules and preaching ideologies. As Loving observes, "Incessant speaking is essentially a power position which demands that one's own narration take center stage" (Loving 5).

In *Diary*, Anya appears as a dwarfed figure facing a towering JC, a giant who assumes authority as an accomplished writer and whose opinions attain sophisticated wisdom. How is it possible, then, to listen to the opinions of Anya without assuming the gesture of paternalistic tolerance? Listening demands passivity, perhaps a passivity more passive than patience as Levinas maintains. What Coetzee attempts in *Diary* is both an opening of the system and a disruption of the authority, allowing the articulation of different voices devoid of the jurisdiction of the authority. In its engagement with reality, writing resists being contained within the jurisdiction of authority, particularly in the form of the author, the very embodiment of authority. As a novelist of certain fame built on the novels he wrote in the past, JC writes in *Diary*, "Stories tell themselves. . . . They[stories] don't get told. . . . Never try to impose yourself. Wait for the story to speak for itself" (55). In the event of writing, it is not the author who chooses to write stories, but stories tell themselves in their performative act. Authorship does not automatically give rise to the act of writing. The literary event dissolves the sovereign urge to

impose its dominating narrative to ensure the stability of meaning and confer authority on the figure of the author who pretends to preside over the practice of writing and interpretation of that work. JC asks this rhetorical question: “But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically?” (151). As JC informs us, authority is built through “rhetorical tricks” (149), which means authority is merely formal, not substantial. The rhetorical tricks create an illusion of the authority, inviting messianic intervention in the saying of the literary event, offering hospitality to the other who also participates in the saying. Ultimately, writing is not merely a matter of what a text means; instead, the literary event gives rise to a movement in which it does not impose the meaning but listens to the silenced voice in the ontological system.

To listen is to listen to that which withdraws from the order of presence. Starting on Page 157 through the following pages, the middle-bar narrative remains void. Coetzee does not remove that empty space by incorporating it into Anya’s narrative or JC’s hard opinions. Why does Coetzee preserve this space that is void/devoid of narrative, and how do we read this nothingness? What ethical possibilities are there in this void? The first encounter with this void within the narrative space leaves the reader at a loss as to what to do with it because it frustrates our desire to comprehend a text. Western philosophy is founded on the thinking of presence, and truth is construed in terms of revelation, light and reason. Apollonian illumination is the condition of philosophical thinking. Suddenly, right in the middle of the narrative stream, the reader is exposed to the void, the absence of meaning, something incomprehensible to the knowing subject. Reason fails to

work, as there seems to be nothing to comprehend. The spacing of void within the continuum of narrative defies the norm that we expect in a narrative that is supposed to be filled with signifying chains that generate meaning. Onto-epistemology comprehends the universe through the gesture of grasp and mastery, grounding itself in completeness and plentitude, and it tolerates no secret, no void, no alterity within what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence. How can this philosophy that thinks presence also think absence? Can it grasp the void?

Through creating the presence of the void within a terrain where other narratives run on, Coetzee invites the reader to think this void without translating it automatically into literal nothingness or interpreting it in dialectical terms as the antithetical elements to be synthesized. This is not a simple question of what narrative to fill in; instead, we have to think the question of how to think the absence. Coetzee's attempt of keeping the narrative space void is to raise our awareness of the fact that it is always the authorities that decide on the laws and rules that privilege presence over absence. To define the void as lack is to overlook the fact that the void overflows with traces and potentiality. While philosophy thinks in terms of presence, plentitude, autonomy and self-sufficiency, the void is anonymous and marks the limit of thinking. It refers to that which cannot appear in the order of presence, which is incomprehensible to the logic. In a dialectical thinking, nothingness is perceived literally as nothingness, as nonexistence. But, what is not recognized by the order of the same does exist, only in the form of nonexistence, in the *il y a*. The other appears in the form of nonappearance, which is not recognized by the same, by the self. If philosophy only thinks in terms of presence and revelation, the void challenges the reader to think the absence, to

think “the abyss beneath the text” (Almond 466). As Ian Almond writes, the void “enables all its various counter-texts, sub-texts, contexts to proliferate in a ‘bottomlessness of infinite redoubling’” (Almond 466). The void is not lack: It is the unfolding of iterability and infinitude. When Derrida writes, “Literature voids itself in its limitlessness,” (*Acts of Literature* 177) he means the semantic void frees the text from logocentrism, from the teleological bondage.

This void is the site of non-knowledge, of mystery and secret. It is dangerous; Melijac calls it “an act of narrative seduction” (100) because it not only fascinates the reader but also sucks all textual meanings. With the dissolution of meaning and authorities, and with disruption in the totalized boundary and linear temporality, Coetzee reserves this spatial void for the other who has been denied its presence. What is not allowed to appear in the order of presence is simply without name, identity and claim to any property, thus uncounted and discardable. They are not given the place they deserve. But, the void, inassimilable to realm of knowledge, is the place reserved for the other. Very ironically, despite its blankness, the reader can hardly overlook the presence of the textual void. The void can never get resolved or dissolved, and it keeps haunting the reader: Whose narrative is it supposed to be? Does it belong to JC, Anya, or some vatical voice or unnameable other? How, if possible, can we listen to the silence of the void? The void arrests the conceptual coherence and logical unity that preserves the totality of ontological order of actuality. The void leaves the narrative unsealed, out of joint, and out of place. It is the site of traces and differences, the site of possibility reserved for the unrealized. The narrative space remains open to that which is to come. The void will always be there, incomprehensible and open toward the future.

Conclusion

While ontology suppresses the "as-if," thus installing dogmatic certitude and wiping out all possibilities of whatever and whoever is to come, literary writing holds constant vigilance against dogmatism and foreclosure so that we are not held hostage by dogmatic thought, as Hans Vaihinger says, "[P]oetry [is] a valid counterpoise to the pessimism which arises from a one-sided preoccupations with the actual" (331). It is this force of resistance coming from the literary "as-if" that has the potentiality to rend ontology, to render ontology inoperative. This experience comports us to resist dogmatic morality, sovereignty and biopolitical rule by deontologizing the established political rule, institutionalized ideological system, and received opinions.

Writing writes difference and otherness, and it breaks generic stability and trembles logocentric hold of meaning. With its exceptional three-tiered structure, the coexistence of narrative voices and the presence of the void haunting the narratives, *Diary* defamiliarizes the present order of actuality. This text embodies a force that constantly disrupts the illusion of the hierarchical stability and logocentric consistency that structures the order of actuality. Ontological construction is haunted by the sense of incompletion. Ontological totality is on the wane, as literature writes otherwise than what is proper to Being, as it writes from elsewhere, which is never present to presence.

The literary "as-if" deontologizes the present order of actuality; in other words, it potentializes the order of actuality. Injustice occurs when ontology closes, when certain groups of people are excluded, their suffering made irrelevant, their

memory forgotten, and their traces erased from history. Literary writing, in the face of injustice, does not seek merely realist representation, and it does not adopt the escapist gesture by creating another world of fantasy where all injustice is addressed adequately. Literary writing decreates the world, causing openings in the ontology that underlies all political discourses and historicist narratives. The literary as-if is inscribed in the contingent in the world, in the inexhaustible potential in the order of actuality, just like the messianic comes to throw open the continuum of history so that images from the past flash and inscript their memory on our consciousness (Benjamin 254). The as-if makes us perceive the world as if our consciousness were not conditioned by the hegemonic discourse and our self not structured by sovereignty.

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Writing as Acts of Responsibility in "Stavrogin" and *Elizabeth Costello*[1]

> And one is thankful to Russia too, Mother Russia, for setting before us with such indisputable certainty the standards toward which any serious novelist must toil, even if without the faintest chance of getting there: the standard of the master Tolstoy on the one hand and of the master Dostoevsky on the other. By their example one becomes a better artist; and by better I do not mean more skilful but ethically better. They annihilate one's impurer pretensions; they clear one's eyesight; they fortify one's arm.
>
> —*Diary of a Bad Year*

From Politics to Ethics

During the decades when postcolonial criticism was established as a dominant literary practice, much emphasis was placed on the roles history and politics played in the reading and interpretation of literary texts. Within that context, Coetzee was highly regarded as a postcolonial novelist, and critics have made meticulous attempts to register the connection between text and context—the historical and political nexus that could, and should, be drawn between Coetzee's novels and the political events, particularly apartheid and post-apartheid violence that ravaged South African society. In *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell argues that "Coetzee's novels are located in the nexus of history and text" (2) and "look into

[1] This chapter was adapted from the article published in *NTU Studies in Language and Literature* 33 (June 2015).

the various forms of the relationship between *reflexivity* and *historicity*, examining these categories, as far as possible, within the South African context" (3). Michael Green also identifies historical and historiographical concerns in Coetzee's early novels: "his early novels in particular are overtly concerned with historiographical issues, exploring as they do different manifestations of what is considered to be history at varying moments within history" (125). Such a criticism has led to the imposition of a meta-narrative of historical and political consciousness on Coetzee's novels to extract the meaning that caters to the national concerns.

With the emergence of ethical criticism, the scholarship on J. M. Coetzee has undergone an ethical turn, mainly inaugurated by the publication of Derek Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004). The ethical turn, which distinguishes itself from a historical and political reading and interpretation, is figured in Coetzee's resistance to the institutional demand on literature and his commitment to the responsibility for the other in his writing. Attridge maintains that Coetzee's writing is structured by a concern about responsibility for the other: "Coetzee's works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?" (xii). Anton Leist and Peter Singer make a similar observation and write, "ethics lies at the bottom of most of Coetzee's writings" (8) in their introduction to *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*.

Coetzee's novels, particularly more recent ones, stage the concerns of hospitality and responsibility, forgiveness, animal rights, the event of writing, violence in the wake of the September 11th attacks, and the ethics of memory and the meaning of singularity. His writing at the limit not only displaces the linguistic boundaries and literary conventions but also exceeds the onto-epistemological totality of literature,

and the constellation of these ethical concerns challenges us to rethink literary writing and to see what promise literature holds on the question of the other in Coetzee's novels.

Coetzee's writing coincides with ethics. Ethics, as reconceived by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, is about the radical opening of the ontological foreclosures anchored in logocentrism or metaphysics of presence, to borrow two familiar terms from Derrida, so that the welcome of the other is not only possible, but also the absolute responsibility for us. To write is both to disrupt the ontological actuality and to write the other—their silence and their suffering. In Coetzee's writing, we witness the fact that the literary event reconfigures the ontological actuality through radical openings for the coming of the other. Coetzee's ethical writing is *otherwise* than logocentric writing wedded to social moralism sanctioned by state authorities and gives rise to "writing as acts of responsibility":[2] Writing operates in an aporetic logic that "promises" and "provokes the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible" (Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* 132) within the formal and disciplinary demand of the institution of literature. The literary event in Coetzee's writing comes as both a performative act that disrupts the grounds of fixed moral and cultural assumptions and a response toward the unknown other, the secret, the traces and alterity. In Coetzee's novels, if responsibility means anything other than the parochial understanding of duties and obligations, it is the promise to and welcome of the

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[2] In his introduction to *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes about the diverse meanings of act "as both 'serious' performance and 'staged' performance, as a 'proper' doing and an improper or temporary one, as an action, a law governing actions, and a record documenting actions" (2). J. Hillis Miller also points out that "[t]he phrase 'acts of literature' is a double genitive, subjective and objective at once. It names acts performed by literature, and at the same time acts that create or comment on literature" (58).

other. In this chapter, I will investigate the literary event in Coetzee's writing by bringing in Jacques Derrida's notion of literature for discussion. Through Derrida's understanding of literature as a "duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers" ("This Strange Institution" 38), we gain an alternative insight into Coetzee's responsibility as a writer, particularly in his (re)invention of the writer-figures of Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* and Elizabeth Costello in the eponymous novel *Elizabeth Costello*.

Literary Writing: Fidelity and Betrayal

It is an impossible task to essentialize what is called literature because literature manifests itself at the aporetic moment between literature as architecture on the one hand and excess of the literary on the other. While it is possible to refer literature to some convention-bound routines in the discipline of literary studies, the literary exceeds the onto-epistemological foundation of the institution of literature. Literary writing does not adhere to the logic of unity and coherence; it is immersed in dissemination, which frustrates the attempts to essentialize and categorize literary writing. "What is" literature is instantly an invalid question. As Attridge notes, "what is" presumes an onto-epistemologically fixed and universally applicable meaning (Introduction 1-2), while embedded in literature are excess, abyss, ambivalence, and transgression that would destabilize the architecture of this institution.

What is transgressive and excessive in literature defies totality and homogeneity, and in a literal sense, "literature is the space of heterogeneity" and openness (Ajana 106), in which one registers singularity and alterity, transgression and absolute invention. Derrida rejects the notion of intrinsic properties of literature:

“there is no—or hardly any, ever so little—literature; that in any event there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being or being literary of literature” (*Dissemination* 223). Maurice Blanchot also denies the ontological conceptualization of literature. The possibility of literature emerges from “non-literature,” from the dissolution of any “essential characterization, any affirmation which would stabilize or even realize it[literature]” (“The Disappearance of Literature” 141). Hence, the antinomy of literature beyond any ontological horizon and dialectical relation: “[literature] would no longer be itself if it were itself” (Derrida, “Before the Law” 215). The possibility of writing arises out of the impossibility in the face of institutional demands. Literature is possible only at the moment when the institutional imposition of taxonomy and teleology on literature is neutralized (its irreducibility to ideological service), when literature is not reduced to genres with definite properties (fiction, poetry and drama), periodization of literary movements (the Renaissance, Romanticism, Modernism, etc.), or the canonization of literary works.

In this defying act against institutional codification, literature is *not*, devoid of identity and property, as Joseph Kronick writes, “[literature] is not; it is not an entity[;] nor does it subsist in the identity of its historical being” (1). This “not” of literature is to be understood as what Peggy Kamuf calls the “reserve” of literature: It is “the sense in which a literary text holds sense in *reserve*[; it] does not exhaust the possibility for meaning in an indicative or transitive relation to a referent. Such texts . . . are reserved, that is, they hold back from a full and present disclosure of sense” (5; italics added). This “reserve” cannot be reduced to impotent passivity or negative obscurity. Literature in reserve articulates itself when it withdraws from the

economy of presence. In a more radical gesture, literature in reserve suspends the prescriptive telos and enables the "subversion of subjectivity, materiality, commonality, and the onto-epistemological brutality of politics" (Ajana 106).

Literature's defiance of, or *betrayal against*, the institutional codification and its resistance to the subjection to political discourse constitute *fidelity* to the promise of the literary event. The literary event comes as a surprise that disturbs any horizon of thought. Resisting any premeditated rationality or any preordained end, the literary event exceeds the totality of literature's institutional status. It is always "to come" as a promise to the other. The literary event does not seek to homogenize the other into our system, but to open to them. Derrida writes that the "to come" designates "the space opened in order for there to be an event . . . so that the coming be that of the other" ("Politics and Friendship" 182). The literary event to come is never fully actualizable in the institution of literature. Its time is out of joint, never belonging to teleological temporality; nor does it designate an empty waiting for a future present. To write involves knowing "how to say 'come' and to answer the 'come' of the other," ("Psyche" 341), but, in a radical sense, it is even impossible to prepare for the coming of the other, as this "preparing" would assume the possibility of the coming of the other, and might fall into the logic of the metaphysics of presence. In *The Master of Petersburg*, it dawns on Dostoevsky that "[a]s long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will come. Therefore—paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness—he must answer to what he does not expect" (80). The literary event, unconditioned by conventions, status and legitimization, is a moment of the *unpreparedness* for the other to come. The possibility of the "to come" lies in the impossible coming of the

other—the other always comes as a surprise, and their coming would cause disruption to the system.

The literary event that inaugurates the welcome of the other is inscribed in the singular literary invention that causes trembling in the institutions. For a writer, to write is to use the inventive forces of literature to *act upon the world*. Writing is never simply a private or passive act; it is "a private act with public consequences" (Tighe 1). While writers dream about realizing the singularity of literature, they are also held accountable for social values and moral principles. Séan Burke points out that the society "demands an elect to which it grants imaginative freedom, but only at the price of *accountability*" (486; italics added). The authority has an established apparatus to bring under its control the inventive forces of literary writing, or what Coetzee calls "the undesirable" forces (*Giving Offense* VIII) that would go too far—think about censorship, authors put on trial, and even *fatwa*. The society privileges the writer with the power of invention and simultaneously revokes that power for fear of losing control. But, literary force is irrepressible, as Derrida says that literature "overflow[s] the institution [of literature]" ("This Strange Institution" 36). This "overflowing" excess at the heart of literature is the irreducible inventive force that gives the writer the power to see through the political realism constructed by prevalent ideological consciousness or false multicultural consensus. The literary inventive force makes "Saying" possible: not to say "the Said" and "the sayable," but "to *say everything*, in *every way*" (Derrida, "This Strange Institution" 36), to say "the unsaid" and "the unsayable."[3]

Coetzee is attentive to the exorbitant literary force, the spectral logic and the

[3] "Said" and "Saying" are Levinas's terms. "The Said" is ascribed to the domain of philosophy, the space of ontology and Being, while "Saying" is conceived as exposure to the other. See *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*.

promise to the other in his writing. He resists the social and political accountability imposed on writers by state authorities, and he also rejects the identity of "South African novelist": "I sometimes wonder whether it isn't simply that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a 'South African novelist'" (Coetzee, "Two Interviews" 460). The identity of "South African writer" would demand that the writer submit to the cause of a free and new South Africa by representing the people victimized by the political and historical violence in his writing, and realism would be the preferred technique since it would represent faithfully. As Rosemary Jolly and Attridge remark, the African National Congress calls "for literature to represent the victimization of the oppressed in realist form" (2). What results from this "political writing" is the corpus of "judgmental texts" (Jolly and Attridge 7) and "solidarity criticism" (Sachs 239). Coetzee turns away from the way of writing about political and historical violence dictated by the State, since the State has hijacked the institution of literature through ideological domination in the social milieu that stifles the inventive force of literary writing. Writing in this co-opted state would cease to be inventive at all and would be programmed for the politically correct.

History's demand on literature, in the form of characters' active participation in shaping the course national history takes, has its support from Coetzee's fellow South African writers. In her 1984 review of Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer explicitly criticized its elusive and disengaged characters. She diagnoses the *passivity* of the characters in the face of the traumatic historical events with her "judgmental" comments, seeing them as people "who ignore history, not make it":

> Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it. That is clear not only in the person of Michael K, but in other characters, for example the white doctor and nurse in the "rehabilitation" camp, who are "living in *suspension*" . . . . No one in this novel has any sense of taking part in determining that course; no one is shown to believe he knows what that course should be. The sense is of the ultimate malaise: of destruction. (142; italics added)

According to Gordimer,[4] these characters, whose lives are plagued with a sense of "destruction" are crushed in history. This critique of the passive characters in *Michael K* is shaped by the discourse of social "accountability." Not to think in the terms of national development and solidarity is seen as an unaccountable and irresponsible act, and worse still, as an act that betrays the cause of New South Africa. Yet, the notion of responsibility implied by Gordimer's critique is rooted in a parochial understanding of responsibility. To be held responsible by the law and social morality is a "passive" and conditional form of responsibility because one is simply ordered to fulfill certain terms of duties and obligations. This act is tantamount to mechanical procedures that generate distributive justice in a liberal political system. It is not possible to talk about ethics and justice with this simplified understanding of responsibility; what it amounts to is moralism—merely the prescription of some principles or rules to follow. For a writer, it would be far too easy to write by

[4] Rachel Donadio writes in the *New York Times*, "In a country [South Africa] where every inch of physical and moral ground is contested, Coetzee has been criticized for refusing to play the role of writer-as-statesman, one more easily played by his fellow Nobel Laureate, Nadine Gordimer."

employing the prescribed techniques and acquiescing to social accountability, and this act of writing would lead to literary impasse and intellectual oppression.[5]

In his *fidelity* to the literary event, Coetzee defies the institutionalized political and historical discourses that would reduce his writing to nothing more than aesthetic propaganda. In responding to the critiques coming from the "solidarity criticism," Coetzee adamantly asserts that writing is irreducible to the very limited political and historical concerns, and that he is only interested in

> . . . a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process . . . perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history—in other words, *demythologizing* history. ("The Novel Today" 3; italics added).

[5] In *Youth*, the young Coetzee dwells on the difference between doing the "right" thing and pursuing his "poetic" vocation, finding that doing the "right" thing is easy but that the "right" thing is founded on "emptiness":

> Working out the right thing to do is not difficult. He does not need to think overlong to know what the right thing is. He could, if he chose, do the right thing with near infallible accuracy. What gives him pause is the question of whether he can go on being a poet while doing the right thing. When he tries to imagine what sort of poetry would flow from doing the right thing time after time, he sees only blank *emptiness*. The right thing is boring. So he is at an impasse. . . . (165)

The right thing, the moral decrees and the received opinions, would wither the well of invention, as is the case in the young Coetzee, who is thrown into impasse, into intellectual oppression, into "deadness."

It is no longer a secret that history is veneered with myth. Postmodern historiography has shown that history is a discourse, or "historicism" in Walter Benjamin's term, founded on ideological hegemony; it is a discourse maneuvered by historians and rulers alike who intervene in the practice of history writing that involves narrative construction, material selection and textual interpretation. History's demand on writers is reinforced by postcolonial theory, which gained ascendancy in the South African academic circle in the country's transition from the apartheid regime to new South Africa. Postcolonial theory decrees that a legitimate postcolonial novel be devoted to the theme of resistance *against* hegemony, of colonized people fighting *against* colonizers in the power struggle.[6] In the paradigms of historicism and postcolonial theory, literary characters do not really "make" history, as Gordimer claims they would: they simply follow a designated trajectory of history prescribed by the State.

For Coetzee, literary writing challenges history by exposing the myth propagated by "solidarity" critics. Coetzee does not write novels that are "checkable" by history, and he takes a radical step beyond Gordimer's ideologically driven grasp of history. If Gordimer sees Michael K as a passive and dwarfed creature because he is not committed to massively organized movements of resistance *against* the oppressive authorities, Coetzee's fidelity to the literary event gives rise to a Michael K "in reserve." Michael K is "in reserve" because he is not assimilated into the climate of resistance: he resists the imperative socio-political discourse by disengaging

[6] In *Postcolonial Resistance*, David Jefferess writes, "[T]he postcolonial critical perspective, even in its deconstructive manifestations, often reinforces the binary and oppositional narrative of conflict" (14). He asks, "Must resistance be conceived of as a struggle *against* something . . . rather than *for* something?" (11). Coetzee also points out in "Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry," in a binary mode of rivalry, the two sides are "more and more alike, even as they more loudly assert their difference" (*Giving Offense* 83).

himself from the resistance movement upheld by the State. As he is in reserve, his potentiality takes the form of im-potentiality,[7]—potentiality that is not exhausted in the order of actuality: "[P]otentiality maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of its suspension; it is *capable of* the act in not realizing it, it is sovereignly capable of its own im-potentiality [*impotenza*]" (Agamben 45). For Gordimer, potentiality is grounded in the order of actuality, and her parochial notion of responsibility leads to the conclusion that Michael K's "suspension" is synonymous with passivity and irresponsibility. In Coetzee's portrait, Michael K's potentiality is potentiality in itself, and his "suspension" and "irresponsibility" constitute radical acts defying the totalitarian grand discourse of the state. In this act of suspension, in this suspensive state, "Michael K's practice of freedom cannot be rendered in the teleological terms of a project" (Prozorov 71). Coetzee does not prostitute Michael K to the "victimist" ideology or the passion of the resistance movement. Thus, creating an "apolitical" character, such as Michael K, does not lead to the verdict that Coetzee's novels exhibit political impotence and historical indifference. Refusing to speak in the political discourse does not spell the evasion of responsibility, as David Atwell defends Coetzee's position: "Coetzee has resisted being drawn into the public sphere, for reasons he has made clear, namely, that a rule of entry into the public and especially the political arena is that one speak the discourses of power" ("The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello" 26). Instead, Coetzee has taken up a greater responsibility, an unconditional responsibility, in challenging and subverting the colonizing and totalizing institutions of history and politics by refusing to speak the institutionalized metadiscourses and by resorting to the "reserving" force of the

[7] See Prozorov's "'To Be Out of Camp': Michael K and the Power of Pure Refusal," in his *Foucault, Freedom and Sovereignty* 69-77.

event of literary invention.

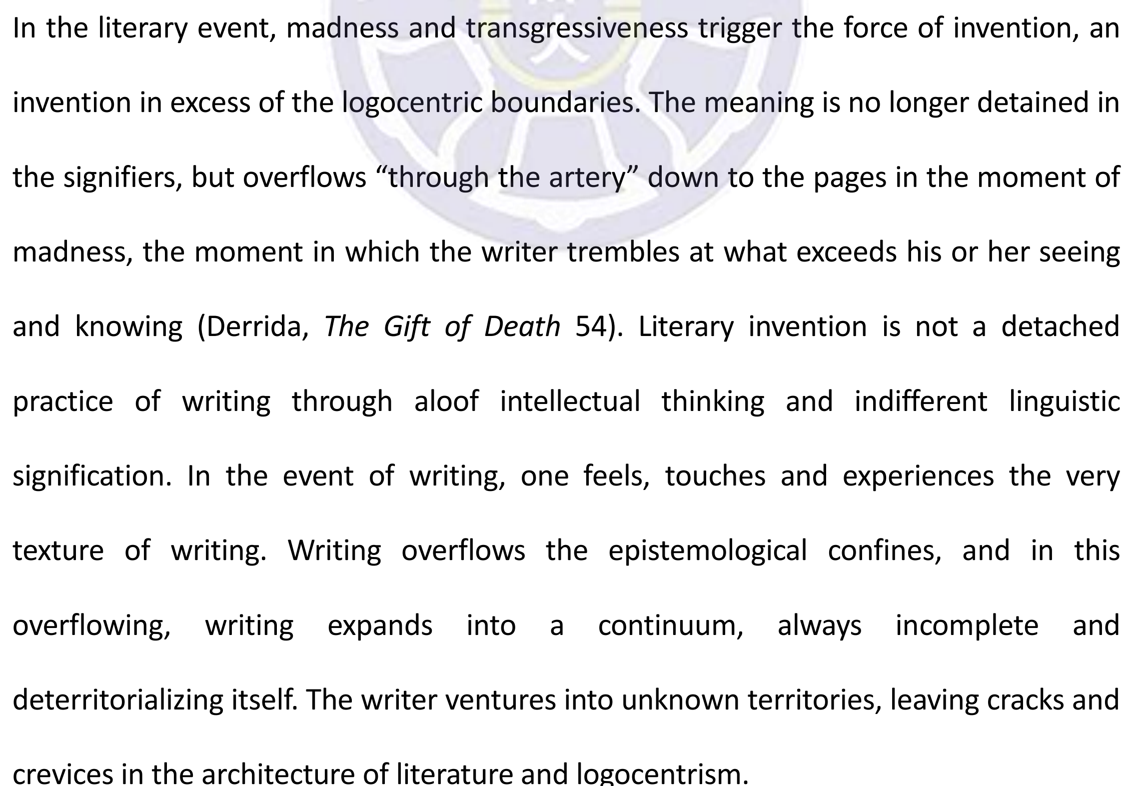
In "Stavrogin," the last chapter of *The Master of Petersburg*, we read Coetzee's aversion to the social and political demand on writing, and his understanding of literature as a space of heterogeneity and hospitality, a space open to the other. In this novel, Coetzee (re)invents a Dostoevsky ruminating on the ethics in literature. This novel is characterized by Dominic Head as "mark[ing] a turning point in Coetzee's career" (72). According to Head, the novel was published at "the historical juncture of transition"—"in the run-up to the final demise of apartheid, in the final phase of interregnum, following the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of the ANC in 1990" (ibid). Head draws the contextual and allegorical connection between *The Master*, the historical background of Dostoevsky's 19th-century Russia, and new South Africa. This reading runs the risk of reducing the novel to a historical text documenting social changes despite its provision of rich historical analysis. To attend to the singularity of this novel demands a "literal" reading[8] (Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 39), instead of classifying it as a "South African novel." To read *The Master* literally is to unread it—not to read the literary text in the categorical and imperative mode of reading, and not to read it as verification or justification in the service of the discourses of other fields. A literal reading of *The Master* would demand that we attend to the singularity and secret and respond to the call of the other in this literary text.

In reading *The Master*, we witness the literary event through the character of Dostoevsky, for whom writing is an experience of "flowing" and "untameable"

[8] Attridge differentiates "allegorical reading" from "literal reading." Readers practicing allegorical reading would attempt to juxtapose Coetzee's fictions with the historical events they might allude to, and further to identify and excavate the possible, though not always explicit, textual meaning parallel to social morality. In contrast, a literal reading would attend to the singularity of the text.

madness, of tactility:

> But the writing, he fears, would be that of a madman—vileness, obscenity, page after page of it, *untameable*. He thinks of the madness as running through the artery of his right arm down to the fingertips and the pen and so to the page. It runs in a stream[. . . .] What flows on to the paper is neither blood nor ink but an acid, black, with an unpleasing green sheen when the light glances off it. On the page it does not dry: if one were to pass a finger over it, one would experience a sensation both liquid and electric. (18)



In the literary event, madness and transgressiveness trigger the force of invention, an invention in excess of the logocentric boundaries. The meaning is no longer detained in the signifiers, but overflows "through the artery" down to the pages in the moment of madness, the moment in which the writer trembles at what exceeds his or her seeing and knowing (Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 54). Literary invention is not a detached practice of writing through aloof intellectual thinking and indifferent linguistic signification. In the event of writing, one feels, touches and experiences the very texture of writing. Writing overflows the epistemological confines, and in this overflowing, writing expands into a continuum, always incomplete and deterritorializing itself. The writer ventures into unknown territories, leaving cracks and crevices in the architecture of literature and logocentrism.

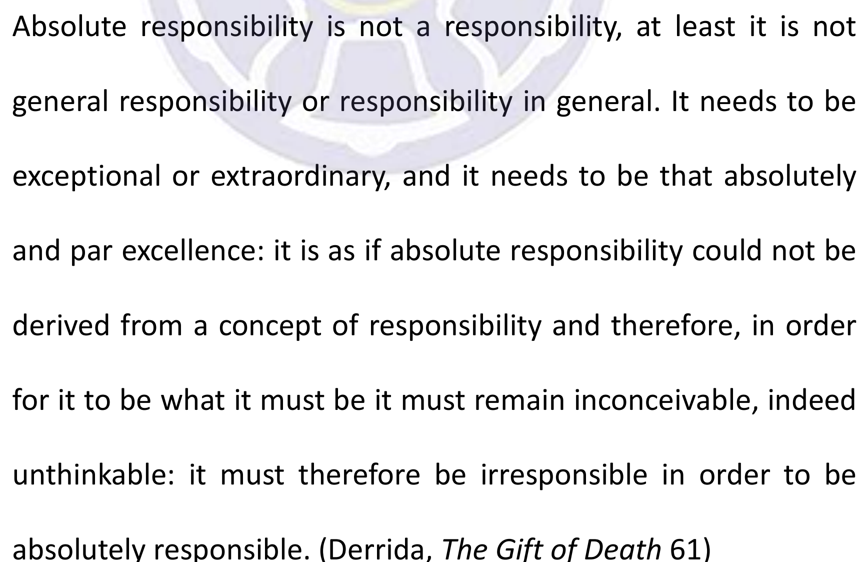
Dostoevsky experiences the "doubleness" and "splitness" of self and

authorship (*The Master* 219). In the space of writing, presence is possessed by absence, Being surprised by radical alterity, and identity inundated with difference. The representational mode of writing "ha[s] no place in the world," and, in its collapse, the possibility of creating the new, of encountering the other emerges: "He sits with the pen in his hand, holding himself back from a descent into representations that have no place in the world, on the point of toppling, enclosed within a moment in which all creation lies open at his feet, the moment before he loosens his grip and begins to fall" (241). This fall from the seat of representation and presence into the "nether realms" promises "all creations"—literary inventions that inaugurate the welcome of the unknown other.

In the fall from presence to the "nether realms," the literary event occasions the "descent of night, [the] invasion of shadow" (Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow" 132), and in the realm of the night, "[e]verything is collapsing: logic, reason" (*The Master* 202). Dostoevsky is exposed to a "darkness of presence": "[H]e [Dostoevsky] stands by the door, hardly breathing, concentrating his gaze on the chair in the corner, waiting for the darkness to thicken, to turn into another kind of darkness, a darkness of presence" (5). "A darkness of presence" is a darkened presence, a presence overshadowed by the night and mortified by the spectral logic. It is "another kind of darkness," a darkness that is prior and foreign to meaning and revelation. This "darkness" is neither engaged in a dialectical relation with light nor structured by the formalized and systematized thinking of *Cogito*. The specter keeps haunting a presence that is losing its solid ground. The haunting is iterable, and alterity has set in in the darkened presence. The experience of writing is very much about the "darkness of presence." In the anonymous and impersonalized *other* night, the subject falters,

language fails, and narrative is suspended.

In the "darkness of presence," Dostoevsky faces the ethical demand of absolute responsibility that necessitates his "betrayal" of his family before he could respond to the call of the unknown other. Dostoevsky "follow[s] the dance of the pen" (236), and "betrayal" takes him over: "[. . .] no longer a matter of being faithful to Pavel[the stepson] when all have given him up. Not a matter of fidelity at all. On the contrary, a matter of betrayal—betrayal of love first of all, and then of Pavel and the mother and the child and everyone else" (235). Dostoevsky's act of betrayal is inconceivable in the ordinary sense of the word. It is not a simple matter of abandoning the mother, the child, and Pavel. Betrayal occurs not because Dostoevsky evades the responsibility toward his family members, but because he faces a call of absolute responsibility:



> Absolute responsibility is not a responsibility, at least it is not general responsibility or responsibility in general. It needs to be exceptional or extraordinary, and it needs to be that absolutely and par excellence: it is as if absolute responsibility could not be derived from a concept of responsibility and therefore, in order for it to be what it must be it must remain inconceivable, indeed unthinkable: it must therefore be irresponsible in order to be absolutely responsible. (Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 61)

In this "paradox constituting the concept of duty and absolute responsibility" (ibid), Dostoevsky ceases to rely on general reason and received moral principles to make

his ethical decisions. Dostoevsky betrays Pavel, as Abraham sacrifices his son Isaac to God, but for the sake of absolute responsibility. In Derrida's reading of the biblical story, "Abraham must assume absolute responsibility for sacrificing his son by sacrificing ethics" (ibid 66). The ethics Abraham sacrifices here is the moral doctrines that command and enslave people's conscience. One needs to be dead in law in order to go beyond the law, to fulfill absolute responsibility, as St. Paul writes in "Galatians," "For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God" (2:19). This death in law demands giving up the economy of exchange. Without sacrificing his son, Abraham would still be trapped in the general economy of duty and moralism. Similarly, Dostoevsky has to sacrifice his fidelity to Pavel, his familial and social relationship, his political connection with the revolutionary Nechaev, and his accountability to moral principles, if he is to commit himself to unconditional responsibility.

Dostoevsky's absolute responsibility lies in his response to the unknown other that has been exiled to what Genet calls the "nether realms" (qtd. in Cixous 169), the "elsewhere" foreign to the order of consciousness. The other Dostoevsky encounters is subject neither to his authorial representational power nor the rationalizing discourse of positivist knowledge as this other in the encounter carries with itself a secret, an aura of indifference and a spell of anonymity:

> From the figure he[Dostoevsky] feels nothing, nothing at all. Or rather, he feels around it a field of indifference tremendous in its force, like a cloak of darkness. Is that why he cannot find the name—not because the name is hidden but because the figure is

> indifferent to all names, all words, anything that might be said about it? (238)

Dostoevsky is capable of neither addressing this other through his command of language nor approaching it through his power of knowledge. The other, in its secret, recedes from the linguistic and logical grasp. As always in receding, the other remains unnamable: it is not "possible for them to be called by their names, to have names, to be subjects in law, to be questioned and liable, to have crimes imputed to them, to be held responsible, to be equipped with nameable identities, and proper names" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 23). In writing's space of heterogeneity and hospitality, the other remains the other, irreducible to the order of the possible and the law, precisely because it does not share its reasons with us, explain itself to us, or reveal its secret to us (*The Gift of Death* 57).

Without a name and an identity, the other irrupts into the order of the same, making it impossible for Dostoevsky not to receive it: "He [Dostoevsky] moves the chair so as not to face the mirror. But the sense of someone in the room besides himself persists: if not of a full person then of a stick-figure, a scarecrow draped in an old suit, with a stuffed sugar-sack for a head and a kerchief across the mouth" (236). This other, increasing in size, stature and significance from a tiny fleshless "stick-figure" to "a scarecrow," causes apprehension, and it is impossible not to respond to it. The irruption of the other into the order of presence is similar to Derrida's description of the "visor effect": "The subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements; one feels oneself looked at by what one

cannot see" (*Specters of Marx* 136). Dostoevsky feels himself "looked at by what [he] cannot see" in the "darkness of presence." The mechanism of gazing, of visual appropriation, does not apply in the (non)relation with the other, as Dostoevsky does not see the other *face to face* and avoids the reflection of the other in the mirror. It is no coincidence that he avoids the mirror, as the mirror is an indispensable instrument to help a child form subjectivity and identity, and enter the Lacanian symbolic order. The avoidance of the mirror constitutes the act not to incorporate the other into the system of representation.

In *The Master*, Coetzee explores the promise literature holds for the other. By disorienting the general assumptions of literature within the institution, he reclaims literature's privilege to say everything and its power of invention to inaugurate the coming of the other. The writerly responsibility he assumes is irresponsibility in the face of the ideological demands and institutional discourses, as Gordimer accuses him of creating politically passive characters. The ethics in his writing is embodied in the literary event that occasions the possibility of encounter with the other that is yet to come: "Stories are defined by their irresponsibility: they are, in the judgment of Swift's Houynhnhms, 'that which is not.' The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 246). The force of invention, as we have witnessed in *The Master*, erupts again in *Elizabeth Costello*.

Writing as Acts of Responsibility

With the re-creation of Dostoevsky, Coetzee has demonstrated the irreducible

inventive force of writing that destabilizes the institution of literature. In *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*,[9] we encounter another writer figure Elizabeth Costello, in whose "lessons" we see how she tests the limits of literature and stages a relation with the other. This testing of limits articulates the *elsewhere* in the space of writing and the *otherwise* than the institutional codification. Costello "prefers not" to prostitute herself to the constituted powers and dogmatic moralism that instrumentalize literature as a mere vehicle for political and social content, and her literary engagements in a series of issues—the Holocaust, animals, novel writing, censorship, etc.—is rightly provocative. The controversy ensues precisely because she has the courage to think and to resist inscription of universal values and hierarchical order of meaning. She uses the inventive force of literature to denaturalize the entrenched socio-political discourses (in "Realism"), the universally applicable logic of instrumental rationality (in "The Lives of Animals"), the institutionalized status of literary writing (in "The Novel in Africa"), and the accountability imposed on writers (in "The Problem of Evil" and "At the Gate"). Costello ruffles the hierarchical stability and logocentric consistency that structure the order of actuality and is wholly open to the openness of Being through the poetic force that releases her ego. Writing as acts of responsibility occurs in the disruption of the self-possession of the ego, giving rise to an ethics that is not subject-centered in the way that her writing responds to the silenced and suffering other.

The primary issue pertaining to the incommensurability of literature in *Elizabeth Costello* is the ethics of authorship. In spite of the fact that Coetzee invents

[9] Most of the lessons in *Elizabeth Costello* have been presented as a lecture, a speech, a reading ("The Problem of Evil") or published work (the two lessons on animals). Jane Poyner cautions us not to treat these versions "as different editions of what was to become *Elizabeth Costello* but as distinct texts" (4).

Costello, Costello resists to be perceived as Coetzee's mouthpiece that expresses his views; on the contrary, she is to be seen as his double and other that disrupts one single, original authorial legitimacy, and her singularity negotiates the writerly responsibility. Identifying Costello with Coetzee is an autobiographical fallacy that imposes an autobiographical reading and reinforces authorial power on a rich literary text that resists the constraints of authorial representation. A major problem with the autobiographical assumption is the illusion that it would give the reader fully transparent access to the author's mind. But, language, with the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified illustrated by Saussure (67) and the complexities between the semiotic and symbolic discussed by Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, always fails us in articulating our thoughts fully. In addition, one's mind is constantly experiencing a struggle between the ego and the dark drives. If so, how can we be sure how much about and of the author is revealed by himself or herself? Terry Eagleton asks, "Was what he[author] 'had in mind' different from what he wrote, and how can we know? Did he himself know what he had in mind? Are writers always in full possession of their meanings?" (41).[10]

In an interview with Tony Morphett on his novel *Foe*, Coetzee expresses his ambivalence toward authorial representation and identification, and his unease at "being installed in the position of power":

[10] The resistance of an autobiographical reading does not deny the fact that "autobiographical moments" exist in Coetzee's works (Kannemeyer 8). Attridge also alerts the reader not to overlook the autobiographical information that could enrich the reading: "Coetzee's biographers, when they draw their connections between the life and the fiction, will have a mass of material to work with: even with the small amount of biographical information that is currently in the public domain it is clear that the novels are woven out of personal experiences and obsessions" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 139). Coetzee himself is aware of the problem of the autobiographical criticism in which the author is identified with the character, as Kannemeyer writes, "He[Coetzee] answered all my questions succinctly and pertinently, but did not want to be drawn into speculations and opinions, especially not on interpretations of his work" (1).

> "Successful author" is a barbed phrase here, a highly barbed phrase. Foe in the book, or Daniel Defoe in "real" life is the type of the successful author. Am I being classed with Foe, though my interest clearly lies with Foe's foe, the *un*successful author, worse author*ess*—Susan Barton? How can one question power or "success" from a position of power? One ought to question it from its antagonistic position, namely, the position of weakness. Yet, once again in this interview, I am being installed in a position of power—power in this case over my own text. (Morphett 456)

Coetzee openly questions the view in traditional criticism that would place the author in the position of power in relation to his work. The assumption of an author expressing his moral belief in his writing reduces the invention into the order of the same, turning the text into one of definitive closure, characterized by conformity to a set of moral values and institutional discourses the author in question is believed to endorse. Since Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, "the death of the author" has dissolved the text of its author's monopoly over the meaning of the text, giving rise to more possibilities of interpretation. A literary work "should not mean/But be" (MacLeish 107); it is wholly onto itself, inscribing its own scene and demanding singular readings from its readers. With the death of the author, the work is thrown open, and from this openness emerges possible "bridging" toward the other of singularities. As I suggested in the previous chapter, for Coetzee authorship is beyond the command of the author: it is a power coming from beyond, possibly from a Messiah, whose coming

is unpredictable and unassumable: “But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically?” (*Diary of a Bad Year* 151). If an author does not dictate the authority over his literary invention due to the “vatical” intervention, Costello is also released from the grasp of Coetzee’s authorial representation.

In creating Costello as an author-other, Coetzee sees the singularity of Costello, rather than treat her as a derivative. It is through the gaps between Coetzee and Costello that the relation between them is preferably to be understood as doubles, doubles with displacement and iterability. Heather Walton argues that “Coetzee has already demonstrated that he is not to be trusted and the strange doublings that take place within his recent Costello performances are read as confirming evidence of his inauthenticity” (283). The concept of doublings works to split the author’s subjectivity and neutralize his authority of representation, and brings about the iterability of his writing. It is no coincidence that David Atwell has chosen to entitle the volume of Coetzee’s collected essays and interviews he edited *Doubling the Point*.[11] In the relation between Coetzee and Costello, we do not see a towering Coetzee that is the origin and a dwarfed Costello that is the derivative.[12] With the corrosion of the origin, the iteration of their singularities, their authorship and their writing suspends the working of representation, a system of dialectics between the origin and the derivative, self and other, sameness and difference. Coetzee is in no

[11] Atwell explains in the “Editor’s Introduction” that in the first sense “‘doubling back’ will involve more than mere repetition” (here iterability comes into play), and that “‘doubling the point’ refers, more broadly, to the reflexive self-consciousness which characterizes all Coetzee’s work” (3).

[12] Jean Baudrillard, the postmodern prophet, hypothesizes that origins and originality are problematic ideas in the postmodern world of simulation and hyperreaity, and in his discussion of the September 11th terrorist attacks, he draws attention to the doubling relationship between the Twin Towers: “The fact that there were two of them signifies the end of any original reference. . . . Only the doubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates” (39).

position to manipulate Costello, and the possibility exists that he might also be overtaken by Costello in his own writing: “To write one has to transgress, to be divided, even double. But to be double is to open oneself to the possibility of being overtaken by another voice.” (Stephen Watson 56; qtd. in Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 129). In this complexity of invention, intervention and doubling between Coetzee and Costello, we register a moment of undecidableility and alterity, a manifestation of displacement and singularity, not one of identity, identification and representation. If we see Costello as Coetzee’s doubling other, then how do we read *Elizabeth Costello* as a textual performance of Coetzee’s inauthenticity? This text is to be conceived as an open space of iterability, repetition with difference. Coetzee plays upon the distance of ambiguity between himself and Costello to create the moment of undecidability, a moment for intervention into the order of the same. This textual performance of inauthenticity displaces the operation of authorial mastery over the work, and the authorial voice is turned into polyphonic performance. As suggested previously, there might also be other voices speaking vatically. To read this novel as a textual performance of Coetzee’s inauthenticity is to be involved in the space of iterability, the moment of undecidability, and polyphonic improvisation.

As a writer in her own right, but without jurisdiction over her writing, Costello faces the aporia between “invention” and “conventions” in literary writing. Literary invention is pure and absolute invention that departs radically from the institutional attempt at “conventionalizing” literary works, namely, the attempt at paraphrasing the text, appropriating it for thematic analysis and biographical interpretation. To conventionalize the text means to “museify” it, to name it as an “example” and to

exhibit its instrumental values by divesting its absolutely inventive force. In the first lesson "Realism," we see Costello debating with her son John how her writing should be treated as a "problem" that trembles the literary institutional jurisdiction, rather than to be named as an "example" for its "conventional" literary merits:

> "No, you're heavyweight all right. Your handicap is that you're not a problem. What you write hasn't yet been demonstrated to be a problem. . . . But for the present you're not a *problem*, just an *example*."
>
> "An example of what?"
>
> "An example of writing. An example of how someone of your station and your generation and your origins writes. An *instance*."
>
> "An instance? Am I allowed a word of protest? After all these efforts I put into not writing like anyone else?" (7-8; italics added)

To be seen as an example is to be given a status, to gain legitimacy from the institution of literature and be codified by its laws, and to be seen as a problem is to be blamed for causing disruptions within this institution. "Example" writing belongs to the order of convention that "only makes explicit a program of possibilities within the economy of the same" (Derrida, "Psyche" 341) while "problem" writing is inscribed in the order of absolute invention that "overflow[s], overlook[s], transgress[es], [and] negate[s] . . . the status that people would have wanted to

assign to it or grant it in advance" (ibid). Costello refuses the category of "example" writer since this identitarian marker would reduce her writing to "the techno-onto-anthropo-theological concept of invention" (343). The "example" writing is recognizable and thus receivable, with its revolutionary force neutralized, and this reduced form of invention is in a state of inertia, as it is no more than preprogrammed production: "Our current tiredness results from the invention of the same and from the possible, from the invention that is always possible" (341). Costello, as well as Coetzee, attempts what Derrida calls "the inaugural invention" that would "reinvent" invention. What their writing amounts to is the impossible invention: "the only possible invention would be the invention of the impossible" (341). The event of invention in their writing occurs at the moment when it breaks with the economy of the same, giving rise to the invention of the impossible, of the other.

Costello defies not only the status of example conferred on her writing, but also the claim that she is writing under the influence of some literary masters, particularly James Joyce. In one of the interviews with journalists, she is asked to address the question of how she understands her literary relationship with James Joyce, "the father figure of modern literature," since she has "claimed or reclaimed Molly from Joyce" for her own novel (12). The literary criticism that places one writer under the influence of another is an institutional criticism that sets a restrictive hierarchical framework for positioning and reading a literary text, a reading that grants a text the status of an "example." Yet, Gillian Dooley notes that the inventive force of a literary text "has little to do with political messages or literary influence" (3). Allan Stoekl argues that the model of literary influence is problematic, that in

writing "[t]here are other 'influences' as well . . . of force over dialectical articulation, of writing referring to its own status as anterior heterogeneous force" (xiii). Literary writing is not "checkable" by the logic of hierarchical influence practiced in conventional criticism in which literary giants exert their influence over their followers. As Allan Megill says, "it is affinity rather than influence that counts" in writing (282). The space of writing is a space of rhizomatic plane, a space of "affinity," full of intensity and potentiality for the contingent encounters between heterogeneous forces. An institutional criticism would institute Joyce as the patriarch of modernist literature, thus subjecting Costello to Joyce's patriarchic influence. The relationship between Costello and Joyce is not one of influence, but of affinity. Joyce has pried open the architecture of literature by demonstrating how literature is endowed with the power to reinvent itself iterabily. He has not exhausted the potentialities his works have made possible—the potentiality of literature is inexhaustible, and here Costello, rather than writing under the influence of Joyce, is reinventing Molly by exploring the excess, "the material left over" (13). This inexhaustible literary potentiality will disseminate and spark creative responses from other literary works.

Costello's writing provides impetus to rethink and reinvent the received views and opinions, particularly the milestones of Western philosophy—reason, subject, identity, and humanism—that structure the current neoliberal system. During interviews, Costello is frequently asked to give her views on the issues of "neoliberalism, the woman question, Aboriginal rights, the Australian novel today" (10). All these questions are shaped by the existing discourses, and in employing these discourse one will get stuck in the "nowhere" at the heart of political realism: "There is first of all the

problem of the *opening*, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, *nowhere*, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge" (1; italics added). This "nowhere" indicates the rigidity and impasse often encountered in socio-political discourses, and if one thinks merely within the confines of the "nowhere," one would fail to think about the more fundamental questions of ethics, justice and responsibility. The transgressive force of literary writing can unsettle deep-rooted thinking and throw open the enclosed and totalized space of socio-political realism. Costello's literary engagements with social issues unthink the institutionalized mode of thinking; thus, she is able to think the unknown and the unthinkable. The explosive and unsettling force of her writing is felt by her son: "[s]he shakes him. . . . shaking people [out of their complacency and ideological numbness]. . . . [S]he is by no means a comforting writer. She is even cruel." Her son even compares his mother to a cat "eviscerat[ing] [her] victim" (5). Costello is a "problem" writer, a "positively indecent" and "cruel" writer because she discloses how people's lives have settled into inactivity, how their thought has become rigidified, how their morality is constrained by their herd instinct, and, more importantly, how they dare not look at their "deadness" (5). She refuses to subject her writing to social accountability and give her readers what they expect. A literary work is not simply a text that is built on conventional literary discourses and represents realistically the surface of life; literature unbound is an event, a "performance" (16) in which the norms and normalcy of the society are challenged. In reading a literary text, people will begin to rethink the normalized practices of conditional hospitality, distributive justice, and neoliberal democracy that has been reduced to the management of political affairs.

The literary event in Costello's writing causes the evacuation of the subject and generates the access toward what Hélène Cixous calls the "elsewhere," where the citadels of egotistical, patriarchal and anthropocentric positions are dismantled for the possibilities of staging a non-relational relation with the other. John has witnessed such possibilities in his mother's novels: "But my mother has been a man . . . She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?" (22-23). In the space of writing, Costello is able to travel from the "nowhere," "out of the world" (Cixous 171), beyond the onto-metaphysical thinking, subjective existence and identity demarcations, "through the back door of thought" (ibid 169) to the "elsewhere" (ibid), where she can experience "becoming" "a man," or even "a dog." The allusion to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming in *Anti-Oedipus* is probably too clear to be missed. The subject is emptied of its anthropocentrically essentialist subjectivity and dethroned from the center: "This subject itself is not at the centre, which is occupied by the machine, but on the periphery, with no fixed identity, forever decentered, *defined* by the states through which it passes" (22). The space of writing is one of neutrality, heterogeneity, and hospitality; to welcome the other in the literary space, one has to step aside from the position of subjectivity, the position of "I." In thinking herself into the other in her writing, Costello learns how *not* to say "I" in her approach toward the other that is unrepresentable and unnameable.

The issue of the irreducible nature of literary writing continues in the second lesson "The Novel in Africa." This title itself suggests the impossibility of

essentializing African novel. If it were "The novel *of* Africa," it would assume the ontological horizon in which only certain types of novel that conform to some pre-established criteria in representing Africa and African consciousness would be morally and politically accepted by the institution of African novel. However, with the original title, "The novel *in* Africa," literary writing does not fall into the onto-epistemological definition but opens onto the polyphonic and heterogeneous space of writing. Costello criticizes the ideologically founded institution of African novel endorsed by the African writer Emmanuel Egudu, and she severs "writing fraternity" with him (52). Egudu's thinking about literature is plagued with irreconcilable contradictions. On the one hand, he blames the West for "exoticizing" African novelists, including himself, and on the other he prostitutes himself to the Western institutional demand of literary production. In one instance, he praises literature's resistance to any institutional constraints, yet on another occasion he promotes the concept of an essentialist "Africa." In the talk he gives on the cruise ship *Northern Lights*, Egudu offers the insight into the nature of novel in its inception: the word novel means "the form of writing that was formless, that had no rules, that made up its own rules as it went along" (44-45). In a sense, the novel is the least prone to institutional constraints, as it can accommodate almost any form and style, such that it continues to be experimented and re-invented. However, Egudu also downplays the literary force of the novel by promoting the *African* novel written by *African* novelists "whose sensibility is African" (44). To propose the idea of "African sensibility" is to assume *a priori* a concept and property of "African sensibility." The concept of "African novel" or "African sensibility" is not so different from the label of "example" writing that Costello resists and "South African writer" that Coetzee

rejected. In the project to establish the African novel, Egudu champions the *négritude* movement as “the essential substratum that binds all Africans together and makes them uniquely African—not only the Africans of Africa but also Africans of the great African diaspora into the New World and now in Europe” (43). Historically speaking, the transnational *negritude* movement contributed to solidifying the global African consciousness by valorizing the African history. Soon, this Pan-African movement would give rise to a hegemonic discourse that structured *the* African history and identity. Costello calls *négritude* movement “pseudo-philosophy” (46), as she is aware that the African novels founded on the *négritude* consciousness would be “judgmental” texts regulated by certain *African* ideological orientation. Another problem she identifies is that “African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigner who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to their [Western] readers” (51). The African novelists are reduced to the category of “the explorer as explainer” (ibid), subjecting their writing to the politics of African sensibility, and to the demands of the Western literary market, publishers and readers that determine what they should write.

If literature is about the “elsewhere” and is resistant to any institutional definition, it is beyond the knowledge system of logicality, beyond the realm of “because.” As a “writer,” instead of a “thinker” (10), Costello is not subjected to the system of *cogito*. In her talk given at the Appleton College in the lesson “The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals,” she disapproves of the philosophical thesis that prioritizes and universalizes reason. To her, “reason is simply a vast

tautology," and "reason will validate reason as the first principle" (70). Costello is terrified at the thought that reason constitutes an enclosed system and operates in the realm of the same, always repeating itself without any possibility of opening toward the outside and toward the other. A worse problem is that Western philosophy is founded on the sovereignty of reason and subjectivity, on epistemology and ontology, thus relegating ethics to a less important philosophical category, as discussed by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. To Costello, reason does not exhaust the possibilities of approaching the world; it makes merely one way of thinking, but not *the* way of thinking. She juxtaposes rationality with the myriads of other experiences and challenges the limits and obscurity of reason: "I don't know what I think . . . I often wonder what thinking is, what understanding is. Do we really understand the universe better than animals do?" (90). She further opposes "fullness, embodiment, the sensation of being" to "cogitation" (78). The conflict between Costello and her daughter-in-law, Norma, who holds a Ph. D in philosophy, is a debate about the applicability of reason on beings in general. Norma's complaints about the "madness" of Costello and the inconsistency of her arguments are indicative of her poverty of thinking and her intolerance of other ways of thinking, if we still retain the word of "thinking" in characterizing the ways we approach beings and things. Only in "madness" is Costello able to *unthink* the institutionalized mode of thinking, to think the unknown and the unthinkable, and to respond to the alterity of the other, the trace, supplement, and différence subdued in logocentrism.

In her "madness," Costello responds to the other via the path of "sympathetic imagination," a unique way literature offers to approach the world. Reason operates by the principle of demarcation between self the other, while "sympathetic

imagination" is about staging a non-relational relation with the other by transgressing these identitarian boundaries. As a writer, Costello sees the potentiality of "sympathetic imagination" in its measureless capacity for one to approach the other: ". . . there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (80). Her claims may sound overtly optimistic, as how far sympathetic imagination can go is an issue that would elicit disagreement. One might also have doubts that anthropocentric position is still in place in one's approach toward the animal others,[13] and that one's identity and subjectivity can hardly be cast aside completely in one's approach toward the human other. We might also wonder whether Coetzee believes in Costello's proposed idea of "sympathetic imagination" as the means to approach the other. What matters is that sympathetic imagination promises *other* forms of relation other than the kind based on the dialectical resolution of self and other, ipseity and alterity, sameness and difference. In the space of writing, the narrative "I" steps aside from the sovereign position of the subject, as Costello has done in the lesson "Realism," so that she can think herself into the other. If sympathetic imagination means anything at all, it is an articulate manifestation of an ethical relation with the other, and the new non-relational relation is "an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation" (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* xii).

Writing departs from allegiance to any ideology. In the lesson "At the Gate," Costello refuses to make any ideological declarations in the face of an institutional

[13] Emanuela Cenami Spada once said, "Anthropomorphism is a risk we must run, because we must refer to our own human experience in order to formulate questions about animal experience. . . . The only available 'cure' [for anthropomorphism] is the continuous critique of our working definitions in order to provide more adequate answers to our questions, and to that embarrassing problem that animals present to us" (qtd. in Foer, *Eating Animals* 46-47).

court demanding her to present her belief both as a human being and a professional writer because she is aware of the fascist nature of all ideologies. Belief is a tricky and risky thing, for it often degrades into moral dogmatism or ideological principles, and this institutional demand evidences what Cixous criticizes as "a huge concatenation of clichés" (172), that is, socially entrenched discourses loaded with violence that have enslaved people's thinking. When the judges challenge Costello with the claim that "[w]ithout beliefs, we are not human" (200), and question her whether she is "bankrupt of conscience" (204), their moralism falls into the trap of modernist morality of humanism "that [begins] to look more like a blind alley" (Bauman 2). This blind allegiance to conscience devalues humanity; for Costello, what makes us human is the capacity of sympathetic imagination. The moral sense of these judges stifles the *moral* with "coercive normative regulation in political practice, and the philosophical search for absolutes, universals and foundations" (ibid 4). Paradoxically, it is the judges with preconceived moral belief who are "bankrupt of conscience," as their demand of Costello's expression of her belief is founded on preprogrammed rationale. Their moral belief is not so much about the moral as about the management, surveillance and discipline of population in the social space that block any alternatives and any beyonds.

While the ideologically oriented stance of the judges is questionable, we also register something problematic in Costello's "innocent" response to them. To the interrogation of the court, Costello gives the response that "*I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way*" (195). "Fixed beliefs" are indeed obstacles that will block a writer's invention and turn writing into propaganda. But, her further statements—"I cannot afford to believe" (201), and "I am a secretary of

the invisible. . . . It is not for me to interrogate, to *judge* what is given me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness" (199; italics added)—seem to contradict her previous belief in a writer's absolute responsibility to respond to the call of the other. By turning her writer's position into a transparent agency without assuming the responsibility to "judge," she offers herself as a Shelleyan trumpet for literary inspiration and impulse, and yet, without "judging" and decision, she also faces the risk of turning her position into one of moral relativism,[14] or, worse yet, nihilism, or even mysticism. A writer's responsibility lies in neither making moral judgments that merely conform to legal justice, nor indulging oneself in reactionary irresponsibility. It demands a writer a writing that would loosen the stronghold of logocentrism and totalized socio-political institutions, a loosening and opening that will inaugurate the coming of the other. A writer does have belief and does judge: He or she has belief in absolute justice and responsibility and makes judgment based on this belief. Writerly responsibility is inscribed in the exigency to make just and timely decisions in each new context so that new possibilities to transform the entrenched thinking and dogmatic political actions can emerge. In naming herself as "secretary of the invisible" who does not "interrogate" and "judge," Costello denies herself the urgent responsibility demanded of her in her writing and risks subjecting herself to the status of irrelevance.

If Costello's act to defend her position not to judge is baffling, she takes a similarly bewildering step in making an institutional judgment on the problem of evil, and in doing so she is lured toward the side of her judges who question her belief. In "The Problem of Evil," Costello delivers a lecture titled "Witness, Silence and

[14] Moral relativism is a mistaken charge leveled against deconstruction on the issue of responsibility. See "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," a dialogue with Derrida.

Censorship," with the thesis that "[c]ertain things are not good to read *or to write*" (173), specifically targeting *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* by Paul West. This novel has a chapter that depicts the darkest hours of torture and cruelty before the execution of Hitler's assassins, and the rationale of Costello's judgment that this novel is not literature but *morally* intolerable obscene representation of evil in the "darkest recesses" (163) is that "a limit has been reached [and breached]" (175): "Obscene because such things ought not to take place, and then obscene again because having taken place they ought not to be brought into the light but covered up and hidden for ever in the bowels of the earth" (159). "Obscene" is a term closely related to censorship, and to say a literary text is obscene is to adopt the discourse of censorship already to set limits to the inventive force of literature. Costello is aware of the infinitely inventive force of literature and is against the practice of censorship, as she herself is a "cruel" and "positively indecent" writer who has used that force to shock people, to motivate people to move beyond the limits and constraints put in place by humanism, patriarchy, anthropocentrism and other forms of intellectual oppression. She notes that "the civilization of the West is based on belief in unlimited and illimitable endeavor" (160), and this "unlimited and illimitable endeavor" is similar to Derrida's thesis that literature is privileged with the right to say everything. But, when encountering the extreme force unleashed by West's novel, Costello holds back from these revolutionary forces by hinting on her "kulturpessimismus" (ibid), *despair of civilization*. She regrets that the potentiality of literature has been abused by West, the potentiality that she used to capitalize on. She guards certain territories from being ventured into by writers, as she says, "To save our humanity, certain things we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!*) must remain

off-stage" (168-69). This statement is paradoxical: humanity is not to be saved by excluding certain censored *human* aspects and by offering a proper prototype of humanity instead; humanity can only be saved by engaging human beings to bear witness to the "inhuman," the silenced, and the unsaid and the unsayable in humanity. Evil is a very human thing; it is down to the very core of humanity. Keeping evil off-stage does not amount to the nonexistence of evil. Costello's way of saving humanity is an *irresponsible* act: she conforms herself to the moral system by withdrawing behind the limits and expelling the question of evil to the "elsewhere." A responsible act would be to constantly test the system of censorship, and to respond to the silenced, the unsaid. The reticence on the issue of evil will not save humanity; it will deform humanity.

The question of whether the literary venture into the realm of evil is a good thing or not is conditioned by moral standards. Costello poses a couple of rhetorical questions in her lecture: "Can anyone wander as deep as Paul West does into the Nazi forest of horrors and emerge unscathed? Have we considered that the explorer enticed into that forest may come out not better and stronger for the experience but worse?" (161). These questions reflect what Zygmunt Baumann calls an elitist modernist moral stance that prescribes the categories and boundaries of morality: the event of literary invention has to be conditioned; certain forms of cultural productions and discourses are morally corrupt and should be banned, such as evil, pornography, sexuality, popular fiction, etc. As it turns out, this moral stance would stifle life and art. But, is it not true that certain forms of resistance are carried out in the cultural production of pornography? Can we deny the fact that the liberation of sexuality has provided impetus for feminist movement? Have not Hannah Arendt's discussion of absolute evil

and mundane evil and Giorgio Agamben's studies on the *Muselmann* helped us to see (in)humanity in a new light? At one point, Costello admits that *The Very Rich Hours* has really "engaged her" (161). This engagement with evil, with the "unsaid" and the "unsayable," is literature's force to "bring inert matter to life" (177), and to bridge toward the elsewhere. Literature should not avoid controversies or censored issues, since they are the site of conflict and creativity, the site from which the possibility to enact changes arises.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Coetzee's writing is an act of absolute responsibility toward the demands of the other through reading the two writer figures of Dostoevsky and Costello in his writing. Instead of endorsing the statist inscription of preserving social stability and upholding moral values, Coetzee's writing challenges the way we read a literary text, and the way a literary text is supposed to respond to social issues. Coetzee looks into the fundamental problems that concern writers—the ethics of writing and the responsibility of writers, and he pushes the limit of writing further beyond institutional constraints. In Coetzee's (re-)inventions of Dostoevsky and Elizabeth Costello, we witness the excessive force of the literary event that can open the space of literature for the coming of the other. But, we also see Costello stepping back from what literature could say on the issue of evil, and here we witness the scenario in which writers are faced with some of the most difficult moral questions. Even radical writers, such as Costello, would feel overwhelmed by the excessive force of literature and respond by receding behind the limits.

As a responsible writer, Coetzee does not produce politically correct texts that would acquiesce to the dominant ideologies. His writing works on the level of ethics, opening the ontological stability to more ethical possibilities. It acts upon the world in the sense that it challenges our entrenched thinking and received moral opinions so that we may respond to the demand of the other in the society. The intervention of literature can reconfigure the ontological actuality through radical openings for the coming of the other. What literature does is not merely to describe the world, but to provide new ways to rethink the current form of society and generate new ways to engage with the numerous others.

The Writing of Suffering and Ethics of Vulnerability in *Age of Iron*

> [I]n South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore the body. . . . I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, [and] my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world.
>
> —Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*

> Suffering interrogates us.
>
> —Joseph A. Amato
> *Victims and Values*

South Africa is a land of suffering, and South African literature, especially during the apartheid era, is weighed down by the unbearable heaviness of suffering.[1] In Bessie Head's words, "Literature is very functional in Southern Africa and bound inextricably to human suffering; the death of South African literature is that it is almost blinded by pain; people hardly exist beside the pain" (67; qtd. in Norridge 64). Violence and suffering constituted the major social fabric of reality, and there seemed no escape, no solution, no hope, as violence fed upon itself and turned into a totalizing force that engulfed the entire society. Pain was the unbearable weight of life, the reality people lived in. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren witnesses this unbearable

[1] By saying that South Africa is a land of suffering and that South African literature is weighed down by suffering, I do not mean to exceptionalize the history of suffering in this country. I think it is imperative that we read the singular instance of violence and suffering of each country without integrating it into the universal framework of comparison or generalization. As James Hatley illustrates Levi's Holocaust experience, "Levi's remarks make clear that each instance of violence is already singular and command a singular response" (1).

weight of suffering in the numerous unnameable figures of black people: "[W]hen I walked upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go, waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig iron floating under the skin of the earth" (125-26). South Africa is a land haunted by the spirits of the numerous black people whose suffering is not recognized in official history.

Writing as a response toward the maelstrom of violence that devastated South Africa, Coetzee found that the undeniable fact of suffering challenges his ethical thinking and fundamental conception of humanity, as he writes that his thinking "is thrown into confusion and helplessness by the fact of suffering in the world" (*Doubling the Point* 248). Suffering has disabled our traditional ethical principles and destroyed humanist values, and philosophy offers no solution, politics comes up with no remedy, and people show indifference in their consumption of the media images of other people's pain. In the face of philosophical ineptitude, political impotence and people's indifference, suffering assumes its own authority, refusing to be accounted for by the authorities and demanding its own expression beyond any analytical representation and interpretation.

Age of Iron is a novel about suffering and powerless; in reading this novel, we find us both interrogated by the suffering that remains unarticulated and exposed to the question of existential vulnerability. This novel comes close to being a realist novel while it also departs from that tradition. It can probably be seen as Coetzee's most politically engaged novel: He is responding to the worst violence during the States of Emergency, an event in which the security force and the anti-apartheid

insurrectionary youth were involved in serious conflict. Mrs. Curren, a white classics professor, is critical of the violence of apartheid against the black population; yet, her privileged life is protected by the "great divide" (7) between her class and the black class. She transgresses that divide and finds herself confronted by the scenes of violence, death, pain and suffering of the subjugated class as she witnesses the burning of a nearby black township and the ruthless killing of her servant's son and another black activist hiding in her house. Her relationship with Vercueil, who visits himself upon her, and her exposure to the violence against the black population invite us to rethink the problem of suffering and the possibility of conceiving of a new self-other relation.

A few critics investigate the inter-relationship between the body and politics in this novel. Marek Pawlicki reads the novel through the concept of metaphor, with a focus on the connection between cancer and social degeneration. His reading parallels that of Neimneh and Obeidat, who also read Mrs. Curren's cancer as a trope for apartheid. Dominic Head reads the "the leitmotif of relinquishment that runs through the novel sequence, and which becomes the dominant feature in *Age of Iron*" (129). Head applies postcolonial approach to look into "Mrs. Curren's relinquishment of all personal investment in South Africa" that "generate[s] a reverse process, the gradual acquisition of political enlightenment" (129). David Attwell, in his conclusion to his monograph *J. M. Coetzee: South African and the Politics of Writing*, reads *The Age of Iron*, summarily and schematically, through the "three seismic shifts" from *Dusklands* to *Foe*—authority, textuality and ethicalism (118-120), though without elaboration.

In reading *Age of Iron*, we find "suffering interrogat[ing] us" (Amato, *Victims and*

Values 17). We are exposed to suffering without the medium of analytical framework. The victims cry out their ineffable pain, and this crying out in the "maimed language" (Agamben 37) frustrates the reader's expectation to come to terms with the depiction of suffering. It ruffles reader's indifference and blocks any quest for rationally verified meaning of suffering, any attempt to integrate it into a coherent narrative or discourse. But more importantly, Coetzee does not treat suffering as a political or an intellectual question, but as an ethical question that challenges our ontological being. As Denise Almeida Silva maintains, "Calling attention to the body in pain, the disturbed, imprisoned, abused, diseased and deceased bodies which people Coetzee's fiction pose[s] deep ontological and epistemological interrogations, questioning the essence of being and nature of knowledge" (82).

In looking into Coetzee's ethics in writing suffering in this novel, we can delineate two inter-connected aspects. The first aspect is that the writing of suffering breaks with the framework of epistemology and representation. Absolute suffering cries out for expression, but it is often rendered meaningless because our language fails to describe the radical intensity of suffering, and because suffering itself causes lacuna in the cultural understanding of pain. For Mrs. Curren, her witnessing of the brutalized body of Bheki leads to her touching the body, and it is this tactile touch that brings her a new understanding of suffering that is quite different from that offered by rational representation. As for the second aspect, Coetzee not only writes the moment of shock in the face of pain, but takes the question back to the fundamental level: What happens when each singular being, before becoming a subject, is fundamentally vulnerable, thus exposed to violence and harm? In this novel, we see a new ethical relationship between Mrs. Curren and the others rooted

in ontological vulnerability, a possible relationship other than the one structured by sovereign subjectivity. Coetzee wishes to show an ethical self-other relation prior to the formation of the subject through exploring ontological vulnerability as the essential condition of human existence. He wants to understand, and possibly to derealize, the existing ontological frame that generates differential distribution of vulnerability, to borrow Judith Butler's phrase. In reading this novel, we cannot help but ask: If all lives are precarious, why are some lives rendered more precarious than others? What determines some lives as socially and politically precarious? What affects our different ways of responding to the suffering and loss of lives?

In the following, I will look into how Coetzee's writing of suffering plays a dissonant tune with the South African committed writing's hegemonic reaction toward the apartheid violence, how suffering refrains from being reduced to a political question that could be resolved through the liberalist solution of empowerment, how suffering cries out for its own expression through the "maimed language" in defiance of the view that extreme suffering cannot be represented, how *Age of Iron* performs a novelistic occasion to explore inter-human ethics in the relations formed between Mrs. Curren and the alterity figures, and how the life grounded in ontological vulnerability is more open than the life that biopolitical rule allows.

Writing Suffering in South Africa

In his reflection on the Holocaust, Adorno wrote, "The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting" (188). Indeed, the passion in Coetzee's writing lies in his commitment toward the suffering others whose right to existence is denied by

the existing ontological and socio-political framework, toward those whose pain was rendered silent within not only the official cultural and literary production, but also the dominant South African literary framework of committed writing that was characterized by essentialized and stereotypical depiction of pain and violence. Coetzee's passion was not recognized by his fellow writers, for he was often accused of evading his writerly responsibility to depict a recognizable South African figure and to use his writing to support the cause of black resistance and the movement of black consciousness. But a reading that focuses on Coetzee's thinking of the nature of suffering would indicate why he rejects the stereotypical depiction of the suffering black people and instead opts for a writing of suffering that attends to the singular experience of pain and trauma.

In the social reality constituted by violence and suffering under the apartheid regime, it seemed that there were no other options available to writers but the depiction of the widespread suffering and injustice. As Arthur Maimane, a South African writer and journalist, puts it: "In South Africa if you are black there can only be one thing you feel very strongly about: apartheid. And you do not have to be an artist either . . . so the first thing those of us who can write want to write about—feel impelled to write about—is the effect of this supremacist ethos on ourselves and on the supremacists themselves." This imperative to write about apartheid violence crossed the division of race and class. White writers also felt compelled to address social violence against the black population. Nadine Gordimer, the most influential white South African writer, wished to align herself with the majority in her country, thus espousing the Black Consciousness movement and envisioning a possible integrated community of black and white that would not be fragmented by

apartheid.

The commitment that commanded South African writing during the apartheid era was mainly inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's model of committed writing,[2] and it prescribed the ideal subject—the injustice endured by the black people and privileged literary realism "as the unquestioned means of bearing witness to, and telling the truth about, South Africa" (Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee* 11). Writing is ultimately "tested by its accountability to the truth of its society" (ibid 13). The truth is limited to the description of the violence inflicted on the black population, and writing dictated by this ethos could easily fall into political writing that promoted certain values and ideologies. This committed writing verged on utilitarianism, which, in the sense of the promotion of moral and political message, could easily compromise aesthetics and literary potentiality. Another problem associated with the committed writing is the tendency to essentialize suffering. It turns the suffering of the black people into a universal phenomenon without attending to the singularity of the experience of suffering.

Realism was much favored within the movement of committed writing due to its ideally authentic representation of historical violence and social oppression. Unlike modernism that was associated with elite white culture,[3] realism belonged to the

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[2] In *What is Literature?*, Sartre has the idea that literature has to be committed to the representation of reality and has to represent with clarity and with the preferred choice of prose rather than poetry. Rejecting the aestheticism of art for art's sake, he adopted an essentially utilitarian approach toward literature, which should serve to criticize the mainstream culture with the aim for amelioration. The committed writer should write with the conviction that "words are action" and that "to reveal is to change" (37). Thus, committed writing can and should be translated into active political actions. Writing is utilized as tools of resistance, as mediation for moral and political messages. It also defends the value of freedom (69). However, the problem with Sartre's notion of committed writing is his "persistence in promoting categorical action, including violence, which stemmed from his unshakable conviction of the inevitable historical progress and individual's role in it" (Just 8).

[3] The suspicion directed at Coetzee's writing was partly due to his mastery of modernist and poststructuralist style in his writing. David Attwell defends Coetzee's position by writing that "Coetzee has absorbed the lessons of modern linguistics—the textual turn in structuralism and poststructuralism—yet seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a

people of the lower class under oppression. Its straightforward and unbiased representation and linear narrative style contributed to the formation of a reading community among the oppressed people who could recognize and emphasize with the fictional characters experiencing social violence. One particular strand of realism influenced Gordimer, who inherited "critical realism" from her reading of Georg Lukacs in the late 1960s,[4] and this version of realism presupposes that readers would recognize "exploitative systems of governance" that caused oppression and would emphasize with such experiences. The reader's recognition and empathy would couple with his or her rational decision to change the exploitative system (Su 35). But recognition and empathy are insufficient to activate readers to take action (ibid 35), and they tend to naturalize the black people as victims of social violence. Njabulo Ndebele describes mimetic writing as "an art that is grounded in social debasement," as he argues that "little transformation in reader consciousness is to be expected since the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition. Recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms" (45). This confirmation confirms the binary structure that installed the apartheid regime in the first place by strengthening the binary struggle between the white oppressor and the black victims. The problem with committed writing is that the writers who devoted themselves to the ideal of committed writing would support the binary structure despite their criticism of the violent regime. The South African committed writing, with the sanctified subject of violence against black community and the ordained realist style, is more like ideological constraints imposed on writers. As

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particular historical locale, that of contemporary South Africa " (1).

[4] Dominic Head points out that Gordimer was concerned about "developing fiction of black African writers," and she found "the model of critical realism—as inherently progressive—to be amenable for this purpose" (12).

Louise Bethlehem points out, this commitment "seems less a choice than a structural constraint" (242). Its essentialist attitude constituted a climate of hegemony within the literary community.

Coetzee felt out of place in this climate of committed writing's call for realist representation, and his refusal of conventionalized writing led to his fellow writers' suspicion, if not outright rejection of his works. For Coetzee, writing is not reiterative—it does not portray and ultimately confirms the *status quo* in the political realm. Writing is productive in the sense that the literary potentiality disrupts the *status quo*, and due to this reason he rejects the reduction of writing to instrumentality, to serving any didactic dogmatism, nationalist myth or teleological ideal. The challenge for any writer writing about apartheid violence is how to avoid cliché and sentimentalization of suffering and how to defy the essentialist attitude lying at the heart of committed writing. Commitment in writing, if we follow Theodore Adorno, "in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions . . . but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes" ("Commitment" 180). Adorno is concerned with the disruption of the fundamental attitudes that have caused social injustice. In terms of ethical thinking, the commitment in writing is to probe how certain version of actuality strengthened by some entrenched "fundamental attitudes" has led to the exclusion of others. Any form of writing that might lead to tendentious actions and reified social causes should be subjected to critical inquiry. The commitment in Coetzee's writing is to restore writing's potentiality to reconfigure the order of actuality, including that constructed for the sake of black resistance against white supremacy. We should view writing as an act of opening that gives rise to exposure

to the silenced other, an exposure that engenders attentiveness to beings.

It is no exaggeration to say that Coetzee's novels are full of suffering figures—Friday, Michael K, the unnamed and blind girl and the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Lucy and Lurie in *Disgrace*, to name a few. But the fact that Coetzee writes the suffering of these figures does not really explain why his writing is ethical, and how his writing departs from the essentialist attitude of South African committed writing. For Coetzee, the ethics in writing suffering resides in the threshold between the effable and the ineffable. He does not write the recognizable, or consumable type of suffering, such as journalistic or media representation. Writing with this stereotypical and mechanical depiction would not be literature. He is equally resistant of approaching suffering "within the terms of gender inequality, racism, and colonial violence" (Vermeulen 270). These approaches are grounded in the discussion of power relations and identitarian politics. To read suffering from the political, gender or colonial perspectives is to accede authority to the authorities already by being locked in a dualistic structure and adopting the regime's mentality and discourse.[5] If Coetzee does not adopt a realist depiction of suffering, he does not resort to the idea that extreme pain is purely indescribable and incomprehensible, either.[6] The fact that the nature of apartheid violence exceeds the referential and representational capacity of language does not lead to the conclusion that silence and nonrepresentation are the best response for the suffering that is simply too horrifying. If it were the case, then those who suffer the indescribable pain would remain buried in the historical wreckages, and there is no

[5] A subversion rooted in applying binary discourse is called "triumphant subversion" by Coetzee: "subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn" (*White Writing* 81).

[6] As George Steiner reflects on the impossible task of representing the experience of the Holocaust in *Language and Silence*: "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason" (123).

possibility to respond to their demand of justice.

Suffering has its own authority and demands its own voice for telling the story. Literature has this potentiality to attend to the singular instance of suffering, as Zoe Norridge explains, "literature explores the relational nuances of individual experience rarely captured in analytical work," and it "opens up such systems to reader involvement and interpretation, to both a cognitive search for meaning and the potential for emotional identification" (24). Coetzee commits himself to writing the experience of suffering that is inarticulable in our linguistic and cultural expression with a different kind of language that does not describe but touches, that respects the authority of suffering and approaches suffering on its own terms. It is a language that disrupts the fundamental attitudes. Before the discussion of this language that touches, we need to see how suffering is treated as a political question and how the victims are subjected to the biopolitical rule.

Suffering as a Political Question and the Discourse of Empowerment

The fundamental attitude toward suffering in liberalist politics is to perceive suffering as a political question, and the solution it offers is self-empowerment. The creation of the social category of the victim and the identification of suffering as a political question can be traced back to the nineteenth century,[7] and since then it

[7] Joseph A. Amato ("Politics of Suffering" 25) and Michel Wieviorka (50) offer us the background information of the evolution of suffering as a political question in the nineteenth century. Amato writes, "The suffering downcast (the poor, slaves, serfs, and prisoners), the suffering of oppressed peoples (the Greeks, the Poles, the Italians, and others) and even the suffering animals (especially domestic animals like dogs and horses) won the hearts of increasing numbers of the West's literate upper classes." As a result of this "expanded sensibility," the newly formed class of victims "moved to the front of the moral stage." Public sentiments gave rise to a moral economy in which sufferers, now called victims, appealed to the conscience and responsibility of the public. Amato continues: "Conscience, justice and political rhetoric became inseparable from perceptions of suffering victims. . . . suffering became . . . a human responsibility. Suffering imposed a claim on private conscience and public action it never had before." Suffering ceased to be perceived as a natural phenomenon, a personal concern or a religious matter. The inhuman aspect of suffering was less

was articulated in political vocabulary. The moral terms that used to command people's conscience started to be articulated in political jargons, and suffering has been manipulated as a political concept and tool. The people who suffer would no longer be at the mercy of the rich and powerful classes that were willing to help; instead, they demanded a political response from the state. This new political awareness gave rise to the social discourse that suffering is not the result of a person's inherent powerlessness, but of social structural violence and injustice, caused by the confluence of complicated politico-economic factors. Suffering is no longer portrayed merely as the corporeal pain or psychological trauma a person feels alone; rather, the sociological term victimization, which was given larger valence in political discourse, was described in the political terms of oppression and exploitation and incorporated into the social discourses of identity, resistance and empowerment.

The primary task to deal with the political question of suffering is to recognize the victims, that is, to impose the identity of victim on those who suffer so that policies can be applied on the targeted groups. James Orbinski, once the president of MSF, proclaims, "the first act of justice is recognizing the victim" (12). He writes about the widespread unrecognizability of the great number of victims in the undeveloped countries who are rendered invisible in the global media representation in *An Imperfect Offering*. In some cases, the incalculable number of victims are given to the world merely as numbers, as "anonymous victims" (Sontag 60), without names, identities and life stories. In other cases, their suffering is consumed as the spectacle of violence, as "living room sights and sounds" (ibid 18).

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attributed to God's wrath than to the result of socio-political inequalities.

In terms of identity politics, only by recognizing the victims can the problem of suffering be settled; in other words, to deal with the question of suffering the sufferers have to be converted into the social category of victims. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, maintains that the way we perceive the pain of others is through media showing and representing the others' suffering at a distance. She writes, "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience" (13); "Wars are now also living room sight and sounds" (18). In this global indifference toward the widespread suffering, recognition is seen as the first step toward the question of human suffering.[8]

Social activists tend to link the question of recognizability to that of citizenship. They view social suffering rooted in the denial of social identity, and they argue that if the victims could be afforded citizenship, they would be protected by law and would not be subjected to violence and injustice. Thus, they praise the humanitarian organizations that are committed to "maintaining a world order which insists upon citizenship as the authentic ethico-political identity" (Nyers2), for they believe that the solution resides in the humanitarian attempt to fight for a social identity granted by the state to the unrecognized victims.

To rectify the problem of victimization, the state prescribes the remedy of empowerment to the victims to help them eventually get integrated into the society, or into what Thomas E. Reynolds calls "the cult of normalcy" that designates "productivity and rational autonomy" (107). Empowerment is a vital concept in both leftist and liberalist tradition. Barbara Cruikshank points out that the notion of

[8] Sontag does not see the question of suffering as one of recognition. In the face of media domination of the representation of the others' pain, she reminds us of this critical question: "What pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are not being shown" (Sontag 14). What is more important than recognition is the question of who decides the way of representation and how that representation is manipulated.

empowerment was first employed by the leftist critics in the 1960s in the US "to generate political resistance" (68), and gradually empowerment was being taken up by neo-liberal thinkers on the other end of political spectrum to produce "rational economic and entrepreneurial actors" (ibid). Victims are encouraged to appropriate a "proper" autonomous identity and adopt liberal values of free will, agency and empowerment in order not only to get their problem of social suffering addressed through the resources distributed to them but also to eventually restore their due place within the society. The concept of empowerment in identity formation is perceived as a strategy to promote full and responsible citizenship of the socially powerless. Political scientists and sociologists are always concerned about how to transform powerlessness into active citizenship through the logic and strategy of empowerment, and seen in this light the empowerment of the powerless is inherently connected to the logic of governmentality and the project of governance.

As *Age of Iron* begins, we witness the general indifference toward the black people suffering from the state-initiated violence during the State of Emergency, a historical event during which violence spiraled out of control, and the blacks were subject to the living reality of intimidation, poverty, displacement, killing and death. This nationwide indifference reflects Orbinsky's worry of the unrecognizability of the victims. The media showed no sign of the troubles but presented a sense of normalcy to the audience. What was shown on TV every evening was the "parade of politicians," and Mrs. Curren cannot restrain herself from calling them "a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives" (28). This media ignorance was coupled with the white people's general indifference to the troubles. This problem of suffering and violence was

limited to the “other” side of racial segregation; it is their/the black’s problem, as the privileged lifestyle of the white class continued to be protected amidst the escalating violence that engulfed the whole country. The white community was immune from the violence, and they were ignorant of the violence that was going on on the other side of the great chasm dividing the black and the white communities. Mrs. Curren observes, “And on the other side of the great divide their[the black children’s] white cousins soul-stunted too, spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons. . . . Slumberous their souls, bliss-filled, abstracted” (7).

As a white liberal humanist, Mrs. Curren is critical of the media’s nonrepresentation of the suffering blacks and the “slumberous souls” of the white community. She criticizes the violence the authorities employ to subjugate the black community, and she upholds the liberalist values at the heart of the Afrikaner government. On the one hand, she considers the suffering of the black people a social question that demands a political solution, and she entrusts the political institution, though perhaps not the current Afrikaner government, to institute policies to diminish the violence nationwide. On the other hand, she holds the belief that the black people should also be encouraged to adopt a self-empowering identity to earn social recognition and equal citizenship.

Mrs. Curren’s attitude toward Vercueil and the black people in her life is fundamentally structured by the logic of recognition and self-empowerment. In her relationship with Vercueil, Mrs. Curren wishes to transform a powerless and unrecognized Vercueil into a responsible and self-empowering citizen. In her first encounter with this stranger who visits himself on her, she recognizes him as a victim belonging to the socially downtrodden class and sees his temporary stay at her

garage as the social problem of vagrancy. The present irregular lifestyle of Vercueil stems from his giving up on himself, and she does not approve of a life that is wasted. For her, life is not like that, as she moralizes to Vercueil, "You are wasting your life. You are not a child anymore. How can you live like this? How can you lie around and do nothing all day? I don't understand it. . . . Something in me revolts at the lassitude, the letting go, the welcoming of dissolution" (8). Liberalism teaches us that each individual is entitled to a self-empowering identity, and her self-justifying preaching to Vercueil that each individual should be responsible for his or her own life is grounded in this notion of self-empowerment. Her gesture of offering him the job to work as a gardener demonstrates her liberalist stance that each individual should have a job to earn him- or herself livelihood and autonomy. Charity is not a reliable notion in liberalist politics, as it is not going to help permanently those who cannot help themselves. "If you want to be paid you will have to earn it. I am not giving you money for nothing. . . . we can't proceed on a basis of charity" (21). The way to fit into the society is to get a job that sustains oneself. "Be warned. In the South Africa of the future everyone will have to work, including you" (72). Mrs. Curren's liberal discourse ties in with the state's strategy to promote empowerment as a solution to deal with victimization.

To see human suffering as a political question of social victimization and to envision the solution in the adoption of a self-empowering identity is to think from the perspective of the state, which further indicates our acquiescence to the roles the state plays as the administrator of suffering and arbiter of the claims of victimhood. The state's attitude toward the victims is to manage victimization and to empower the victims in order to strengthen its rule. Suffering has become a political

issue in the sense that it has been incorporated into biopolitical rule, which names the entry of life into political realm and the state's "growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures" (Rose 3). Biopolitical rule is seen as the governance of population by the optimization of life and by managing risks, insecurities and life contingencies that could potentially disrupt life.

While suffering has become a major issue of political preoccupation, the ascendency of victim status[9] justifies the state in assuming legitimacy and authority over the matters of victimization. In the first place, the state has the authority to decide whose victimization counts and whose victimization does not. But more importantly, since suffering is a potential condition of human life, the state has to intervene by employing biopolitical technologies and implementing policies to secure the livelihood of the population. As Peter Berger writes in *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, "The most pressing human costs are in terms of physical deprivation and suffering. The most pressing moral imperative in policy-making is a calculus of pain" (xiii; qtd. in Amato, *Victims and Values*). Suffering, subjected to the logic of calculation, becomes a matter of managing the victims and distribution of social

[9] The conversion of suffering into political fabric is followed by the emergence of victim culture, in which the victims are expected, and taught in certain instances, to lay claim to their victim status recognized by the state. Our contemporary culture can be said to be one characterized by ubiquitous victimist rhetoric. Victims of different kinds, for instance survivors of catastrophes and social minorities, strive for their visibility within the political system in the belief that the state will respond to their suffering. To gain the status of victimhood and the benefits that come along with it, it is important to decide whose suffering counts. In other words, another way of getting recognition from the state is to get included in the frame of representation. Once they get represented in the frame, they would get people's attention and sympathy. Once the victims are "recognized," they claim for their victim status. What ensues are frequently the essentialization and fetishization of suffering. The victims would get authenticity and authority through their discourse of victimhood and act of exhibiting their suffering. The minorities would become the "natural" victims of unjust social structures, and they would cherish or even "enjoy" their suffering with which their victim status is self-perpetuated and their compensation guaranteed. In this sense, suffering becomes "hyper-valorized as a means of gaining power" (Hron 58) and "secur[ing] forms of privilege" (Ahmed 32).

resources to those in need. The policy-makers need to maximize the effect of polices that take care of the victims by calculating the distribution of benefits. In the process, suffering has become less about the people who suffer than the state's concern of preventing any potential risks and tightening the control of population. Suffering has been emptied of its content, and the victims simply disappear from the public view unless they are given victim status.

In the dealing with the victims, biopolitcal rule works in a nuanced way to empower the powerless to become self-sustaining, participatory and productive citizens in order to better regulate them. Political discourse defines empowerment as "the possibility of generating one's capacities, one's 'self-esteem,' one's life course," (Brown 22); however, according to Wendy Brown, the political regime increases its power through this strategic promotion of empowerment of the liberal subject. In the end, the victims would discover "a wide chasm" between the promise of empowerment and the real picture of what it means to *be* empowered:

> [W]hile the notion of empowerment articulates that feature of freedom concerned with action, with being more than the consumer subject figured in discourses of rights and economic democracy, contemporary deployments of this notion also draw so heavily on an undeconstructed subjectivity that they risk establishing a wide chasm between the (experience of) empowerment and an actual capacity to shape the terms of political, social, or economic life. (Brown 23)

While the concept of empowerment is normalized as an essential part of a liberal

subject, it is linked to power relation and regulation. Contemporary welfare states prescribe the norm of empowerment through the "normative" correlate between identity, agency and citizenship (Mitchell Dean 83): A liberal subject, who is expected to "overcome a passive, indeed dependent, relation to government" (Dean 83), is empowered with rationality, knowledge and agency to make decisions and take actions. This prescription of the norm of empowerment should not blind us from the operation of biopolitical rule as a power relation. A victim who wishes to shake off his or her social powerlessness is drawn to the normative discourse of empowered identity, and without his or her awareness this act of self-empowerment involves a "voluntary and coercive exercise of power upon the subjectivity of those to be empowered" (Cruikshank, "The Will to Empower" 35; qtd. in Dean 85). In this scenario, power is no longer a top-down relation, nor structured in a dichotomy of the powerful against the powerless. As Barbara Cruikshank writes, "Without the empowerment of the poor it would not be possible to act upon their actions or to extend relations of power and government to them" (*The Will to Empower* 82). The project of empowerment, which is based on the voluntary disempowerment of the self, works to disempower the powerless before empowering them.

In a profound way, empowerment is used as a "technology of citizenship" (Cruikshank 68), as "the means by which government works *through* rather than against the subjectivities of citizens" in order to "maximize their[the victims'] actions, motivations, interests, and economic and political actions" (69). The political logic of empowerment works by eliciting the prior concession and consent of the powerless in the form of adopting full and responsible citizenship. Patricia de Santana Pinho, in interpreting Wendy Brown's critique of empowerment, writes, "The formation of

subjects and categories (blacks, women, and homosexuals, among others) in liberal societies demands an artificial development of self-esteem, because it is inserted within the orders of regulation, exploitation, and domination" (141). To attain "self-esteem" signifies one's prior consent to the biopolitical regulation. As Carolyn J. Dean testifies, "The appropriation of traumatized identity (or 'identity politics') by victims themselves constitutes a misguided concession to dominant culture" (407). This "misguided concession" constitutes the subservience to sovereignty, to biopolitical rule. Empowerment is fundamentally about the disempowerment of the victims, that is, how to entice the victims to adopt full citizenship so that they could be regulated within the biopolitical rule. Within this political logic, empowerment is synonymous with disempowerment, and it signals a new form of subjection: Autonomy is subjected to discipline. In a political system that is founded on identity politics, the victim may appeal to the authorities for the restoration of their lost identities without the awareness that the state imposes a system that regulates, dominates and even exploits through the very concept of identity politics.

Mrs. Curren's benign gesture to help Vercueil adopt a self-empowering identity and live a life of self-esteem leads to her unconscious complicity with the state ideology to tighten its control over the socially powerless people through the implementation of self-empowerment. Her job offering to Vercueil is indeed more like an imposition of her will on the elusive and passive Vercueil than an offering rooted in the willingness to help. She comes up with a list of the daily necessities for Vercueil that would be afforded by his work: "He needs a bath every day; he needs clean underwear; he need a bed, he needs a roof over his head, he needs three meals a day, he need money in the bank" (20). If Vercueil can live a life resembling

Mrs. Curren's, then she would not need to fend him off (her first thought when seeing Vercueil is how to fend him off). The imposition of her lifestyle on him would eventually lead to the implantation of liberalist ideology in him. In Mrs. Curren's benign gesture toward Vercueil, we see a political act of inclusion and discipline with the practical expectation to maintain order and rule that cannot be disrupted by some unruly vagrants like Vercueil.

When Orbinski proclaims that "the first act of justice is recognizing the victim," he is adamant in linking the question of suffering to justice. Suffering is fundamentally a question of justice. However, the state seeks only legal and institutional justice, that is, justice administered mainly through legal terms. In legal practice, suffering is measured on the scale with a proportionate amount of punishment or compensation. The state brings the perpetrator to justice through legal means in the name of justice and mete out adequate compensation to the victim. However, justice in the form of legal justice does not do justice to the victims themselves. In Derrida's famous distinction between the imperative of unconditional justice and the materialization of conditional justice in the form of law in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority," justice that is reduced to the status of legal prescriptive proportions is simply distributive and calculated justice, i.e. conditional justice at the service of the political authority. The institutional thinking that takes the law and justice to be synonymous reveals that the law is a stable system in the onto-epistemological order that prescribes generally accepted rules, norms, and rights. In dealing with suffering as a political question, the state overlooks the singular experience of suffering itself, since what concerns the state is less the injuries and pains felt by the victims than the damage that could harm the

political system. To the state, suffering represents "a challenge to society, threaten[s] the social bond, and disturb[s] the social order" (Wieviorka 49). Essentially, the state uses the issue of suffering and the concept of justice to maintain its rule by remedying social wrongs, to ward off any potential threats to its rule by arming itself with the legal system to increase its authority to rule. The state speaks for the victims in the communal interests of the collectives; in other words, the state needs the victims in order to enforce its sovereignty.

To think suffering from the liberalist perspective is already to set a limit to our responsibility to the suffering others, and to house justice under legal jurisdiction. To think suffering ethically, we cannot simply entrust the question of suffering to the state, to the lawmakers who are expected to implement the most benign policies without touching on the fundamental issue of suffering itself. Justice suffers when suffering takes place. If the state conceives of justice as part of its rule, then we have to think justice that is singular and unaccountable to law, a justice that is beyond the legal order. The experience of justice is fundamentally unsettling: Justice is radically interruptive, and it can reinterpret and reinvent the law by opening the law to the other. We can have a chance of justice only in radical excess of existing apparatuses of law and legal institutions. The justice demanded by the other is irreducible to the legally distributive justice in the onto-epistemological register of identity and presence.

Perhaps the first act of doing justice to the suffering others is to "unrecognize" the victims. The theory of recognition is a vital liberalist concept associated with the formation of self-identity.[10] To recognize the victims, however, is a much more

[10] Hegel is usually perceived as the historical figure whose thinking started the discussion of recognition for contemporary social and political philosophy. Important contemporary contributors to this theory include Charles Taylor, Alex Honneth, and Nancy Fraser.

complicated matter than simply identifying the victims and providing the urgent assistance they need. In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver points out that the mechanism of recognition is problematic, despite its importance for the debate on multiculturalism and for marginalized or oppressed people's struggle for social struggle: "[W]hat is recognized [and recognizable] is always only something familiar to the subject" (Oliver 9). She maintains, "Only when we begin to think of the recognition of what is beyond recognition can we begin to think of the recognition of difference" (ibid). Recognition recognizes only what is recognizable—it sets limits to the range of recognizability. An ethical gesture would be to move beyond the economy of recognition toward those rendered unrecognizable within the dominant framework of intelligibility.

For Coetzee, real victims are absolute victims, who are irreducible to representation and who are even unable to claim the status of the victim: "One of the meanings of what is call a victim . . . is precisely to be erased in its meaning as victim" (Derrida, "Passages—from Traumatism to Promise" 389). An absolute victim is perceived in his or her fundamental powerlessness to claim his or her suffering, let along the identity recognized by the state. "The absolute victim is a victim who cannot even protest. . . . He or she is totally excluded or covered over by language, annihilated by history, a victim one cannot identify" (ibid 389). As the novel proceeds, Mrs. Curren is exposed to more absolute victims, to mutilated bodies and the dead bodies that cannot die, and this exposure collapses her faith in liberalist politics that relies on the "science of victims" and the discourse of empowerment to deal with the question of suffering. The mechanism of recognition fails, and the discourse of empowerment founders. To attend to the experience of absolute suffering demands

"the tongue of a god," the "maimed language" that articulates the unspeakable pain.

"The Maimed Language"

Suffering is the moment of shock, the site of the irreducible gap between the unspeakability of pain and knowledge's attempt to represent it. When we approach suffering, we encounter a limit site where self and the world meet on new terms. Suffering has its own authority: It demands its own voice that resists political, philosophical and medical perspectives of comprehension, a voice that articulates the singular instance of pain. The crying out of unrecognized victims demands that we think beyond the biopolitical conception of suffering, for the act of claiming victimhood for recognition and adopting self-empowering identity amounts to the subjection to state paternalism. As I wrote in the previous section, to approach victimization in biopolitical terms, that is, to empower the victims, is fundamentally to disempower those who suffer. While we suffer from the impossibility of accessing the inarticulate pain through our entrenched linguistic and cultural expressions, it is in this irreducible gap that we might be able to explore new possibilities of responding to the suffering others, and to explore how responsibility and justice do not rely on recognition and empowerment but on vulnerability (Rubenstein 62).

The state relies on the disciplines of law, sociology, political science, and psychology and medicine to produce the "science of victims" that provides the necessary knowledge to deal with social security and intervention (Wieviorka 57). Modern culture, founded on the philosophy of Enlightenment and science, attempts to leave nothing out of its universal grasp of the world, and its attitude toward suffering is to see it as a subject of study, a problem to which a solution is to be

proffered. As Daniel Callahan writes, "Enlightenment and the science that goes with it (especially in modern medicine) treat it[suffering] as a problem, an effort full of hopes, possibilities, and upward progress" (X). This epistemological orientation is translated into "the science of victims" that "can make an important contribution if we wish to define what a victim is, and to distinguish between different types of victim" (Wieviorka 59). This science leaves nothing undisclosed from its predatory eye, not even trauma, the abyss where the experience of the unimaginable and the unspeakable reside. According to Michel Wieviorka, a French sociologist known for his study on violence, terrorism and racism, this science of victims "allows us to approach the central problem of trauma, to further specify the notion of harm, and to outline and discuss concrete ways of caring for victims, making reparation to them, or indemnifying them" (59). "Science of victims" mobilizes the methods of taxonomic division, rational analysis, statistics and graphs, and functional language that allow for no ambivalence in the investigation of suffering and in communicating the abstract feelings of suffering. Suffering, if it is to be comprehended by the public and elicit sympathy, has to make sense, to have meaning in our daily discourse.

A typical example of this confidence to represent pain and suffering is seen in Rob Roddice's "Introduction" to *Pain and Emotion in Modern History* in spite of his awareness of "polyvalence" in the articulation of pain. He writes that pain "has been, is and can be expressed—bodily, orally, emotionally and linguistically" through "metaphors," "figures," "contexts" and the sharing of a common culture (1-2).[11]

[11] Some critics suggest that figurative speech is one possible method to get close to the experience of suffering. Nevertheless, Jean Améry, a concentration camp survivor, rejects this suggestion. He writes of his "incomparable" experience of torture by the Nazis in *At the Mind's Limits*: "It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it 'like a red-hot iron in my shoulders,' and was another 'like a dull wooden stake that had been driven into the back of my head?' One comparison would only stand for another, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing

Roddice's faith in the expressibility of pain and suffering is self-defeating in that the translation of biological and psychological feelings into artistic and linguistic representation is undermined by the discrepancy between the signifier and the signified, and the asymmetry between the linguistic conceptual tools and the affective and somatic feelings. The employment of "metaphors," "figures" and "contexts" renders the project of translating inner feelings impossible, for metaphors involve "a tremor, a shock, a displacement of force" in the movement of communication (Derrida, "Signature Event Context" 1). Metaphors and figures introduce heterogeneity and ambivalence into communication, often leading to not only polyvocality but also displacement of meaning (ibid 2).

The "science of victims" grounded in the optimism of the objective analysis of the indescribable experience of extreme pain is much disputed, especially after the Holocaust. For instance, Rebecca Chopp criticizes the "quantitative analysis" of the suffering of Holocaust survivors in *The Praxis of Suffering*:

> Events of massive, public suffering defy quantitative analysis. How can one really understand statistics citing the death of six million Jews or graphs of third-world starvation? Do numbers really reveal the agony, the interruption, the questions that these victims put to the meaning and nature of our individual lives and life as a whole? Knowledge of suffering cannot be conveyed in pure facts and figures, reportings that objectify the suffering of countless persons. The horror of suffering is not only its immensity but the faces of the anonymous victims who have little voice, let alone rights, in

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to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity to communicate" (9).

history. (2)

Facts, statistics and quantitative analysis say nothing about the nature of suffering itself, about "the agony, the interruption" and the victims' silent accusation of the society that allowed the tragedy to happen. The experience of suffering is never at home in language and knowledge and can hardly be brought to broad daylight for examination. It resists *logos* and the power of speech, as Adorno writes, "Suffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational. Suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential" (*Aesthetic Theory* 18).

In *Age of Iron*, the experience of suffering does not "remain mute and inconsequential." Bheki's friend (Bheki is the son of Florence, the servant at Mrs. Curren's house) is riding a bicycle on the street, and he is pushed by the police and crashs into a car door. In her act of "covering the open wound" of the black body Mrs. Curren feels the presence of a body for the first time, a body that suffers, a body that "cannot protest" and yet accuses her and the white class silently:

> As long as I pinched tight I could hold in most of the flow. But when I relaxed blood poured again steadily. It was blood, nothing more, blood like yours and mine. Yet never before had I seen anything so scarlet and so black. Perhaps it was an effect of the skin, youthful, supple, velvet dark, over which it ran; but even on my hands it seemed both darker and more glaring than blood ought to be. I stared at it, fascinated, afraid, drawn into

> a veritable stupor of staring . . . Because blood is precious, more precious than gold and diamonds. Because blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existence, but belonging by nature together . . . (63)

In this passage, we do not find a Mrs. Curren maintaining her aloof liberalist stance surveying the scene in which the black boy is mutilated by police violence. Nor do we listen to her reporting his suffering with detailed description of the wound. We see her feeling, touching, holding, and covering the open wound on his head. It is the wound itself that articulates his experience of suffering: the body is lacerated, the skin peeled off, and the blood keeps flowing, coloring Mrs. Curren's clothes. A mutilated, but also still and silent body, yet it powerfully accuses the society of its complicity with the police and its indifference toward the violence imposed on the blacks, and it vehemently demands a response from them. Mrs. Curren feels afraid, but also fascinated by the blood flowing from his body. The open wound fascinates Mrs. Curren, who covers the wound "on an impulse" (79). The wound and the blood unsettle her sense of self and result in a new relation with a black.

This black body lies still, but its suffering does not remain mute. While suffering might defy any linguistic or cultural attempt to bring it into consciousness, it confirms the undeniable presence of the body that feels the pain. In her seminal work *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes, "Intense pain is world-destroying," (29) as the totality of pain destroys consciousness, the notions of identity and subjectivity, and all means of articulation. Scarry further argues that pain "not simply resist[s] language but actively destroy[s] it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language

is learned" (4). In this reversion of linguistic articulation of pain, the experience of suffering is marked by "absence" of language (37), the world and the self while "the body and its pain are overwhelmingly present" (46). Very ironically, suffering confirms the presence of the suffering body while it also denying our access to that presence. The indescribable pain confirms how absolutely real and singular the body is in experiencing the "world-destroying" experience of suffering, while it leads to self-negation and the destruction of language. It can be felt only by the one who suffers—it is impossible to generalize the experience of pain, and the experience of suffering forbids comparison, as the mode of comparison creates hierarchy of suffering and perceiving suffering in a universal mode overlooks its singularity. As Amery writes, "In self-negation, his flesh becomes a total reality" (33).

What emerges from this aporetic scenario is that extreme pain suffers a double injury: On the one hand the pain itself is totalizing and overwhelming, and on the other the mechanism of representation, whether it is scientific language or figurative speech, falls short of articulating that experience of pain. In its double injury, suffering is defined by loss—the loss of language and the loss of human agency, the loss that is "irremediable, incompossible, [and] irreparable" (Hatley70). An absolute victim is stripped of his or her language, recognition and dignity, and human subjectivity; in other words, suffering destroys every single trait of humanity. A Cartesian subject would assert its agency in feeling the pain, within a tolerable limit. It emphasizes its ability to feel and describe the pain, and it is capable of finding out the cause of that pain and seeks to remove that culprit. However, "[s]uffering subsists on the underside of agency, mastery, [and] wholeness" (Connolly 252). Suffering "incinerates our ability to communicate and . . . robs us of a degree of

agency" (Marino 54). The sheer incommunicability exceeds the self-control of the rational subject, beyond the order of presence. Blanchot tells us, "There is suffering, there would be suffering, but no longer any 'I' suffering, and this suffering does not make itself known in the present; it is not borne into the present" (*Writing Disaster* 15).

To say suffering is marked by the loss of language and agency does not mean that suffering cannot be articulated in any way though, or that muteness is the ultimate scenario we can imagine in the face of extreme pain. If it were the case, then it would amount to the forgetting of the suffering others, which is exactly the aim of the oppressing regime.[12] As it is not an "I" that makes sense of the pain, extreme suffering voices itself through a "maimed language." Writing about the testimony of the Holocaust survivors by drawing on Primo Levis's works, Agamben tells us that "Levi had already attempted to listen to and interpret an inarticulate babble, something like a non-language or a dark and maimed language" (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 37). In listening to the maimed language, one experiences "an undergoing of compulsion" and "becomes vulnerable to a silence inspire by the other that leaves one in anarchic disarray" (Hatley 40).

This "non-language" constitutes the lacuna: It is filled with interruptions, inconsistencies, literary specters and gaps in narration (Norridge 4). The lacuna in discourse and in linguistic subjectivity is not a pure void, but the site where specters keep coming back, demanding interpretation while exceeding that interpretation. This "maimed language" renders "an unconscious within discourse" and "encrypt[s]

[12] In *Suffering Witness*, James Hatley points out that Nazi relied on the world's indifference to the victims of the Holocaust to complete its project of the Final Solution (15). The extermination of the Jews would not be complete if their traces were not erased as well. And if we acknowledge that since the suffering exceeds our ability to represent we'd better remain mute, this act of forgetting would not be so different from that of the Nazi.

an ontological void" within the order of presence (Van Boheemen-Saaf 8). This ontological void is where significance emanates, where the poetics of listening to the singular experience of suffering resides.

In his portrayal of the suffering characters, Coetzee makes no attempt to produce the knowledge of suffering, and he does not resort to figurative speech to create sensational images to arouse reader's pity and sympathy. The suffering others are authority, and they resist the science of victims. Pain and suffering cry out for expression, yet language fails to articulate the limit experience. That is the reason why we see the impasse and silence in the narrative of Coetzee's novels, and this impasse and silence have led to not only the disruption of narrative temporal development but also the breakdown of language altogether. What surfaces is a "maimed language," or what Mrs. Curren calls "[the] voice that is no voice" (164): a non-language, a language of silence, a body's language that challenges the authority's discourse and its attempt to both articulate and contain the bodily experience by imposing the meaning it desires.

Probably the most outstanding example of the "maimed language" from *Age of Iron* is the much quoted statement, "To speak of this . . . you would need the tongue of a god" (99). According to Mike Marais' interpretation, Coetzee uses the "tongue of a god" to defend his position not committing himself to the cause of South African committed writing. Writing is singular, and it "must truly come from [himself]" (98), to adapt Mrs. Curren's words. In this novel, the "tongue of a god" names the impossibility of representing suffering with the traditional epistemological framework; it calls for the exigent responsibility to attend to the body that feels the pain, to respect the authority of the body that experiences the suffering.

To her surprise, Mrs. Curren finds that both the state and oppressed side of the blacks are committed to the same principle of the instrumentality of suffering. At the request of Florence, Bheki's mother, Mrs. Curren agrees to drive her to the black township where the police's killing spree occurred. Her foray into the black township is "like a descent into the underworld," into the "liminal space," as if she crossed "from the living to the dead" (van der Vlies 98). When challenged by Mr. Thabane to give her opinions after seeing this underworld, Mrs. Curren refuses to offer her condemnation of the violence much expected by Mr. Thabane not only because the scene of suffering and death is too overwhelming but also because she resists the "orthodox of vocabulary" and "the jargon of struggle" (Gordimer, "A Writer's Freedom" 106) that supports the resistance movement. (Of course, if Mr. Thabane could have a white sympathizer for the cause of Black resistance, he would feel more justified in the fight of resistance against the Afrikaner government.)

Witnessing the five bodies "neatly laid out" in the rain (102), Mrs. Curren says, "Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again" (103). Her eyes are open because for the first time she is exposed to an unbearable scene that was shielded from the white people, and because she no longer perceives suffering and death in indifference and abstraction. At this moment of shock, she can no longer "understand" suffering and death, but faces the ontological condition of life and death:

> The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. He still

> wore the gray flannel trousers, white shirt, and maroon pullover of his school, but his feet were bare. His eyes were opening and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating on him for hours, on him and his comrades, not only here but wherever they had been when the met their deaths; their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth. (102)

Despite the seemingly simplistic and terse narrative description, what Mrs. Curren is exposed to radicalizes her previous perception of suffering. While she touched and covered the open wound of Bheki's friend when he was brutally hurt by the police in a car accident, now she is exposed to the body that she touched before when he was still alive. The wound from which blood flowed and colored her clothes was perhaps healed, perhaps not. She recognizes the clothes Bheki used to wear (as a poor black kid, he wore the same clothes most of the time), and she also notices that the shoes are gone. The body is not so different from the body she touched before, only with the difference that it no longer moves. The black boy is dead; the body is dead. They body preserves the facial expression when it encountered the moment of death: What could have made his eyes open and stare, and his mouth open? What kind of shock could have frozen this frightened facial expression? The sanctity of the body is defiled: Who could allow the body to lie in the rain for hours? Why didn't any one wipe away the sand in his mouth and in the corner of his eyes? Why are the bodies denied their proper burials? In silence, the defenseless bodies cry out for decency and protection, and these requests are denied.

Mrs. Curren's eyes are opened, and she is shaken and disturbed as she sees black people in their death. She says, "They are dying all the time, I know, but always somewhere else. The people I have seen die have been white and have died in bed, growing rather dry and light there, rather papery, rather airy. They burned well, I am sure, leaving a minimum of ash to sweep up afterward" (124). The privileged class die a natural and decent death, while the oppressed class are denied their proper death. The dead black people are not mourned. Mrs. Curren's ontological sense of self and epistemological worldview are shaken. She needs the tongue of a god for articulating the pain and suffering, as functional linguistic expression and representation have failed. What she feels is the crushing weight of the death, and she comes to think the significance of the death of the black people.

Bodies are vulnerable: Mr. Thabane instrumentalizes the death of the five young people, since he uses them in the service of the cause for resistance movement. He says to Mrs. Curren, "Yes, they must lie there[in the rain]. So that everyone can see" (124). The bodies cannot die: The bodies are exhibited as the empirical evidence of government violence against the black people to incite anger and resistance among the black community. Pathetically, the black resistance is locked into the dead-end game of binary resistance, and more pathetically this ideology is implanted in the consciousness of the five young boys when they were still alive. When Bheki and his friend were hurt brutally by the police, Bheki avers that the wounds are symbols of honor in the fight against the Afrikaner government. Wounds are weak, but they are turned into symbols of strength and glory. In a fundamental way, Mr. Thabane's perceiving of the suffering falls in line with the instrumental logic of the state's management of social victimization. Suffering is a

form of state oppression, and the collective suffering of the black people must be mobilized as a collective force to combat the oppressive violence. But who attends to the singular experience of suffering and listens to the cry of pain of the person who suffers? Mr. Thabane is passionate about the resistance movement, and yet he is also cold-blooded in his attitude toward the singular sufferer. Perhaps, it is Mrs. Curren who is willing to engage such questions. When she visited Bheki, who was hospitalized after being hurt by the police on the street, she saw in Bheki only a "child, no more than a child, playing on a bicycle" (66) who is manipulated by the resistance ideology to die for the movement. Now, witnessing the vulnerable bodies lying in the rain, she thinks, "What did he see as his last sight on earth?" (102). Does his mouth with the sand try to say anything?

While the state and the resistance movement alike tend to use the suffering and the dead, silent bodies to express their respective ideologies, Mrs. Curren is engaged in the ethics of listening to the muteness of the body. To write suffering is to confront the moment of shock, the moment when pain emerges in its inaccessibility to the conscious mind and trembles the Cartesian subject bounds. The moment of shock is not the purely inexpressible; instead, it breaks with our moral parameter of responding to sufferings, and our cultural and social paradigmatic representation of pain. If Mrs. Curren's gesture can be deemed ethical, it is because she is "arguing for that unheard" (146). She does not attempt to account for the extremity of pain, but to listen to the cries of the suffering others articulated in the maimed language despite herself. To listen to the pain, Mrs. Curren suffers from "insomnia" (Hatley 3): She is haunted by the demands of the other, and she cannot

stop mourning for the dead and the silenced. While Mrs. Curren mourns the five young boys, Mrs. Thebane forgets them.

Writing does not set out to find the truth based on supporting facts and statistics, its cause and consequence. The "maimed language" speaks a different truth, or rather, it remains "true to the victims" (Hatley 3). Adorno puts it in these words: "[T]he need to lend a voice to suffering is the precondition of all truth" (*Negative Dialectis* 17). Truth would not be truth if did not involve "the audibility of suffering" (Snyman 3). Coetzee's writing bears witness to the pain and suffering rendered silent in official history. When Mrs. Curren says that "to speak of this . . . you would need the tongue of a god," she does not evade the demand to articulate the pain and suffering. She voices the suffering beyond the state's attempt to produce "the science of victims" and departs from Mr. Thabane's ideology of dualistic resistance. In her exposure to the suffering and death of the black people, Mrs. Curren's liberalist self is shaken, and in this shakenness she comes to realize that vulnerability is an ontological condition. Responsibility toward the suffering other does not reside in the biopolitical management of social victimization, liberalist empowerment of the vulnerable self, or resistance ideology. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein points out, "[R]esponsibility relies upon vulnerability rather than the mastery of certainty" (62).

Ethics of Vulnerability

The maimed language articulates an experience of suffering that official history cannot convey, and this experience of unrepresented (not unrepresentable) suffering exposes the state of fundamental vulnerability beyond state protection and

intervention. Ontological vulnerability defines humanity, and the ability to suffer gives rise to the possibility of hospitality. The self, as embodied in ontological vulnerability, exists in the existential condition of contingency, susceptibility, and precarity. In terms of the existential state of the self defined by vulnerability, I suffer, and therefore I am; I suffer, and I welcome. Ontological vulnerability is the condition of hospitality toward alterity, the site of possibility to reconceive self-other relation.

For Coetzee, "justice is weak" (Derrida, *A Taste for Secret* 33);[13] to think responsibility is to think ontological vulnerability prior to the formation of an autonomous and liberal self. If responsibility is rooted in an autonomous and rational subject, there would be only violent assimilation, repression, and outright exclusion. Coetzee not only writes the moment of shock in the face of pain, but takes the question back to the more fundamental level. The passion in Coetzee's writing lies in the commitment to the suffering others whose right to existence is denied by the existing ontological framework and whose life is rendered "ungrievable" and "unmournful," to use Judith Butler's terms. In total suffering, the concept of subject no longer holds, along with the liberalist discourse of identification and recognition. Coetzee explores the ontological vulnerability as the essential condition of human existence in the pre-subjective stage, and he sees existential weakness as the site of new ethical relation between self and other.

The discussion of ethics in Western philosophical tradition is rooted in the ontological presumption that an autonomous subject has the will and strength for ethical conducts, while consigning vulnerability to "moral failures" (O'Sullivan 1). Ethical discussion is inevitably linked to "enselfment," (Turner 27) which is the

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[13] The original passage reads, "[T]he image of weakness offers less purchase to dialectic. . . .It is the weak, not the strong, that defies dialectic. Right is dialectical, justice is not dialectical, justice is weak" (*A Taste for Secret* 33)

process where the self is empowered with the will and strength to ward off existential vulnerability and insecurity. Vulnerability is a problem to be solved through rational security policy and moral rational judgment. Vulnerability cannot be allowed in the political space since it will cause disorder and disability. Without "enselfment," the subject experiences self-alienation and self-effacement; it is not in command of itself and control of the surroundings, thus subject to vulnerability, passivity and irresponsibility. This ontological subject is translated into an autonomous liberal subject in the political realm, a self-interested and self-sufficient individual that assumes personal responsibility for themselves and for their dependents in the society. In this tradition, ethics is dependent on ontology, and thus ethical conducts are possible *only because* the subject wills it.[14]

The discussion of ethics that relies on a sovereign subject draws suspicion from and raises concerns for philosophers and critics. In *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alasdair Macintyre points out that vulnerability is evidently of "singular importance" to our existence; however, "the history of Western moral philosophy suggests otherwise" (1), as vulnerability is portrayed in a negative fashion in Western philosophical tradition. In *Hospitality and World Politics*, Gideon Baker is also concerned with the absence of sustained attention to biological vulnerability from the academic analysis of hospitality and the ethics of international humanitarian intervention, as scholars and critics have placed greater emphasis on state policies

[14] The logic of modern science is not only to treat illness when the body is influenced by certain diseases, but to prevent the chance of getting infected in advance. We want to immunize our body from any threats of illness because we do not want to expose our lives to the risks of biological inserucity. Translated into political terms, liberal politics works to "minimize vulnerability," usually through the provision of "negative freedoms" and constrained liberties (Kuzner 2). The concept of risk society is precisely to minimize the chance of exposing the self and the society to any risks from the known and unknown sources, such as terrorist attacks and environmental pollution. In this process of shielding itself from any threats, the society institutes measures and policies that exclude the heterogeneous that cannot be domesticated.

and legal measures to deal with the problem of refugees and asylum seekers (198). For Macintyre and Baker, as well as Coetzee, ethics is not grounded in the discourse of recognition and empowerment: Ethics has to be situated in the site of ontological vulnerability before subject formation if we want to think otherwise than the current liberal policies grounded in a sovereign and self-empowering subject as the agent of ethical conducts and to imagine a less reified world than the one constructed by liberal politics.

The Latin etymology of vulnerability, *vulnus*, denotes "wound," naming "a capacity for damage, a liability to harm, an exposure to risk, aggression, or attack" (Ganteau 5). Ontological vulnerability describes the state of human existence in which one is utterly naked and exposed, without clear boundaries separating self from the other. Ontological vulnerability is an inter-human matter before and beyond legal sovereignty that founds the subject. In this state, self and other are interdependent, as self is not armed with the solipsistic foreclosure of subjectivity and thus exposed to the other. The pre-subjective vulnerability, prior to any contractual relation that relies on the law to stipulate individual duty and rights, is irreducible to any political or legal rhetoric that would normalize the suffering of the powerless and promote interpersonal reciprocity or moral altruism. The discussion of the ethics of suffering is possible only by shifting the ethical discussion from an ontological self to a preontological state of vulnerability, thus "reconfigure[ing] vulnerability . . . as an inalienable condition of becoming" (Shildrick 85). Vulnerability is neither "a psychological category" nor "a way to merely solicit positive affects like empathy and sympathy" (Ganteau 6), but, as Levinas sees it, the fundamental human condition that precedes the hypostatical emergence of the subject. Ethics, as the

discussion of the self-other relation, is the first philosophy primarily because ontology, the philosophical study of being, begins from this prior state of existential vulnerability.

In the world of "useless suffering" that we live in (Levinas), Coetzee probes this existential weakness by abdicating his author/authorial position, as he knows quite well that to write suffering, he needs to position himself in the place of weakness. The withdrawal from the position of authority inaugurates the possibility of thinking the question of the other from the non-subject position, as Adriana Cavarero suggests that "[i]f we observe the scene of massacre from the point of view of the helpless victims rather than that of the warriors . . . the picture changes" (1). For Coetzee, to write from the position of the powerful, of an all-knowing author, one fortifies the existing social structure by seeking to understand and eventually do away with suffering. The position of the powerful is tied to the political order, "the realm of generalization, programs, and predictions" (Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee* 105), and in this political order, one might empathize with the victims or show pity or sympathy, but one's understanding is limited by the social and cultural discourses that structure one's identity. The state of ontological vulnerability is not an initial phase to be conquered in the process to construct a self-sufficient subject and to build a society that guarantees the security of the citizens; rather, it endures, always correcting the political order (ibid 104).

In Coetzee's oeuvres, we find numerous figures stepping aside from their position of authority as well, and he approaches their suffering as an ethical issue with the hope to reconceive self-other relation. For instance, Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*, Susan Barton in *Foe*, the Magistrate in *Waiting for the*

Barbarians, Lurie in *Disgrace* and Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron* either are deprived of their social privileged identity or abandon it, and are reduced to the state of frailty and injurability. What we see in their return to this existential vulnerability is that they come to the understanding that their sense of self is not that absolute and stable as guaranteed by ontology and by law, and that the relation between self and other is a different kind based on ontological vulnerability.

Mrs. Curren's awareness of the vulnerability of the subject comes from the diagnosis of cancer in her body. The myth that a transcendental subject has the sovereignty over itself is broken: Existentially, the self is incarnate of "flesh and blood," and vulnerability is an ontological condition of embodied humanity. She does not own the control of her body: the cancer develops in her body despite her unwillingness, and the body is further subject to the influences caused by medication. The body is not a derivative of the transcendental subject: The self is susceptible to illness and eventually to death. The affect and bodily sensory experiences are not under the control of the Cartesian ego, as Macintyre says, "I am my body" since the Cartesian ego, "I," does not have the body (6).[15]

A dramatic twist occurs when Mrs. Curren exiles herself from her home and spends a night on the street as a vagrant, as she claims, "It's not my home anymore" and "Here, amid the rubble and filth, I was just part of the urban shadowland" (157). This act of exile from the property of home and the proper identity as a white citizen exposes her to potential risks to her life. On the street, she is no different from other

[15] In the bodily turn in the thinking of ethics, "I" is vulnerable to the touch by the other: "The I becomes flesh by being 'touched.' The I becomes the flesh of one who is touched. This being able to be touched is the vulnerability of the I, the vulnerability of my agent body, of my free and autonomous self-possession" (Caputo ibid 217). The relation between self and other is marked by this tactile possibility: "Being touched is a transformation from autonomy to heteronomy. . . . Being-touched is the vulnerability, susceptibility, or sensitivity of the I to the power that emanates from the Other" (Caputo ibid 217).

vagrants or homeless people. She feels like “an old animal” listening to the beat of pain in her body. She has to find a shelter like a squatter; feeling too weak to move, she yields and urinates where she lies. The tragic moment comes when she is clustered by a few boys attempting to pluck gold teeth from her mouth: “Something pressed between my lips, was forced between my gums. I gagged and pulled away. . . . I tried to push the hand away but it pressed all the harder. An ugly noise came from my throat, a dry rasp like wood splitting” (158-9). Perhaps, for the first time, Mrs. Curren understands that being lies in exposure to contingency, to violence and outrages, to any risks that threatens one’s life, as Butler writes, “If I am wounded, I find that the wound testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control” (*Giving an Account of Myself* 84). If Mrs. Curren’s social identity is taken away, she is reduced to a life unadorned with social recognition, material property, legal rights and protection.

Mrs. Curren’s inability to prevent the cancer from developing in her body parallels her inability to fend Vercueil off. While she initially treats his taking temporary residence in her garage as a social problem of vagrancy and thinks to herself how to fend him off, she comes to realize that “But I did not choose him. He chose me” (12). The intrusion of Vercueil into Mrs. Curren’s life is indefensible. There is a force of passivity on the part of Mrs. Curren: She welcomes Vercueil despite herself. She even describes him as “a visitor, visiting himself on [her]” (4). Vercueil’s visitation on Mrs. Curren, rather than her invitation of him, makes him an arrivant in the Derridean sense: An absolute arrivant is “not even a guest. He surprises the host . . . enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very

border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies" (*Aporias* 34). Perhaps it is too schematic and mechanical to read her inviting Vercueil into her house and offering food and assistance to him as an instance of Levinasian or Derridean unconditional hospitality. But, we do witness the trembling of the subjectivity on the part Mrs. Curren. The relationship between Mrs. Curren and Vercueil can be described as "proximity" (Levinas, *Otherwise* 77). Instead of the distance traditionally required to be essential for the formation of a subject that separates itself from the other, her sense of subjectivity is turned into one of sensibility and susceptibility through "an exposure to others, a vulnerability and responsibility in the proximity of the others, the one-for-the-other" (*ibid*). Mrs. Curren no longer commands her sovereign subject, and she is involved in a relationship with Vercueil that is antercedent to her freedom and legal duty, a relation of proximity that overwhelms the calm of being.

The ability to suffer gives rise to the possibility of hospitality. To refuse to suffer is to refuse to accept our existential contingency and to admit to the fact that we are constantly in need. This denial of contingency means our refusal to be in loss of control. We do not want to be vulnerable to injuries, that is, we do not allow ourselves to be wounded, so we seek to be more powerful. Under this circumstance, hospitality becomes very conditional: Only those who do not cause harm and disruption would be tolerated. The refusal of existential weakness points to the unwillingness to relinquish subjective solipsism, and to be open to alterity. Thomas E. Reynolds writes, "Refusing to own up to our vulnerability cultivates an aversion to difference. This, in turn, yields ideologies of exclusion and violence" (110). Ontology, and subsequently liberalism, tend to deny the existential state of the self and instead

strive for a sovereign subject. Ontology not only externalizes vulnerability but also naturalizes it among the powerless groups in the society. The way the state addresses biological vulnerability often results in inhospitality toward the other.

On the contrary, the engagement with vulnerability can bring us to a new form of life that is more open to the other, to a renewed possibility of an originary relation with the other by showing the limits of a subject-centered ethics. Jean-Michel Ganteau writes that since "vulnerability designates the way in which the subject is emptied of his/her being and abides by the principle of the 'otherwise than being' to situate subjectivity 'beyond essence,'" then it is possible to conceive a subjectivity that is "defined in ethical terms as the capacity to welcome the other" (6). Vulnerability is not an empirical descriptive term for the social phenomena of victimhood, deprivation, or dependency. Instead, it has the potential to describe a fundamental and enduring aspect of human existence. We encounter a form of life that is open toward the other, rather than one of autonomy and foreclosure. In the proximity between self and other, there is no power relation, no discrimination of any kind (class, racial, gender, etc.), and no exclusion of the powerless. Inter-human relation is not one of demarcation or autonomy; it is one marked by exposure, by encounter, by proximity, and by tactility. What is necessary is "thinking *between-ness* instead of *separateness* (Richardson 149).

Conclusion

In writing the pain and suffering, Coetzee distrusts referential language and representation, and he also refuses the stereotypical image of suffering blacks prescribed by the movement of committed writing in South Africa. Suffering is not a

subject matter for intellectual rumination, and it does not offer itself to be used for any ideological causes. Also, Coetzee does not approach suffering as an intellectual or a political question, but as an ethical question. Various academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology and medicine have produced the "science of victims" to explain the question of suffering, but as Rubenstein warns us, "[E]xplaining suffering always entails a degree of explaining it away" (69). The state attempts to recognize the victims and impose the discourse of empowerment on them. Yet, the mechanism of recognition and the rhetoric of self-empowerment in liberal politics work to incorporate the previously unrecognized people into biopolitical rule and convert them into autonomous and self-responsible citizens. This act of empowerment is essentially an act of disempowerment since it relies on the prior consent of the victims to be subjected to the technology of citizenship.

Suffering is an ethical question. Coetzee approaches suffering with the "maimed language" that voices the void in each singular instance of suffering. In listening to this "maimed language," one feels affected, and one faces the accusation coming from the victims, the absolute victims who are not recognized and who are even powerless to protest. But Coetzee does not see suffering as "other's suffering." The liability to harm is a potential state each of us is subject to. A vulnerable self has the chance to reflect upon a preontological vulnerable condition as the ethical site to reconceive a self-other relation. Self is grounded in exposure and in a mode of response toward the other. "I" does not exist as an ontological agent that critically interrogates the other, and the other cannot be rendered fully intelligible and appropriated into the system of the same. Ethics is rooted in learning how to think

and feel in this vulnerability, in rethinking responsibility as a response to the other instead of self-initiated acts.

A Land without Memory:

The Violence of Forgetting in *The Childhood of Jesus*

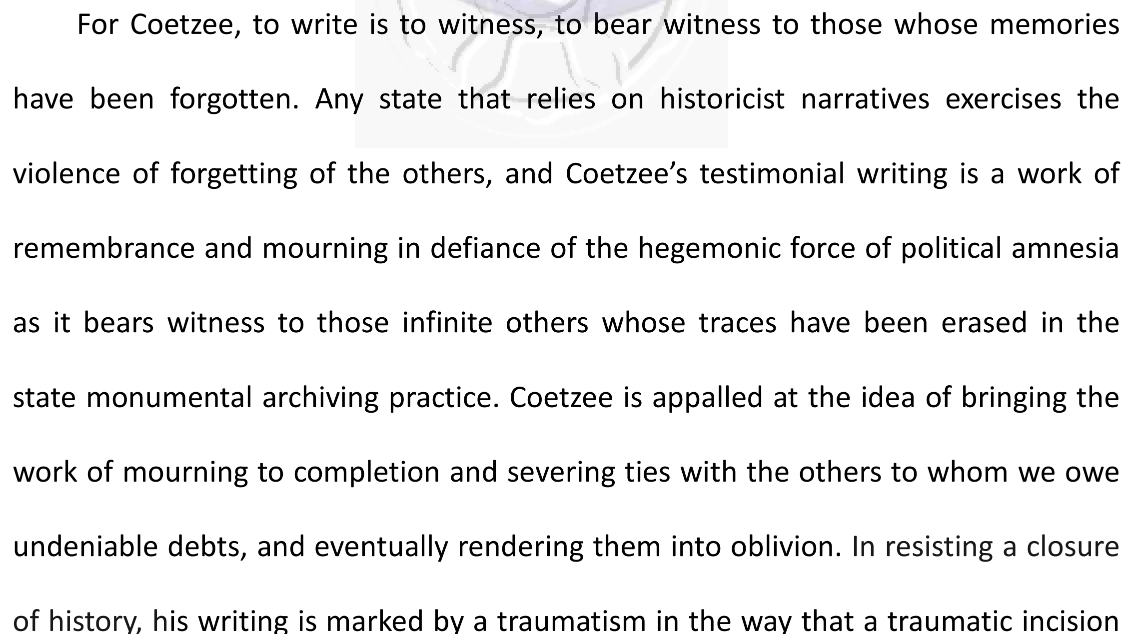
Those who are alive receive a mandate from those who are silent forever.

—Czeslaw Milosz

1980 Nobel Lecture

I have no memories. But images still persist, shades of images. How that is I can't explain. Something persists too, which I call the memory of having a memory.

—*The Childhood of Jesus*



For Coetzee, to write is to witness, to bear witness to those whose memories have been forgotten. Any state that relies on historicist narratives exercises the violence of forgetting of the others, and Coetzee's testimonial writing is a work of remembrance and mourning in defiance of the hegemonic force of political amnesia as it bears witness to those infinite others whose traces have been erased in the state monumental archiving practice. Coetzee is appalled at the idea of bringing the work of mourning to completion and severing ties with the others to whom we owe undeniable debts, and eventually rendering them into oblivion. In resisting a closure of history, his writing is marked by a traumatism in the way that a traumatic incision

keeps the memory alive and open, thus comporting us to be responsible for the loss in history. Louise Bethlehem writes, "[P]ost apartheid literature at the close of the twentieth century transforms a legacy of hurt into the truth of responsibility, unwritten and still to be written" (249), and in Coetzee's writing the ethics of mourning demands that we do not forget the lost others and the loss of them. His writing exemplifies "the truth of responsibility" by maintaining a creative and ethical engagement with the past.

Coetzee's earlier novels bear witness to the colonial and apartheid violence. *Disgrace*, published in 1999, can perhaps be seen as the first novel with direct bearing on the post-apartheid era as it looks into how the post-conflict South Africa dealt with the legacies of apartheid. On the one hand, South Africa celebrated its peaceful transition from a totalitarian regime to democratic government, and on the other the quest for freedom and modernization coupled with the need for psychological compensation for past apartheid injustice generated another oppressive regime. In *Disgrace*, Professor Lurie was forced by the committee made up of both white and black faculty members to admit to the sexual charges against him and to make public confession for his improper and indecent deed as if this act of contrition could atone for historical wrongs. In addition, the new South Africa was given over to the grand narrative of development at the cost of silenced others—women, animals. Professor Lurie is subjected to the wave of violence in the name of historical justice while he himself was involved in the complicity with the violence to subsume the voice of his daughter, Lucy.

While *Disgrace* might be described as a novel with a stronger political orientation in its investigation of the legacies of apartheid, in my reading *The*

Childhood of Jesus, despite its setting of a utopia, bears witness to how the post-conflict South African society have forgotten some silenced others in its attempt to remember the historical suffering through the TRC archiving work, and this novel also shows us how it is possible to remember by attending to the singular in personal memory. *The Childhood of Jesus* depicts a utopian society that verges on a dystopia. Simon and David, like many refugees before them, arrive at the mysteriously utopian country called Novilla in Spanish after surviving some sort of calamities. Simon claims himself as the godfather of David, who is on a quest to find his mother. They are received with goodwill by the residents upon their arrival: They are allocated free residence and promised a "normal(ized)" life. They learn a new language and are given a new name and a new identity, and even a new birth date. Their daily consumption of food is largely based on bread and water, since no luxury in any aspect of life is encouraged. We register a strange climate of "normalcy." In this peaceful land, the social welfare is sufficient, people lead a utilitarian lifestyle, and they seem to be undisturbed by desires or emotional turbulences. We see Coetzee parodying the illusion of a utopian state. There is a sense of abormalcy underpinning the "normal(ized)" society: People are exceptionally submissive and passive in accepting their assigned social roles; human relationship is reduced to its minimal significance; and social activity is numbed by inertia. This utopian society strangely lacks any sense of progress, fulfillment, or even happiness.

Roger Bellin describes this society as a "heaven" in an ironic tone. Indeed, the seemingly normal life degenerates into a life of stasis. The citizens claim to live without memories, without desires, and their daily diet is basically on bread and water. Novilla is like "posthumous limbo," as Joyce Carol Oates puts it in her *New York*

Times review of this novel: The milieu is shrouded "in a paralyzing smog." The promise of a new beginning turns out to be an illusion. Another issue that other critics explore is childhood. Benjamin Lytal points out that "[l]ost children have haunted Coetzee's fiction for a long time."[1] Maria J. Lopez also focuses on the child, David, perceiving him as a Don Quixote-like figure that experiences the conflict between imagination and reality (95). David Attwell also draws our attention to David's "other-worldliness" (222), maintaining that *The Childhood* is "a novel about a pristine mind, David's, and his efforts to understand a world that is less than ideal" (ibid).

In my reading, *The Childhood of Jesus* addresses the ethics of memory: In the face of political forgetting, the singular in personal memory still demands to be remembered. Without naming post-apartheid South Africa, the issues of political forgetting and the singular in personal memory are highly relevant to the post-apartheid South African society. The free "rainbow nation" is marked with a divide with the violent apartheid regime, and the quest of normalization in the "New" South Africa is premised on the principle of "reconciliation through truth," a quest that demands nothing less than the forgetting of the traumatized past once the truth about the past has surfaced. As Coetzee has demonstrated in *Disgrace*, the notion of truth that operated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is grounded in legalism and forensics, he further reveals that the nationalist account of truth tolerates no personal truth, and that the question of history is a question of power in

[1] Lytal continues, "The rather dry novel *Foe* comes to life when a little girl shows up, claiming to be the heroine's long-lost daughter. *Age of Iron* is a letter to an absent daughter. *The Master of Petersburg* follows a father investigating his stepson's death. *Slow Man*, which at first reads like an exquisitely pale Philip Roth novel, goes nicely off the rails when its protagonist begins to covet his nurse's son. *Disgrac*e pits father against daughter, and it has been widely remarked that Lurie's final gesture, carrying a sick dog like a lamb to the incinerator, puts heavy Christian symbolism on his daughter's self-sacrifice."

The Childhood of Jesus. We witness the perpetuation of historical violence in the form of forgetting in post-apartheid South Africa since it inherited the monumentalist historiography from its former oppressor. The institution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with its legal conception, faith in juridical truth, and the framework of chronological temporality, "forgot" the dangerous memories that are difficult to fit into the new nationalist historiography grounded in the value of progress, and this forgetting constituted the institutional silence at the heart of the TRC archiving work.

While the "New" South Africa is veneered with a face of normalization, which is essentially a totalizing and coherent narrative of nation building, we register layers of anomalousness, ambiguities, contestation, and resistance in personal singular memories. The state prioritizes the collective at the expense of the singular; it privileges identity over singularity, homogeneity over alterity. We should read against normalization, against the totality of history. The nationalist narrative of the "normalized" state is constantly shaken by the irruption of unwanted singular elliptical memories into its sanctified space of history writing. Underneath the seemingly serene narratives of the novel, we witness the singular and elliptical personal memories. As singularity names the remainder of being that is inexhaustible by the larger categories, we sees the singular in personal memory as a way to resist the imperative of normalization and the hegemony of collective remembrance in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

The Promise of the "New" South Africa: Against Normalization

The Childhood of Jesus opens with a scene in which Simon and David, having relocated from a camp and crossed oceans, arrive as refugees at the new country called Novilla. In addition to the place name's connotation of "novelty," this beginning that alludes to the Deluge in the Bible bears a highly symbolic and significant message. A purifying flood has washed everyone coming to Novilla clean of their past, preparing them for a new beginning. A resident says to Simon upon their arrival, "We have no history, any of us, it is all washed out" (208). Novilla represents a promised land that welcomes survivors: They learn a new language, and they are given a new name, a new identity, and even a new birth-date. In a weird sense, people seem to take this "newness" for granted and make no claim to what happened to them before they come to this country, as if the ocean they have crossed marks the insurmountable demarcation between the present and the past. People whom Simon encounters keep reminding him of letting go of the past: "People here have washed themselves clean of old ties. You should be doing the same: letting go of old attachments, not pursuing them" (20). The motto inscribed in people's consciousness is "to let go of the past." Simon, who is unwilling and unable to give up on his memory, feels perplexed about the fact that people apparently do not suffer from memories (58). He observes that the past has no role to play in these residents' present life, and they even deny they have a past.

The rhetoric of the new thus prescribes a life like "a blank slate" on which it is possible to erase old memories and identities and draw a new contour of life, as Elena, the woman with whom Simon feels enamored with, puts it: "None of us has a past. We start anew here. We start with a blank slate, a virgin slate" (97). This image of a "blank slate" suggests that the past could be erased, and that everyone coming

to Novilla could be born again. The connection between the present and the past is severed, and history remains no more than the historian's practice of documenting the past. Elena describes the irrelevance of history to the present: "[H]istory has no manifestations in the present. History is merely a pattern we see in what has passed. It has no power to reach into the present" (116). The underlying assumption is that the past belongs to the past, while the present remains in the present and connects with the future. It is as if history could be reset, as if the past were a portable thing that could be easily abandoned, as if the debt owed to the dead could be canceled, as if their memory could be forgotten, and finally as if they could purchase a new identity that is not haunted by the traces of their past experiences. Elena further perceives the present as "nowhere": "We all started from nowhere, from nothing" (103). Despite her confident and optimistic tone to assert to Simon that the life in Novilla, devoid of historical burden, is full of promise, we cannot help but witness an essential loss. The utopian society of Novilla is characterized by a void, as the sense of normalization is founded on the termination of history and the erasure of memory. This is a land reminiscent of Fukuyama's endist society, without memory, without past, without promise, essentially without history taking place. This is not a society that has attained the ultra-capitalist stage. The truth is that its superficial normalcy has inflated into an ethos of oppression, masking the perpetuation of the violence of historical forgetting in a post-conflict society.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the metaphor of the purifying flood that ushered in a new epoch gained dominance in the political discourse in the post-apartheid South Africa. The purifying flood promised the emergence of the New South Africa from the flaming violence of apartheid (Bevernage 56). Kader Asmal, the

intellectual father of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, saw the work of this institution as a powerful "cathartic dam-burst" that cleansed the post-apartheid South African society of its traumatic past (208). Desmond Tutu, the chairperson of the TRC, also saw 1994, the year in which the free election that installed the democratic government took place, as a "watershed" that inaugurated "the new South Africa" (15). For Tutu, the future of a "healthy" South Africa lied in the moral virtue of forgiveness and reconciliation.[2] After the deluge, all the past debris was swept into the dustbin of history, and it was imperative for the post-apartheid democratic government to look ahead without being burdened by the past. In a literal sense, the *TRC Report* described the past as "a different country" (Vol. 1, p.4), while the present, the post-apartheid epoch is committed to starting all over again, to building a new and "normalized" country.

The "new" can be understood in two aspects. Firstly, if we want to call it ontological, the "new" has to be recognized as the absolute beginning; otherwise, its newness would be compromised by the lingering legacy of the previous epoch. The new can only occur with an epochal rupture, a radical division between the present

[2] In *No Future without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Tutu proclaims 1994 as "the beginning of a new era" (15). This "new era" has its foundation in the discourse of "never again," by which Tutu means no laws that could lead to injustice could be passed in the legislature (16). On the one hand, he employed the rhetoric of "never again" articulated in legal vocabulary in his envisioning of a new era, and on the other he mobilized the moral concept of forgiveness to address the much complicated and demanding task of justice and responsibility. Derrida maintains that the concept of forgiveness is usually used to serve political purpose, as he says, "[The] political scenes of forgiveness, of asking for forgiveness and repentance, are often strategic calculations made in view of healing away." He also points out that "'[h]ealing away' is a major term in South Africa." When forgiveness is reduced to be a means of therapy, then it is not forgiveness (*Questioning God* 56-57). It was expedient for the state to condemn "those who will not forgive grave wrongs by unrepentant perpetrators as exhibiting serious moral, spiritual, or even psychological problems" (Brudholm ix). Those who could not repent and confess (as Lurie in *Disgrace*) are condemnatory, and those who cannot forgive and reconcile would be deemed pathological, forever trapped in the inability to get over mourning for the losses in the past. Thomas Brudholm, in *Resentment's Virtue*, criticizes "boosterism of uncritical forgiveness" (x) and warns, "Political necessity, however, should not be confused with forgiveness"(xi). The logic of Desmond Tutu's idea "no future without forgiveness" is somewhat misplaced. The future of South Africa is not guaranteed by the victims' unconditional forgiveness of the perpetrators alone. It demanded the government's commitment to face the more challenging task of justice and responsibility.

and the past, a temporal dissociation and a change of worldview. If the "New" South Africa wanted to promote its "newness," it had to emphasize its epochal rupture with the previous regime and the closure of this chapter of apartheid in its history. In the second aspect, and we can call it ideological, the rhetoric of the new in post-apartheid South African history gained its political legitimacy grounded in moral terms in claiming the end of the violent apartheid, thus the beginning of the democratic period. The new assumes a "highly dichotomous narrative in which past and present are strictly separated and opposed in moral terms" (Bevernage 59): The old was violent and traumatic, the past was a wound and a disgrace, while the new promises full accountability of the past, reconciliation between the citizens formerly divided across the racial difference, and eventually normalization of the whole country. The democratic government was intent to emphasize its difference from the past regime through manipulating the rhetoric of the new and the discourse of political legitimacy rooted in moral supremacy. If the old apartheid regime was a police state that reinforced racial segregation, the "New" South Africa is what Bishop Tutu called a "rainbow nation," a multicultural society.

The new always comes with a sense of surprise, and sometime a sense of uneasiness and even anxiety as well, and it reshapes our consciousness and reframes the relationship between the self and the world. However, the new has to settle into a state of normalcy, and in the process of adapting ourselves to the new worldview and lifestyle, we become "normalized" in the new milieu. Most post-conflict societies embrace the concept of normalization to follow the avenue of modernization that has been taken by the Western countries. The rosy picture of normalization, in terms of political and economic benefits, however conceals the fact that it is fundamentally

a regulative concept. In terms of logic, the normal emerges from the binary opposition with the abnormal. What is considered "normal" receives its approval from the authorities, and it further gains supremacy over the abnormal through the binary distinction. Ultimately, the accepted standard is maneuvered to control the population and to reform the anomalous. Foucault writes about the shift from a mode of punishment in the pre-modern age to that of discipline in the nineteenth century in *Discipline and Punish*, and since then we have witnessed the emphasis on the disciplinary power in the institutions of the school, the hospital, the army, the prison and rehabilitation centers. At the heart of this shift is the ascendency of the biopolitical concept of normalization. For Foucault, normalization names "a system of finely gradated and measurable intervals in which individuals can be distributed around a norm—a norm which both organizes and is the result of this controlled distribution" (Paul Rabinow, "Introduction" to The Foucault Reader 20; 3-29). The norm organizes and distributes the population through a series of disciplinary technologies in order to maintain social normalization. The state defines and imposes politically and culturally normative systems not only to guide people's behavior. It does not leave the "anomalies" alone but attempts to "reform" their deviatory behaviors through a series of disciplinary measures. The regime of bio-power relies on a normative order to enable "continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms" (Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* 266). Normalization is less about the standard that people should abide by than the control and manipulation of the population.

In *The Childhood of Jesus*, the rhetoric of the new is closely connected to the prospect of normalization as the basis of social stability. Normalization designates the institutionalization of a norm, a standardized pattern of development to avoid

aberration and instability. In this novel, the reader is exposed to a seemingly normalized society, and yet that sense of normalcy is constantly disrupted as the regime of normalization turns oppressive. On the surface, the society seems to be running smoothly, if slightly awkwardly: Every refugee to this new land is entitled to free housing and job, and children receive mandatory education while adults are encouraged to participate in adult education; goodwill permeates inter-human relation, as the society is free from any sort of conflict. Like all the other survivors arriving at Novilla, Simon and David, when seeking assistance about accommodation at the *Centro de Rebicacion Novilla* (the relocation center), are promised to be allocated a room to live in, though they get into a Kafkaesque meandering series of difficulties in finding the person in charge of the key to the promised room in the first few days. Simon is further encouraged to get a job as stevedore at the wharf. With the provision of accommodation and job, *Novilla* has helped Simon and David get settled into a normal(ized) life.

However, normalization embodies an oppressive force for Simon if we understand it in its regulative aspect. The assumption underlying the project of normalization is that the assignation of new identity and the demand to learn a new language will help one get settled into a new and normal(ized) life, untroubled by past memories, especially traumatic ones. However, the acceptance of this normal(ized) life means one’s subjection to the new regulation by the state. As I refer to Cruikshank s concept of “technology of citizenship” in the previous chapter, this new identity comes along with a series of explicit and implicit codes of regulation. The need to learn a new language in order to get integrated into the social life further places the newcomers in the grasp of state’s control. In *Of Hospitality*,

Derrida writes about the violence imposed on the refugees when they have to use the language of the country where they hope to get accepted. It is not only the language itself that might render them inarticulate; the discursive norms might further render them speechless. We see Simon constantly falling short of articulating himself, and David often questioning Simon why they have to learn a new language.

Normalization gives rise to conformism: The newcomers are supposed to follow norms and rules without registering ambiguities and differences. Simon constantly feels out of place in Novilla due to his insufficient mastering of the new language and unwillingness to abide by the protocols of the normal(ized) life. To him, the life in Novilla is reduced to the minimum of bodily needs (regular labor and the bare consumption of bread and water), devoid of memories, and bereft of feelings and desires. He fails to understand how it is possible that people have no memories, no passions and desires, survive merely on bread and water, and only stick to the "thing" itself" (114). At one point, he interrogates Elena, "Have you ever asked yourself whether the price we pay for this new life, the price of forgetting, may not be too high?" (60). In Novilla, people are subject to the ideology of normalization, and this ideology regulates their worldview and lifestyle, making their life "abstract" (56) and lacking "weight" (64). Beyond this state of blankness and passionless "normalized" lifestyle, Simon years for something "more" (63).

David is not immune from the violence of the regime of normalization. On his fifth birthday, a letter from the education authorities informs Simon and Inès, who is recognized as the mother of David by Simon based on his instinct, that David has to begin his formal schooling. Despite Inès' protest, Simon decides that it is in David's interest that he should receive mandatory education so that he is able "to read and

write and count like a normal person" (214). Things do not fare well for David, however. The schooling proves a disaster: Leon, the teacher, declares that David was unruly in class, and that he has serious problems with math and reading. After a process of psychological diagnosis to evaluate "whether he can be accommodated in an ordinary school" (229), the verdict is reached that David is to be sent to the special learning center at Punto Arenas, a reform institution.

While educators hold the idea that education has the grand ideal to inspire and help to realize the student's potentiality, the state authorities look to the regulative value of education. The space of the classroom is the enclosed space of discipline in which the authorities attempt to forge a "docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 198). The fact that David does not read and count in the standardized way Leon teaches poses serious threat to the authority that he represents. While Leon represents the authority in the socio-political realm, David embodies the resistance to be supervised, to be normalized in the way the state prescribes. Leon likes "order and calm in his classroom. He likes order in the world" (226). He is committed to the principle that "there can be only one authority in the classroom, there cannot be two" (225), and as a result he finds David's disobedience and endless questions disturbing and threatening. If we put this scenario in the larger social context, David's disobedience challenges the legitimacy of the authority and disrupts the social status of normalcy. The new and normal(ized) life that David is promised in Novilla turns out to be a series of biopolitical mechanism to make him a normal and "docile" student, to fit him into the existing system. David's experience is similar to what happens to the black youths demanding "freedom before education" in *Age of Iron*. When Mrs.

Curren tells the little black boy to go back to school instead of making troubles on the street, he retorts, "What is school for? It is to make us fit into the apartheid system" (67). Despite the difference between the oppressed life under apartheid and a free life in a post-conflict society as the one David has, the price that David has to pay to live in this promised land is to be subjected to the regime of normalization and "become a social animal" (219).

David and Simon's experience of leading a "normal(ized)" life in *Novilla* reflects the project of normalization in the "New" South Africa. Having been through the violence of the apartheid period, South Africa envisioned a "normalized" society undisrupted by any form of conflict and turbulence. If the country had deviated from the normal path of modernization during the apartheid era, at least it should strive for a common horizon in which consensus on the vision of a normalized country should be sought. The faith in normalization in South Africa was to a great extent inspired by the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC), the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 and his election as the first president of the new democratic government in 1994. Mandela's presidential inauguration marked not only the peaceful transition to democracy but also the beginning of civilization in contrast to the barbarity of the previous apartheid regime. The discourse of normalization in the new South Africa was largely invested in the advent of modernization, that is, in the realization of the democratic political system and legal rule, multicultural society, and capitalistic opportunities. The new nation would be founded on the legal principles of freedom, equality and human rights, and through legal proceedings and political negotiations the new country could steer clear of any class or racial conflict, military insurgency, or any other forms of social unrest caused

by the legacies of apartheid.

The regulatory ideology of normalization that commanded people's consciousness was intended to maintain social stability, but we should be critically aware of the lingering problems from apartheid that the project of normalization failed to resolve and the new problems generated by this project. In *Against Normalization*, Anthony O'Brien points out that the ideological normalization of the new South Africa produced merely a "hypnotic normalizing effect of the commonsense present" (6). Driven by the narrative of transformation, the whole country was preoccupied with the question of how to build a normalized country, and yet it overlooked the imperative of addressing historical injustice and social inequality. The demand for politico-economic modernization outweighed the question of justice, as the society looked ahead and resorted to the easy solution of severing ties with the traumatic past. To make things worse, the promise ushered in by the establishment of democratic politics was compromised partly by the exchange of political benefits between the previous regime and the incoming government, the latter consenting to the deal to hold out amnesty to the perpetrators if they were willing to reveal the truth concerning the apartheid violence.

If the project of normalization ignored the question of history, it did not live up to the promises it offered, either. O'Brien argues that the way the new state dealt with the current inequalities is "ameliorative" rather than "structural" (4). The democratic government painted a rosy picture of the "New" South Africa: People would be entitled to freedom and equality, the society governed by justice and fairness, and politics open to people's participation. However, the "normal(ized)" society gave rise to a restrictive multicultural society. What we see in post-apartheid

South Africa is “a normalization of culture on the model of its officially sanctioned, officially pluralist place in the Western market democracies, as against the more transformative view of a culture of liberation whose efforts would continue, linked to the fate and struggle of those who continued to be oppressed . . . under the new regime” (O’Brien 79). The real problem is with the ontological structure that determines the framework of inclusion and exclusion, liberation and restriction. A multicultural framework works in the way that it tightens the control of population by relegating them into different blocks within the panoptican society supervised by the authority. It promises reform by including more people, and yet without “structurally” altering the socio-political system that caused exclusion in the first place. O’Brien concludes that the introduction of western-style capitalism and multiculturalism did not really solve the problem, but only led to “the reproduction of a de facto racist status quo” and “the development of a largely black political stewardship of racial capitalism” (4). Normalization turned into a climate of rigidity, foreclosing the possibility of radical democracy. According to O’Brien, what is needed is “how to construct an expressive culture that springs from, responds to, and shapes visions of economic and political democracy deeper than ballot box democracy, parliamentary representation, liberal capitalism, cultural pluralism, and the Enlightenment discourse of rights” (3).

The Past Is *Not* Another Country: The TRC and The Unfinished Business of History

One of the most important tasks for the post-conflict societies in the transition to democratic rule, perhaps more important than building a new country, is to address the legacies of repression. Most political discourses are invested in the

model of teleological development; thus, the need for the nation to look forward toward the endist point of history, as Francis Fukuyama has theorized. However, this forward looking is inherently interlocked with backward glance; in other words, every historical moment is inscribed in the constellation between the present and the past. Benjamin portrays "the Angel of history" whose face turns toward the past while a storm called "progress" propels him into the future:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 257-58)

The Angel of history tells us that historical time is not to be conceived of as historical continuum, that the transition to a new phase of national history is not set on the trajectory of linear development and teleological progress, as a historicist would argue. It is imperative to focus on every single historical moment as a monad and perceive the transition as the constellation, the threshold between the past and the present. The transition is the site of struggle between progress and debris, between the mission to build a new and normalized country and the ethical imperative to be

responsible to and for those buried in the historical wreckages.

To understand our ethical responsibility for those buried in historical debris, we need to know that history does not merely manifest itself in the collection of facts, in the representation of what really happened. As Benjamin writes, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (254). This moment of danger is the moment of "redemption" (Benjamin 254), the site of "unrealized possibility" (Levine 5) made possible by the Messianic intervention, the blasting open of historical continuum. As Derrida suggests, we need "another thinking of history" that is "beyond the metaphysical concept of history and the end of history" (Derrida, *Specters* 70), so we need to think the impossible moment of danger that bears the possibility for the emergence of the unrealized, of those buried in historical wreckages.

The political act of retrospective visit involves the struggle between consensus and contestation. The incoming governments in many post-conflict societies have relied on the institution of truth commissions to look into the violence of the national past with the political necessity to generate consensus among the people in the quest of reconciliation and normalization; however, politicians discovered that they cannot afford to lose the control of history, which would endanger the legitimacy of their rule. It happens that while the state intends to produce consensus on historical representation through the manipulation of collective memory, memory, in its singular aspect, would contest the construction of coherent narratives that seek to reduce the diversity and incommensurability of personal memory. This dynamics of consensus and contestation, embodied in the political intention to close and the

ethical demand of opening, concerns not so much about the veracity of historical truth as how the past is understood and what is allowed in the officially approved archive of remembrance. Framed in this struggle between consensus and contestation, memory is the site of struggle for meaning, for determining the relation with the past.

The utopian society in *The Childhood* is characterized with a sense of historical closure that prevents any further engagement with the past. The demand of closure is seen in the residents' consistent denial of their having a past (or at least in their lack of interest in mentioning it), and in their persistent demand that Simon and David forget their life prior to their arrival at Novilla. The past and the present are perceived as two distinctive periods in the historical succession, and the general attitude toward the past is that it is, taken literally, *another country*. By refusing to acknowledge the relevance of the past to the present, the residents of *Novilla* are immersed in collective amnesia. What is intriguing in the novel is that we do not even know what they intend to forget. No information of their life before they set on the journey to cross the ocean to Novilla is revealed. We (re)visit the past in order to define the present, and yet these people automatically set up a point in time and delete all memory before that temporal point. Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering tell us that we use the past to fund the present and the future (139), yet the Novilla residents give up on any relation with the past, resulting in an essential emptiness of the present and the future. The present is decoupled from the past, and the past's indexicality to redemption and its unrealized potentiality are disavowed.

Paul Ricoeur writes that a utopia that does not keep its promise remains an empty utopia: "all utopias would be empty were it not for the reactivation of unkept

promises" ("Memory and Forgetting" 10). Despite its deceptively normalized life, Novilla turns out to be a utopia that fails to keep its "promises" toward history, toward the infinite others with whom they have formed some sort of undeniable existential relation. Their view is narrowly limited to the ontologically enclosed present without seeing that the present cannot close in on itself, that each single moment of the present is exposed to enigmatic and incommensurable doubling relation with the past, a relation that might disrupt the present and open it to the future to come.

The failure of "unkept promises" also characterized the post-apartheid South African mentality in its political imperative to address the legacies of the previous dark period. The state knew that the voices of victims had to be heard[3] if it were to capitalize on the values of democratic freedom and equality for a successful political transition. The political will to look into past atrocities led to the institutionalization of the TRC with the mission to document the apartheid violence and to give meaning to the past events during the three decades between 1960 and 1994. The "Preamble" to the "Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995" states that the purpose of the TRC is "to establish the truth in relation to past events as well as the motives for and circumstances in which gross violations of human rights occurred, and to make the findings known in order to prevent a repetition of such acts in future" (para. 9; qtd. in Dawes). A fair account of the TRC work would indicate that the TRC was indeed perceived as an impressive example of how the truth commission can contribute to the peaceful transition from a totalitarian regime to a democratic rule,

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[3] Dominick LaCapra notes that the TRC provided "a quasi-judicial setting in which the truth was sought and some measure of justice rendered" and that it also served as a "forum for the voices—often the suppressed, repressed, or uneasily accommodated voices—of certain victims who were being heard for the first time in the public sphere" (696).

though its critics have also pointed out its problems.[4] The problem that concerns the ethics of memory is how the attitude toward the past that informed the TRC archiving work has led to national amnesia.

To say that the post-apartheid South African society was plagued by "unkept promises" means that the TRC archiving practice is essentially an exercise in forgetting (Derrida, "Archive Fever" 54), the forgetting of those whose testimonies fail to fit into the paradigm of national development, and those who fail to testify for themselves (as we can imagine, those who were dead and those who were unwilling to come forward and testify in public). The vision of the post-apartheid Angel of history was set on the future and turns his back against the past. The TRC's attitude toward the past was inscribed in political pragmatism and legal ideal of "no longer," "no more," and "never again" ensured by the means of human rights activism, truth commission and juridical proceedings. What this political pragmatism in the form of the TRC work could achieve is quite limited as it was grounded in the assumption that the truth of abuses and violations of human rights could be fully accounted for through legal means (that is, to paint the most complete picture) and losses of innocent life could be mourned and suffering healed in the "ritual-like" occasions in the public space where the victims were encouraged to come forward and give

[4] A major problem is that the TRC suffered from the "confusion between law and religion" (van Heerden 49), and this confusion rendered its position ambivalent in addressing the question of justice. The TRC was founded as a legal institution, and yet it was expected to perform a religious function: "[T]he demons and traumas of the violent apartheid past needed to be cleansed from the body politic through a cathartic and theological process of truth-telling, confession, healing, reconciliation, [and] national redemption" (Steven Robins 126). The TRC employed moral discourses of *ubuntu* (the African philosophy of humanism), reconciliation and forgiveness, and "claim[ed] for itself a quasi-religious status by demanding demonstrations of remorse, repentance, confession and reformation of character" (ibid). This institution was plagued by the problem of "how an instrument of truth and reconciliation can turn into an instrument of bad social control in the absence of a clear moral vision and an intelligent understanding of the difference between spirituality and legality" (ibid). Stemming from this confusion is people's doubt of its function to grant amnesty to the perpetrators who would come forward and reveal the truth of violence they had committed. Does it grant amnesty based on its legal or moral authority?

testimonies for their experiences of suffering and the perpetrators would confess for the wrongs and even crimes they had committed against the black citizens. The ultimate aim was to help South Africa work through the trauma and losses of the past and normalize the country.

Given the mission to look into the past in order to remember, the TRC's ultimate aim, however, was to "finish history" by drawing the process of constructing the narrative of national remembrance to a definitive conclusion. The TRC archiving work started as an opening into the atrocities in the past, yet the work was self-defeated for it limited its investigation between March 1, 1960 and May 10, 1994 with the hope to close "a horrendous chapter in the life of our nation" (Verne Harris 162). The institution of the TRC attempted to shape the collective memory in the post-apartheid period, as if it could write the script and expect the people to perform and shape their individual memory according to the official narrative. The TRC archiving project tended to universalize and impose an overarching framework of collective memories by excluding the difficult memories that did not fit into the teleological framework and national agenda of normalization and modernization. In other words, it selected "testimonies that reinforce [its] pre-existing ideals" and overlooked "'difficult' testimonies that reveal experiences outside the dictates of collective memory" (Waxman 5).

The individual memory is often at odds with one another, while collective memory seeks unity and conformity. Ruptures are smoothed over, and dissonance is hushed, as Maurice Halbwachs says, "[T]he collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people" (48). As each individual is located in a specific group "delimited in space and time" (ibid 84), their memory is

determined by the shared communal experience. The authority manipulates the collective memory by facilitating its form, coherence and organization for a collective identity. In her critique of collective memory, Sontag maintains, "[I]deologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings" (86). While it is possible that the individual may remember the past in his or her own way, that recollection eventually has to be brought into the jurisdiction of the collective remembrance. The post-apartheid collective memory stipulates that the history of this country under apartheid is full of violence and division, and now with a new democratic government in place the country should seek redemption from the curse of violence and recovery from wounds and trauma.

To finish history is to forget the past by the seal of an officially approved narrative of national remembrance. The monumentalists[5] of history scrap the memories that do not fit into the national narrative structure, essentially forgetting those downtrodden in the traces of history, as Bernard-Dona maintains, "the forgetfulness that inheres in memory is oriented to others" (29). The state needs to control history by forgetting the memories of those who might disrupt official historiography and by erasing their traces: "As far as forgetting is concerned, this memory of the memorial is intensely selective; it requires the forgetting of that which may question the community and its legitimacy" (Lyotard 7). Paul Ricoeur also argues that the authorities rely on the monopoly of historical narrative to maintain its power: "[H]igher powers take over this emplotment [narrative] and impose a canonical narrative by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery" and by

[5] This refers to Nietzsche's idea of "monumental history" in "Use and Abuse of History."

"stripping the social actors of their original power to recount their actions themselves" (*Memory, History and Forgetting* 448). To secure the public acceptance, the state commemorates official history at the expense of the personal memory. Donald G. Reagan writes, "[I]f there is an official, authorized, commemorated history, there is also an official forgetting of those forbidden things about which one does not have the right to remember" (314). In this logic, if an event is not commemorated, it is not considered as part of history. To be registered as part of national history, an event has to be commemorated; otherwise, it is subjected to the fate of forgetting.

However, commemorated history is grounded in "institutional truth" in contrast to the "individual truth." In "The Truth according to the TRC," Mamdani distinguishes two types of truth: the individual truth and the institutional truth. The former is opposed to power while the latter is linked to power in the way that it works to reinforce the sovereignty (177). For Mamdani, truth is irreducible to an officially approved version, to verifiable and dialogical truth. He argues, "[T]he TRC's version of truth was established through narrow lenses, crafted to reflect the experience of a tiny minority." He continues, "The tiny minority included two groups, on the one hand perpetrators, being state agents, and on the other, victims, being political activists, and the two groups were linked to power. The TRC defined over 20,000 South Africans as the 'victims' of apartheid, leaving the vast majority in the proverbial cold" (178). The rationale behind the TRC narrative falls into the politics of exclusion and the economy of calculation: Only "over 20,000" victims belonging to the two tiny minority groups will count while an infinite number of victims are simply left out.

The official historiography structuring the TRC is fundamentally based on linear

temporality and “meta-politics of closure” (Barnard 103), and it played a dominating role in determining the contour of collective remembrance. This “meta-politics of closure” underlies both Novilla residents’ denial of ever having a past and the state-manipulated collective amnesia in the post-apartheid South African society. The decision to investigate the violence during the three decades between 1960 and 1994 when apartheid was officially implemented and abolished respectively illustrates the historiographical structure of temporal insularity—by compartmentalizing and periodizing historical periods, the state was able to limit the periods of investigation within a manageable scope and comprehend each single historical moment as a complete and enclosed unit within itself without considering the interlocking relationship between these historical moments and the inseparable relationship between the past and present. Berber Bevernage points out that “the TRC suffers a short memory span and that it potentially facilitates social amnesia instead of forging a new collective memory” (48). The new democratic government, with its enclosed historical framework, took up its share of a limited responsibility while dodging a greater responsibility: those who suffered violence prior to 1960 would be neither the concern nor the responsibility of the ANC government. In this way, the state was able to evade the questions about the policies that had caused racial discrimination and legal violence against the black and other subaltern population prior to the 1960, the policies that had directly or indirectly contributed to the legitimization of apartheid in 1960. At the same time, while the 1994 marked the end of apartheid and the state put an end point to this historical event institutionally and symbolically through the TRC work, could it also put an end point to the impasse of traumatic recurrence, the lingering influences, repercussion, and

compulsive repetition of the traumatic memories?

History cannot be finished, and we can never come to an end of history. If history were to be closed, it would be what Benjamin called the document of barbarism. In terms of the TRC archival work, no archives can be completed once and for all, as all archives are haunted by specters and are subjected to messianic intervention. The desire for closure and unity in history is at the same time compromised by the dissonance and fracturing of memory. The apartheid was indeed many events in the sense that each person's experience of this traumatic event was singular and resisted to be captured within the official framework, and yet the state recognized only the version it sanctioned. It is perhaps not so ironic and paradoxical to say that the post-apartheid South Africa "suffer[ed] from too much history, and too little history" (van Tonder 43): The experience of each of the victims of apartheid was different from that of another person, yet what the state was willing to archive is minimal. As apartheid lasted for decades (as we can imagine, for those oppressed, each moment of suffering could be magnified infinitely into a boundless length of time), the violence it caused was hard to be calculated in technical terms, and the trauma it had caused swelled into a vortex of pain and suffering that have engulfed the entire black population. There were infinite witness accounts the TRC could have collected, but it turned out that the state archived only a number of selected testimonies.

Derrida points out a couple of reasons why the archive can never be closed. Firstly, even if the archive work is finished, that is, closed officially and its record published, it is still "open infinitely to readings, interpretation, contestation and so on, so this closure is not a final closure" (*Archive Fiver* 76). Even if the TRC has closed its

work and published its official report in four volumes, the legacies of apartheid were still much debated in the post-apartheid period. Secondly, archive is marked by "the messianic" (ibid 46). The archive is not a space of historicist realism that produces definitive account of the past based on historical analysis. Through the messianic intervention, it is possible to witness the contingencies, silences and gaps within the archival narrative. Beneath the official narrative of national remembrance are indeterminate layers of traces that resist identification and representation. The trace does not assume identifiable form and exceeds the "plenitude" of the metaphysics of the present. The trace in history is besides the metaphysical conceptualization of a complete historical moment; it surrounds, haunts, defers, destabilizes and "potentializes history." Full meaning that is posited by the historicist account of the past is never present, as it is infinitely deferred in the ashes, in the cinders that cannot be rendered in the present and yet is "the condition" of meaning (Derrida, *Of Grammatology 62*).[6] A Derridean archival thinking[7] teaches us that the archive is linked to promise and justice. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida maintains that the messianic intervention into the archival space makes possible "opening the future in the past" (40). The messianic intervention transforms the archive into a site with promise: The archive holds the promise to come, a promise that is yet oriented toward the past.

History is essentially excessive, as it is haunted by spectral others who are

[6] The trace is always already there, and it names the irreducible alterity that is "present-absent." In the frequently quoted passage, Derrida defines the trace as "differance": The (pure) trace is differance. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude. Although it does not exist, although it is never a being-present outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign (signified/signifier, content/expression, etc.), concept or operation, motor or sensory." (*Of Grammatology* 62).

[7] A Derridan archival thinking defies the totalitarian archival thinking that sees the archive as a means of surveillance and ideological management, and it departs from the liberalist archival thinking that considers the archive as a site of post-conflict empowerment (Weld 15).

unrealized and unrecognized. As such, the TRC archive should be conceived of as a space of "spectral hospitality" (Burns 232). The structure of history is not impervious, and the end of apartheid constitutes the beginning to attend to the silenced others in history. As Anthony O'Brien argues, "The end of formal, legal apartheid is not a profound end point in South African cultural history, but rather an opportunity to review the continuous radicalization of culture some South African writers have insisted on" (6). We need another thinking of historicity that admits the incommensurability, or what Christodoulidis and Veitchwrite calls aporecity[8] (23) between the historical events and the historiograpical structure. If the "triumphaliss" and "monumentalists" (Jaco Barnard 97) prefers a history based on "meta-politics of closure," an ethical gesture toward history is to find the gates through which the Messiah can enter, "to open up access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipator promise as promise: as promise and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design" (Derrida, *Specters* 75).

History takes place, history is still taking place in the sense that we continue to remember the past and answer the call of the other and the infinite others buried in the totalizing narratives of history. History has "weight" and relevance for us only if it is articulated in the present tense. If it is consigned to the past, it is documented, classified, and ultimately forgotten. The past is not another country, as the *TRC Report* intended to show. The past is the country where we have lived, where we have acquired our identity, shaped our consciousness and formed our memory. History is both present and past; it is the past articulated in the present tense, and the way we remember the past determines our ethical attitude toward history. As

[8] In illustrating Reinhart Koselleck's idea of structure and event of history, Christodoulidis and Veitchwrite maintains,"[T]he relation between structure and event has something of the 'aporetic' about it" (23).

Donald G. Marshall writes, “The truth history calls us to is faithfulness to the past, and that is never a given but rather a wish, a task, and a responsibility.”

When the TRC was founded to deal with the legacies of apartheid, it was reduced to the service of political will to close the chapter of unbearable trauma. The state’s confidence to articulate truth fully, to render the experience of suffering in rational and juridical language was, nevertheless, undermined by the gap, the fragment, and the disproportion that characterize the personal memory. In *The Human Race*, Robert Antelme, a Holocaust survivor, wrote that personal memory infinitely suffers from the “disproportion between the experience we had lived through and the account we were able to give of it” because it is “impossible to bridge the gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodies” (3). The dynamics of this singular bodily experience is irreducible to a stabilized representation: The contour of this experience is constantly being shaped and reshaped, always in a dynamic modality, always disrupting the TRC archiving framework that sought political management and manipulation. To revitalize the closed archive, it is imperative that we listen to the “other” stories, to the remainder of the collective remembrance of the past. “Memory is, achingly, the only relation we have with the dead” (Sontag 115), and to maintain this relation with the dead whose voices are rendered silent in the institutional archive, we should attend to the singular in personal memory, to what remains “unexhausted” by any historicist account of history (Attridge, *The Work of Literature* 100).

Witnessing the Singular in Personal Memory

The Childhood of Jesus raises the point of the singular in personal memory as a way to resist the imperative of normalization and the hegemony of collective remembrance. Memory is tied to the personal, to the singular that eludes the state's attempt to comprehend and represent it. In its dealing with the personal memory, the state attempts "a systematic and complete takeover of memory, hoping to control it even in its most hidden recesses" (Todorov 11). What Tavetan Todorov suggests is that the space of memory is not an enclosed and well-defined one, and that memory, "in its most hidden recesses," cannot be entirely contained within the jurisdiction of official remembrance. In *Childhood*, we see Coetzee ruminating on the metaphysical structure of memory: An empiricist view of memory would understand memory as a stable representation through an epistemological perspective, while this conceptualization of memory is always disrupted by memories coming from "elsewhere." Elena questions Simon about his account of recognizing Ines as the mother of David: "You arrive here with no memories, with a blank slate, yet you claim to recognize faces from the past. It makes no sense" (98). Memory probably does not make sense, as it is non-signifying. It is not the site of knowledge, as it lies "deeper than thought" (77). Simon retorts, "It is true: I have no memories. But images still persist, shades of images. How that is I can't explain. Something persists too, which I call *the memory of having a memory*. It is not from the past that I recognize Ines but from *elsewhere*. It is as if the image of her were embedded in me" (98; italics mine). This "memory of having a memory" can be understood as "memory-trace"—"the bits that have been left out are still there somewhere in the dark recesses of memory" (Coetzee, *The Good Story* 12, 14). The ontological structure of memory is surrounded and haunted by the traces of memory irreducible

to representation and epistemology. The personal memory always already recedes from comprehension, as it is anterior and exterior to the order of presence, representation and teleological temporality. Criticizing the violence of collective memory, Sontag writes, "[T]here is no such thing as collective memory . . . But there is collective instruction" (85). Official memory is essentially the construct of statist interpretation, while personal memory can only be "individual and unreproducible" (86), as in all personal memory there is something that is always distracted and dispersed, thus defying facile consumption and preprogrammed interpretation. If the state decrees memory as the site of the inscription of the collective remembrance, then there is always the singular in personal memory, from "elsewhere," that is "embedded" deeper than this official inscription of collective memory.

Memory is tied to the singular, and it has this irreducible and irreplaceable dimension. In *The Work of Literature*, Attridge "unpacks" the history of how this term "singularity" has been used by referring to the writings of Spinoza, Hegel, Deleuze, Badiou, Agamben, Peter Hallward, de Man, Nancy, Derrida and Timothy Clark (133-143).[9] Without delving into the genealogy of this concept (and its complexity), the understanding of singularity underlying the discussion here is a modest one. We tend to see beings in logical sequence and impose ontological properties on them without paying attention to the singularity of each existent. However, singularity

[9] Attridge distinguishes the singular from the particular. He alludes to Derrida's concepts of iterability and exemplaity to illustrate the possibility of the manifestation of the singular (or as he prefers to call it singularization with the connotation of the event of singularization that happens) (136-37). He quotes a passage from the interview he conducted with Derrida: "An absolute, absolutely pure singularity, if there were such a thing, would not even show up, or at least would not be available for reading. To become readable, it has to be divided, to participate and belong. Then it is divided and takes its part in the genre, the type, the context, meaning, the conceptual generality of meaning, etc. . . . Singularity differs from itself, it is deferred so as to be what it is and to be repeated in its very singularity" ("The Strange Institution Called Literature" 67-8; qtd. in Attidge, *The Work of Literature* 137).

exists of and in itself, without the imperative to be comprehended within the horizon of Being or through the categories of subjectivity and identity. Paolo Bartoloni writes, "[w]e need to see the being as such, in its *suchness*" (12).

In its resistance to be contained within the general contexts or categories and structured by any meta-narrative or overarching projects, singularity names "acausal force of eventhood" (Clark 3). If ontology operates by integrating beings into a structure characterized by unity and coherence, the "acausal force" of singularity points to "the force of a possible discontinuity," "a jump" (Clark 304), or what Bartoloni calls "incompleteness"(12). Bartoloni's concept of "incompleteness" does not connote the idea that it is situated in a dialectical scheme in which the incomplete is on the way toward the teleological endpoint of completion. Nor does it suggest the insufficiency of the being or its absolute isolation. The "acausal" force of singularity causes fragment and rupture in any pre-given ontological framework. It is not that the singularity is permanently shattered, but that the completion lies in incompleteness.[10] In Daniel Watt's words, in singularity we witness "the potential of completion that is continually deferred" (*Fragmentary Futures* 11).

In *Childhood*, we see the working of universal reason in the philosophical dialogues between Simon and his colleagues at the wharf. Simon gets the impression that his colleagues pay no heed to intuition and affect, and that their normal(ized) life is fundamentally regulated by universal reason. In their intellectual pursuit, they go for rational inquiry, and consequently philosophy, or thinking in a general sense, is to discover "what unity lies behind all the diversity, what it is that makes all tables

[10] We can perhaps understand the "incompleteness" through Blanchot's concept of fragment, as he writes, "[Fragment] is what prompts the search for a new form of completion that mobilizes—renders mobile—the whole through its interruption and through interruption's various modes" (*Infinite Conversation* 358).

tables, all chairs chairs" (120). They claim that they stick to "the thing itself" (114), that is, what matters for them are the ontological properties of the "thing" at the present without seeing its singularity and without considering its diverse manifestations in different occasions and contexts. What concerns them is the "chairness" of the chair (122), the Platonic Form, but not the singular aspect of each singular chair. Under this ethos, it is impossible to think the remainder of being and the singular memory, so Simon always gets impatient with philosophizing about "chariness" with his colleagues. Eugenio, one of his colleagues, asks Simon: "What kind of philosophy do you like instead?" Simon says, "The kind that shakes one. That changes one's life" (238).[11] He is more into passions, desires, memory and affective relationship, things that are not explicable and exhausted by universal reason. Memory belongs to this site of inexhaustible potentiality: While the residents accept the official ideology of forgetting and simply deny the existence of memory, Simon knows that embedded in memory are things that he cannot quite explain, things that persist despite his cognitive inability to recognize them.

Simon's resistance against the totalizing force of universal reason is shared by David, though it is in David that we witness the real possibility to think the singular. In this novel, we do not find a university professor or a publicly well-known writer like David Lurie or Elizabeth Costello to articulate Coetzee's intellectual quest of the ethical significance of singularity. Instead, Coetzee portrays a five-year old kid who, in his encounter with the surrounding culture, is neither tainted by the rigidity of philosophical quest of universal reason nor regulated by the authority represented by his teacher and the school staff. Although Simon claims himself as David's

[11] The philosophy "that shakes one" sounds very much like what Derrida says about "trembling" in *The Gift of Death*.

godfather, there is something in David that eludes his comprehension. "He looks into the boy's eyes. For the briefest of moments he sees something there. He has no name for it. *It is like*—that is what occurs to him in the moment. Like a fish that wriggles loose as you try to grasp it. But not like a fish—no, like *like a fish*. Or like *like like a fish*" (186-87; italics in the original). Here, intellectual comprehension, rhetorical strategy and metaphorical comparison seem to have failed.

David embodies the "acausal force" of singularity, causing disruption to the ontological system. This force can be understood as the freedom not to be reduced to general categories or universal principles. It might be said that his freedom verges on naivety in that he is deeply immersed in the semiotic free play of ideas and has difficulty fitting himself into the symbolic order; however, it might be more accurate to say that his freedom in perceiving the world is inventive, not modeled on autonomous or independent thinking conditioned by the liberal notion of individualism. David's act of asking an infinite series of questions, which greatly disturbs his teacher Leon, is similar to Derrida's privileging of literature's right to say everything, in every way" ("This Strange Institution" 36).[12] This comparison would not be farfetched if we understand that David's inventive inquiries are linked to "the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyze every presupposition. . ." (Derrida, "Passions" 28). In his assertion that "I can ask any question I like" (195), David exposes the fact that some questions are forbidden, particularly moral, political and religious questions that might question the

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[12] In the discussion of literature, Derrida traces its provenance to the emergence of democracy in the modern period: "Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain noncensure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy" ("Passions" 28). We should know that the democracy conceived of by Derrida here is "any democracy to come" (ibid 29), not the current corrupted form of democratic institution premised on the management of public affairs and the surveillance of people's lives.

legitimacy of the authority and disrupt the state of normalization. Leon's pedagogical approach is that he allows only questions to which he has ready answers. Questions have to be designed in a way that standard answers can be facilitated so that representation and the production of stabilized knowledge can be assured. David is seen as unruly because his act of asking infinite questions leads to the multiplying of the plane of inquires, exposing Leon to questions he himself might never have thought about before and to which he might not have the answer.

The conflict between Leon's pedagogical approach grounded in universal reason and the inexhaustible force of singularity in David is played out in the classroom scene in which David is reported to have difficulties "adjust[ing] himself to the realities in the classroom" (203) and suffering from "a specific deficit linked to symbolic activities, [to] working with words and numbers" (205). For Leon, David should be instructed to read in the proper and prescribed way "like a normal person" (214) so that he would not only learn the "proper" knowledge but also habituate himself to the "proper" way of reading. Successful reading relies on the coherence of signifier and signified in the text and on "the right order" of reading, both of which guarantee the production of stable and unambiguous knowledge, and David fails to meet both requirements (212). Simon even aligns himself with the teacher in preaching to David on the right way of reading: "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," to which David retorts, "I want to read my way" (165).[13] For both Simon

[13] "To read his own way" cannot be understood as his individual way of reading. The singular cannot be confused with the individual. While individuality is derived from the concept of an inherent unified and autonomous subjectivity, singularity involves an infinity (thwaites and Seaboyer 1). Derrida further testifies, "The singularity of the 'who' is not the individuality of a thing that would be identical to itself, it is not an atom. It is a singularity that dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself to answer

and Leon, the proper way of reading is inscribed in the correspondence between the logos and the referred meaning.

In reading his own way, David is deeply drawn into the world of *Don Quixote*.[14] His imagination in reading is unbound, as he jumps between sentences, paragraphs and even pages; he sometimes imagines that a hole will happen in the narrative of the book (166). The opening of a hole in the narrative sounds "nonsensical" to Simon and especially to the teacher Leon. In *Black Holes*, J. Hillis Miller maintains that in reading we constantly encounter aporia, which is like an experience of meeting "black holes" in galaxy (185), meaning that "black holes" "interrupts" the self-imposed logic of coherence and continuity in any system grounded in rational analysis. The "holes" that interrupt and intervene generate the possibility of new meaning and inventive thinking. This can explain how David is able to read without a "proper" reading, or, to put it in a paradoxical way, his reading is inscribed in non-reading, in the disruptive and strange logic of différance, the deferral of meaning. Leon's pedagogical authoritative reading adheres to the readable within the textual boundaries and the authority of the author-subject, while David's reading that is disrupted by "holes" responds to the unreadable, to what remains to be read. A pedagogical approach adopted by Leon will not pay attention to the "holes" in reading; it will attempt to remove such holes.

David might be portrayed as an escapist artist like Don Quixote, always holding a

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to the other . . ."("'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject" 100).

[14] In "Miguel de Cervantes and J. M. Coetzee: An Unacknowledged Paternity," Maria J. Lopez argues that "the Spanish writer has always been an important presence in Coetzee's literary and critical production," as she indicates Coetzee's allusions to de Cervantes and *Don Quixote* in "The Novel Today" (1987), "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" (1987), *Age of Iron* (1990), *Disgrace* (1999) and *Slow Man* (2005) (81). In the "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" (1987), Coetzee mentioned that Don Quixote "ends with the capitulation of the imagination to reality, with a return to La Mancha and death. . . . In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (99).

romantic lens to see the world, and this is precisely Maria J. Lopez's interpretation of the conflict between reality and imagination (81) as displayed in David's obsession with this romantic figure and his shunning away from the teacher. What we see in David's resistance against Leon's authority, though, is driven not merely by the characteristics of an escapist artist. His resistance is not an outright fighting back, or simply an escape away from the oppressive authority. Resistance is not locked in a binary game; rather, radical resistance is the neutralization of the logic of binary itself.[15] David's obsession with Don Quixote is indicative of the moment of di-identification, the moment his singularity is irreducible to what Attridge names "ideoculture," "the totality of the cultural codes constituting a subject, at a given time, as an overdetermined, self-contradictory system" (*The Singularity of Literature* 22). While most people tend to see the world through Sancho's eyes, that is, seeing the world as real, David shows us the possibility of seeing the world as a construct, that is, seeing the world not as it is, but as fictive. It is not that we have to choose between Sancho or Don Quixote, between a realist or a romantic orientation toward the world. Rather, it is more about the incommensurability between the singular and the universal. The bonds between Sancho and Don Quixote, between David and Leon are structured in a relationship of proximity and paradox. The singular is anti-determinist, always exceeding and preceding "all pre-existing general determinations" (Attridge, *The Singular of Literature* 63). The singular, if it has a chance to manifest itself, demands a certain opening and loosening of the surrounding culture, the "ideoculture." While Leon declares that "the real . . . is what David misses in his life" (217), it might be more accurate to say that the respect for

[15] The resistance here is "beyond the level of the subject or subjects, beyond performative effectivtiy in the world" (Kamuf 15).

the singular is what Leon misses in his pedagogy and life.

Leon's ontological anxiety to maintain an order is again met with resistance from David's "improper" way of doing sums by counting numbers without subjecting them to sequence and existing formula. Rooted in our tendency to see beings as elements within an ontological structure,[16] we rely on a fixed system to comprehend the world and regulate our daily activities. Leon is deeply committed to "the rules of arithmetic" that assures the order in the world (150, 226), so he cannot tolerate any violation of this mathematical order. What makes him anxious is not that David cannot recognize the numbers, but that he cannot add up the numbers. Without the sum, the formula is disabled. And if David cannot do the sum, how is he going to see the laws that put the world in order? Leon has the support from Simon's colleagues that believe in Platonic Form: "[T]he universe—not just the realm of numbers but everything else too—is ruled by laws, that nothing happens by chance" (249). Leon and Simon's colleagues who are committed to the universal law believe that the numbers and the formula are what hold the universe together (227). This conception of universal rules allows no exceptions: "If the rules are true for you and for me and for everyone else, how can they not be true for him [David]?" (248). This faith in the rules of the arithmetic sheds luminosity and enlightenment on the chaos and offers a sense of security for our life: "They[numbers] fill all the spaces in the universe, packed one against another tight as bricks. So we are safe. There is nowhere to fall" (230).

But the problem with formula is that we achieve the sum at the expense of the

[16] Coetzee is invoking the debate on whether the order between numbers are invented or discovered. Is there a universal law or order that regulates the world (as Simon's colleagues put it, there is unity underlying diversity), and we discover that order and follow it so that the world can run smoothly? Or does our need to understand the world give rise to the construction for a law with which we explain our existence in the world?

singular numbers, the totality at the disregard of contingency and invention. David has a point to make when he says that 1 apple + 1 apple does not inevitably equal 2 apples; rather, he sees each singular apple in itself. "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" (248). Imagining the numbers are stars in the universe, David says, "A number can fall out of the sky," (178), out of the galaxy onto which Leon would impose his rules of arithmetic. David also sees each singular number as a lonely island: While Leon sees "the numbers [as] a fleet of ships sailing in order, each knowing its place" (177), for David "[i]t is as if the numbers were [lonely] islands floating in a great black sea of nothingness" (249). He attends to each singular entity, as each singular number is a fragment whose completion lies in its incompletion for him. When asked by Simon how much fish Juan and Pabulo catch together when Juan catches five and Pabulo three, David responds, "I can't see them[the fish]." Simon says, "You don't have to see the fish. You just need to see the number" (224). This is what happens when we see entities in a sequence, reduced to formula that results in a sum. The society subscribes to the universal law as the ontological structure, and it sees people in collectives, in herds. Is it possible that we see each singular person without subsuming and subjugating him or her to the larger whole, to the One? The One represents the authority, conformity, identity and identification, integration into the large whole by eliding gap and fragment,[17] and "[a]s soon as

[17] The One is a complex question. In the "Introduction" to *The Politics of the One*, Artemy Magun identifies the models of the One in philosophy: "[T]he many, gathered, like a choir around a conductor, around the One that is radically separated from them (thus Plotinus, but even Aristotle thinks similarly), or the many actually forming unity-totality as its parts or members (Spinoza, and almost the entire Modern democratic/materialist thought)" (xii). Contemporary representative thinkers who critically reflect on the question of the One include: Deleuze and Guattari (rhizome), Lacan (the Lacanian "minus one"), Nancy (Universal Singularity), and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (the

there is the one, there is murder, wounding, traumatism" (Derrida, *Archive Fever* 78). Simon, who eventually sympathizes with David, is aware of the violence of the One, and he says to David, "If everything were packed tightly together, everything in the universe, then there would be no you or me or Ines. You and I would not be talking to each other right now, there would just be silence—oneness and silence. So, on the whole, it is good that there should be gaps between things, that you and I should be two instead of one" (176).

Eventually, we come to the simple conclusion: "An apple is an apple is an apple" (250). Of course, this sentence models itself on Gertrude Stein's famous line: a rose is a rose is a rose. A rose exists of and in itself. "One can think it, but one can represent nothing of it and not even define it" (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 343).[18] How does the discussion of singularity bear on the ethics of remembrance in South Africa ten years on after the TRC declared it had finished the archiving work and published the *TRC Report*, which was supposed to close the wounds of apartheid violence? In the post-conflict decade, philosophical universalism was translated into the discourse of normalization and conformism in socio-political terms. Each being was given its identity and ontological property, and within this ontological framework, personal memory had to be integrated into the official narrative. Through David's defiance against the totalizing framing discourse of normalization, Coetzee invites us to think the possibility of bearing witness to the singular in personal memory that was rendered homeless in the national archive of remembrance. As Simon insists, "there

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multitudes) (xi).

[18] Blanchot says this phrase troubles us "[b]ecause it is the site of a perverse contradiction. On the one hand, it says that one can say nothing of the rose but the rose itself, and that in this manner the rose declares itself to be more beautiful than if one were to call it so; but on the other hand, through the emphasis of reiteration, it withdraws from the rose even the dignity of its name, which, unique, claimed to maintain it in its beauty as essential rose." He goes on to say that this phrase "comes in its turn to demystify the emphatic nature of nomination and the evocation of being" (343).

are higher considerations than obeying the law, higher imperatives" (256): The higher imperatives demand that we attend to the narratives forgotten by the national archive. Ten years on after the official declaration of the closure of apartheid, the entire nation does not give up reflecting on the legacies of apartheid and examining the way it dealt with it while the nation was galloping on the avenue of modernization, as we still see museums holding exhibitions of the personal experience of apartheid and writers engaging with the forgotten stories of survivors.

Within the national archive of remembrance are the sediments and the inexhaustible layers of singular memory waiting to be articulated.[19] To get close to these sediments and buried layers, the fundamental question to be addressed is the concept of truth. The truth about truth is that there is no ultimate truth. A productive way of understanding truth is that truth is always in a dynamic mode. Embedded in the time of any proclamation of truth are "two distinct moments." In "'*Le Jarjure*,' Perhaps," Derrida distinguishes two moments that are "at once rigorously distinct and strangely indiscernible" (173) involved in giving testimony. The first moment dictates "a universal implication of the law and the Western social contract" by which "the legal subject understands the language and knows [that] no one is assumed to be ignorant of the law before which one is in advance obligated and obligated to appear; truth, veracity, and good faith are owed by whoever promises it," while one is accused of betraying this promise in the second moment in which the legal and ontological commands are violated (172). The legal and political attempt to bridge the two moments, or to prioritize the first moment, is always

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[19] Derrida writes, "It accumulates so many sedimented archives, some of which are written right on the epidermis of a body proper, others on the substrate of an 'exterior' body. Each layer here seems to gape slightly, as the lips of a wound, permitting glimpses of the abyssal possibility of another depth destined for archaeological excavation" (*Archive Fever* 20).

already frustrated from the beginning, as the moment of giving testimony is beleaguered by "the unsublatable thickness of time and of what it transforms, the multiplicity of times, instants, their essential discontinuity, the merciless interruption that time inscribes in 'me'" (173).

It is in the aporetic temporality between the two moments that we can think the personal truth. The TRC relied mainly on the "forensic and factual truth" that is "verifiable and documentable," and on "social truth, the truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate" (Tutu, *No Future* 26). The reliance on the verifiable and dialogical truth (it is more like consensus people have reached after discussion) is often criticized for "its excessive legalism and positivist methodology" (Richard Wilson xix). The "forensic and factual truth" is more about the production of knowledge than about the recovery of truth, and personal truth in the form of testimony or witness account cannot be reduced to the realm of knowledge and forensics (Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing" 68).

To bear witness to the personal truth of wounds and trauma is then to attend the *other* truth. Kelly Oliver illustrates the double sense of bearing witness in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*: "both the juridical connotations of seeing with one's own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, in other words, bearing witness" (16). The personal memory is marked by a certain degree of unbelievability and unaccountability, which cannot be understood as untruth. The unbelievable truth testifies to "something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence."[20] Bearing witness is

[20] Doris Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* coauthored with Shoshana Felman (1992), illustrates the tension, or the aporia, between the historical truth and the testament of a female survivor bearing witness to seeing four chimney going up in flames during an uprising in the camp. Her testimony was quickly discredited as false by one historian because there was only one chimney blown up according to historical records. Laub suggests otherwise: The female

characterized by the dual limits: “the limit of the possible” and “the limit of what is speakable” (Pollak 12; qtd in Jelin 61). Ultimately, the struggle between a historicist account of truth and the *other* truth does not come down to an arbitration of the verity of the different accounts. More importantly, the *other* truth testifies to an experience that the interpretative framework of the institutional archive refuses to acknowledge. In this sense, the radical truth testifies to “the breakage of a framework” (Laub 60). It not only reveals “the very secret of survival” (ibid 62) (a Derridean secret that does not get deciphered), but also accuses the historicist archiving framework of imposing the violence of forgetting on the silenced others.

The singular in personal memory belongs to the order of “the miraculous” (Derrida, *Demeure* 75), a condition it shares with literary fiction that is not subject to juridical verification or rationalist law. To testify to the unbelievable in memory involves vows, oaths, and profession, thus testifying to the extraordinary and the exceptional, that is, “appealing to an act of faith beyond any proof” (ibid 75). At the heart of testimony is a kind of originary faith, and every testimony is inscribed in this plea: “Believe what I say as one believes in a miracle” (Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge” 83-84). To believe, then, is to enter into a suspension of knowledge, chronological time and assurance of subjective autonomy, since this appeal of belief is a leap of faith, “a leap, as in Kierkegaard, beyond all epistemological and ethical codes and assurances . . . a leap that opens the world miraculously” (Naas, *Derrida from Now on* 79). To say that the testimony is “miraculous” does not mean it is not impossible to believe, but that the “miraculous testimony” is “the impossible” itself. The criteria of either true or false does not apply as the miraculous breaks with all

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was testifying to a more radical form of truth.

horizons of expectation, principles of sufficient reason, and conditions of possibility. The miraculous signals both “the extraordinary relationship to an absolute other” and the event by which the world opens up (Naas, *Miracle and Machine* 98). The miraculous in every testimony does not simply testify to the events of history, “but [is] the condition of history itself” (ibid). History is no longer written in historicist narratives but grounded in the miraculous, through which history comes to have new significance. To read or listen to the testimony is simply to believe, to have elementary faith in the other, in what he or she has to say, to appeal to the experience of the miraculous. Testimonial writing is unhinged from the claim to truth grounded in representation. We have no ready access to the testimony of the other, in the sense that I cannot know, verify, or prove it; I can simply believe it.

The miraculous renders testimony as the “accountability of the incalculable” (Derrida, *Demeure* 69). The aporia between the accountable and the unaccountable, between the calculable and the incalculable structures the movement of testimony. The potentiality in testimonial writing is inscribed in the ambiguities of witnessing, and this ambiguity comes from the fact that the boundary between “fiction” and “testimony” has been trembled. As Derrida attests, “[I]f the testimonial is by law irreducible to the fictional, there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury—that is the to say, the possibility of literature” (*Demeure*29). The paradox is this: While the law attempts to exclude fictionality from testimony, it simultaneously affirms the fictionality within testimony. Thus, the undecidable limit of all testimonies and the need of the law to suspend its reliance on the values of accountability and verifiability. Mark Sanders even argues that “[the] moment of unverifiability

establishes the dependence of law on literature” (6). For us to listen to the testimony whose movement is toward the fictive and the ineffable, “the witness must both conform to given criteria and at the same time invent, in quasi-poetic fashion, the norms of his attestation” (*Demeure* 40). Perhaps, the inventive force embedded in literary writing is one way to read, to listen to, and to witness the lacuna and the silence in the singular personal memory.

Conclusion

In establishing the TRC to deal with the legacies of apartheid, the post-apartheid government was committed to the historicist narrative in discovering the factual truth regarding the violence of the past. What it failed to see, or what it intended to conceal, is that the archival practice was more about the construction than the discovery of truth. The production of the officially approved historical truth, the promotion of the moral values of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the advertisement of the political necessity of normalization were all employed to serve the political purpose of bringing the mourning of the past to a closure and reorienting the country’s view toward a more promising future. This political gesture was undertaken to redeem the country from degenerating into the vicious cycle of violence; however, this redemption did not answer the demand of justice. The promise is a pre-programmed one—it was modeled on the trajectory of Western modernization. The way the state answered the call for justice was to exorcise the specters.

The promise and redemption offered by the state achieved cheap justice. Put in other words, the justice was conditional and limited to a few selected groups of

people. In framing the quest for historical truth in historicist narrative and envisioning the future in a preconceived model, the state determined public consensus by conforming personal perspective to the official worldview. In the political space of totality, the post-apartheid government dwelt on the reassurance of "never again,""no more" and "no longer" as if the questions of violence, loss, trauma, and suffering could have been settled once and for all through legal means, as if the past and memory could remain sealed in the archiving space designated by the TRC. The "normative" framework of the TRC focuses on the collective, rather than on the singular: The state promoted nation building at the expense of the personal demand of justice; it privileged sameness over alterity; it gave priority to order rather than affect. It left no room for the unsayable and unrecognizable, as it overlooked personal truth and rendered the unaccountable into oblivion by imposing official commemoration. This framework of normalization, in the attempt to steer the country in the direction of normalized development of modernity, causes homelessness to the silenced others in the national archive; it failed to offer hospitality to the infinite others oppressed in history.

The novel's title seems to suggest that David is the savior Jesus, though this observation goes right against Coetzee's perception of religion. However, if we redefine the concept of redemption as our responsibility to attend to the unrealized singularity of the other, it is through David that we witness the glimmer of the possibility of historical redemption. In Benjamin's use of this word, the redemption of the infinite others buried in historical wreckage is grounded in the blasting open of historical continuum, in the possibility of realizing their unrealized potentiality in the present, and also in the future to come if we annex Derrida's idea to that of Benjamin.

In the face of state-imposed ideology of normalization, we need to rethink the possibility of the singular. At one point, Leon says, “But what if we are wrong and he[David] is right? What if between one and two there is no bridge at all, only empty space? And what if we, who so confidently take the step, are in fact falling through space, only we don’t know it because we insist on keeping our blindfold on? What if this boy is the only one among us with eyes to see?” (250). As David tells us that he sees each singular entity and he is afraid that “holes” in the narrative and in the numerical sequence might open, we should also be aware of the holes in the TRC archive, and we need a poetics of listening to listen to the singular experience of the personal memory.

Conclusion

Writing is a movement that resists stability and closure. It produces meaning while it also undermines that meaning. However, literary writing is not purely linguistic plays; nor is it the mimetic representation of society, or pedagogical tool to be manipulated by the authority. The literary event is inaugural: It trembles and works opening in any system, institution or ontological order of actuality. With this potentiality to be otherwise, writing becomes the site of possibility, intensity, openness and ultimately hospitality. When the system closes and the relation between the self and the other turns into one of appropriation, injustice ensues. When the system cracks and opens, we might see the glimpse of unconditional hospitality.

In this dissertation, I set out to understand Coetzee's writing as the act of potentializing the present order of actuality. Since Plato exiled poets from his Republic, literary writing has been prejudiced as being elusive, escapist or anarchic. Plato and his followers have overemphasized the fictionality of literary writing while overlooking the fictive nature of all discourses. Literary writing and all other discourses are structured by the modality of the "as-if," only that these socio-political discourses attempt to hide their historicity and contingency in order to secure the ontological order of actuality they have constructed. The "as-if" in literary writing embodies the force to displace the official version of reality, and through this displacement it admits that which is *not* in any given system. Aesthetically it embodies the idea of originality and invention, and in terms of ethics it names the hospitality toward the *arrivant*.

Literary writing can have very positive, rather than positivist, significance in reconfiguring our relation with the world. In my reading of *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello*, I demonstrate this affirmative force in Coetzee's writing. For him, writing does not remain static, and it does not look for closure, either. Coetzee often *plays* with the form and narrative voice, and this literary act of playing intervenes in the (de)formation of form or system and in the (de)construction of narrative authority. In Coetzee's writing, the ontological order of actuality is no longer a given but exposed to the possibility of intervention or reconfiguration. His works forces open the world we take for granted, and through this opening we are able to encounter the other and confront the impossible.

On the premises that the literary displaces the ontological order, I proceeded to investigate how literary potentiality coincides with ethical possibilities. The kernel question is how the literary event inaugurates the coming of the other. Once the enclosed order is "opened," there is the possibility of new ethical relation with the other, of responding to the demand coming from the other and allowing the oppressed others in history to articulate their suffering, though in the "maimed language." For Coetzee, impotentiality, withdrawal, silence and vulnerability are not signs of escapism or impotence, but are ethical stances from which to reconceive the self-other relation. This relation is not founded on liberalist notions of equality and autonomy, both of which create alienation rather than connection. The self has to desubject itself before it is possible for the self to welcome the other. In *Age of Iron*, we see Mrs. Curren losing faith in her former liberalist values of recognition, autonomy, and self-empowerment. She comes to realize that suffering is not a political question, and that suffering is not *their* question. Suffering and violence are

ethical questions that challenge our ontological sense of being. The ability to suffer is the ability to welcome. In her utterly denuded life, Mrs. Curren is exposed to the pre-subjective state of existential vulnerability, a state in which she is ultimately on an “equal” stance with the other (The liberalist notion of equality is a false notion; it is merely a question of political rhetoric. Liberalism always tells us that the law guarantees our equality and our possession of certain rights. But what about those who are not protected by the law, or those whose rights are not guaranteed by the law?)

If Coetzee approaches the question of suffering from the stance of vulnerability, his writing assumes the form of testimony, testifying to the ineffable and the unrecognizable. Coetzee’s writing attends to the victims’ experience of unspeakable suffering, to the singular personal memory of wounds and trauma that demands articulation. As my reading of *Childhood of Jesus* shows, the state mourns the dead in order to bring the traumatic past to a closure and exorcise the haunting specters, but Coetzee’s writing keeps mourning open and ongoing, thus exposing the self to the haunting of the other. His testimonial writing attends to the singular of personal memory, to the radical truth, and to the miraculous experience involved in the singular memory. Coetzee’s writing constitutes the act of responsibility, but a responsibility in the Derridan sense of absolute responsibility that is irreducible to the duties and obligations defined in the law. Indeed, writerly responsibility is possible only “before the law.”

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