

Dark Places and Blank Spaces

Representations of Alterity in the Works of J.M. Coetzee

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My eyes are shut in order to see.

J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*

Introduction

Prisons are places of particular fascination for J.M. Coetzee. Particularly those of the South African variety whose likenesses it was, during the Apartheid years, forbidden to capture on film of any kind; looming and off-limits, the “legal illegalities” (Coetzee “Into the Dark Chamber”) which inevitably transpire within are perpetrated and protected by the self-perpetuating authority of the state they serve. One is aware of the excessive (ab)use of power that goes on in the near-perfect privacy of the prison, yet, short of experiencing it firsthand, the internal reality of the place proves elusive; the penitentiary remains impenetrable. Yet, John Irwin names such dark and essentially unknowable places as “the womb of art” (ibid.); the utter unknowability of, for example, the torture chamber is precisely that which draws the artist to attempt, in an imaginative effort, its representation. Such artistic aims may seem ostensibly commendable in their efforts at illuminating and therefore in a sense also substantiating, in an emotive way, the closed or so-called “alternate” realities (of profound physical and/or mental pain – of suffering) inhabited by certain “others” from which the general public is often excluded, even protected. However, it seems that for Coetzee, art, including language, is inherently problematic precisely due to its own artfulness; representation is necessarily always distortion. In fact, the artist risks committing at least a double violence against his object by taking an established Other and appropriating him further by attempting a representation which, due to its inherent disingenuousness, is destined to fail or fall tragically short. The writing of Coetzee is highly sensitive to this rather unfair appropriation of alterity and consciously seeks ways to write/present the Other without reducing him to spectacle or even his tormentors to tired tropes.

Michael Marais describes Coetzee’s approach to the Other in his writing as representative of a type of Orphic descent; a journey into the darkness undertaken by both the writer as well as his main characters. According to the myth, Orpheus’ wife Eurydice was killed by a snakebite; unable to bear her loss, the mourning Orpheus was granted special protection by the gods to descend into the

underworld in search of her. Upon meeting the lord of the underworld, Hades, Orpheus, a talented musician, charmed the god with his music and was granted permission to return to the upper world with Eurydice on condition that he did not turn to look at her as she followed him. As he neared the upper world, Orpheus, unable to hear her footfalls, began to doubt whether Eurydice was truly walking behind him; afraid that the gods might have been playing a trick on him, just before crossing the threshold, Orpheus, desperate to confirm her presence, turned to look upon Eurydice, who immediately, and permanently, vanished back into the underworld.

Marais observes that, like the writer himself, many of Coetzee's characters embark upon a similar journey; that his subjects, usually white Westerners in some position of authority, become enamored with the exotic Other (usually a less privileged character, who lives, as it were in a temptingly impenetrable darkness) and respond to the Other's strangeness -often perceived as a threat- by attempting to possess him in some way (Marais "Ethics, Engagement, and Change" 164). Coetzee's characters then are habitually engaged with an alterity that uncomfortably exceeds their knowledge; they act by imposing themselves upon the obscure Other, forcing him into the light of their world with the intention of "substantiating" him, that is, giving him substance which can be known, understood, and subsequently catalogued. This categorization however is always a misrepresentation of the Other whose alterity, it will be demonstrated, remains permanently out of reach.

This investigative and potentially appropriative journey into the darkness is, crucially, something which Coetzee recognizes as being not unproblematic for any novelist attempting its fair representation. The writer's challenge, for Coetzee, is: how not to make another's pain "the occasion of fantasy" (Coetzee "Into the Dark Chamber"). Coetzee further states that:

For the writer the deeper problem is not to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is how not to play the game by

the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms. (ibid.)

He is here writing in a specifically South African context, "the state" being the country's (then ruling) apartheid regime, however, the ethical concerns of the novelist, to Coetzee, are not nationally prescribed; they should be the concerns of any writer seeking contact with the unknown.

Coetzee, however, proposes no solution to this dilemma. He in fact even suggests further on in the essay that truly, morally, just representations of alterity, including those of both the torturer and of his victim, remain impossible in the "damned, dehumanized world" such as it is; that morality can only have meaning "when humanity will be restored across the face of society" (ibid.). Until then, power systems such as apartheid will continue to manufacture a morality that privileges its own interests, condemning the "others" it creates to lives of brutality and punishing them when they, in turn, begin to act brutally. It is a vicious cycle of conflict in which no one has any special claim on, or right to, moral authority. A writer, and particularly one who himself occupies a traditional position of power, attempting to engage with such conflicts in a work of fiction thus, in the words of Clive Barnett, faces a considerable "burden of representation". Barnett writes that:

The inscription of literary writing by white South Africans into an international framework involved the imposition of a peculiar 'burden of representation' upon those writers. They are positioned on the margins of Western literary canons as representatives who can speak of and against a racist system, in the name of universal values of justice and equality. They are asked to represent life under apartheid, and present a principled resistance or refusal to it, yet they do not and cannot represent its principal targets and victims, the majority of black South Africans. (Barnett 294)

Despite his sensitivity to such concerns, Coetzee has, in fact, been criticized for operating on the side of the historical oppressor. David Attwell writes that "In South Africa ... Coetzee writes not as a citizen of the First World but of the Third –or perhaps the First within the Third- and therefore, like other white South African writers, he faces the problem of cultural authority. Bluntly put, his

relationship with the European canon entails an accusation of complicity in a history of domination” (Attwell 4-5). The Western canon is undoubtedly the literary tradition with which Coetzee is most familiar as evidenced by the extensive intertextual references/engagements with Western works used in his own writing. However, as Attwell goes on to suggest, Coetzee’s fiction is not merely playing along with, or into, that tradition but rather “through his complicated postcoloniality he brings that situation to light and finds fictional forms wherein it can be objectified, named, and questioned” (ibid.). That is, not only is Coetzee preoccupied with examining and exposing the mechanics of fiction writing/representation in his works, he is turning a critical eye to the (Western) canon as well. For instance, his novel *Foe* is a “rewriting” of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of a female narrator, Susan Barton (whose story is constantly being overwritten by the character Daniel Foe). Of *Foe*, Derek Attridge writes (quoted by Attwell) that it is:

A mode of fiction that exposes the ideological basis of canonization, that draws attention to its own relation to the existing canon, that thematizes the role of race, class, and gender in the processes of cultural acceptance and exclusion, and that, while speaking from a marginal location, addresses the question of marginality – such a mode of fiction would have to be seen as engaged in an attempt to break the silence in which so many are caught, even if it does so by literary means that have traditionally been celebrated as characterizing canonic art. (Attwell 5)

Working within the Western canon that has so inspired him (in both a positive and negative sense), Coetzee has a vested interest in investigating its shortcomings; his extensive intertext challenges the canon by engaging with the figures it has overwritten. Contrary to Attridge’s claim, however, this thesis will argue that Coetzee’s fiction is not in itself actively engaged in “breaking the silence in which so many are caught”, that is, it does not, in fact, attempt or presume to provide direct access to history’s counter-narratives, which are the stories of Others. Rather, this thesis investigates the ways in which Coetzee attempts to live up to his own challenge; the challenge of non-reductive literary representation. If the voices/histories, or even the bodies, of Others (be they Western or otherwise; human or nonhuman animals) are constantly being undermined/overwritten by those in

power, this thesis specifically asks: in what ways does Coetzee's fiction represent this suppressed Other that do not culminate in a divestiture of his alterity? A crucial aim of this thesis, particularly in the chapter concerning the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, will be to underscore the relevance of nonhuman animals in Coetzee's literature; that the challenge of representing animals through literature is almost identical to the challenge of human representation, and the endeavor equally as uncertain. Importantly, this challenge is precisely what Coetzee plays out in his narratives through his main characters, almost all of whom are consumed by their desire to possess an Other whose being eludes them.

The first chapter of this thesis will provide the theoretical framework within which the term "Other" can be understood in Lacanian psychology as well as Levinasian metaphysics, and further introduces the various problems/ethical considerations addressed by both. Lacan is relevant particularly for the first novel discussed in this thesis, *In the Heart of the Country*, whose Lacanian themes have been a source of inspiration for many critics trying to get to the heart of the rather strange psychology of the novel's main character. Levinas is important because his concept of the Other brings with it the very challenge that Coetzee (and, particularly, his characters) must contend with in his/their desire to access/represent the unknown. For the sake of clarity, as Jacques Lacan and Emmanuel Levinas have differing definitions of Otherness, it should be understood that, unless otherwise specified, the default definition of the Other used in this thesis will be that supplied by Levinas. The second chapter will offer a textual analysis of one of Coetzee's early works, *In the Heart of the Country*, focusing on the main character Magda's struggles with language and identity; how she tries to break free from her assigned role of "colonial daughter", but does so by attempting to forge an impossible, appropriative, fantasy-driven relationship with her black workers, Hendrik and Klein Anna. The third chapter will analyze *Waiting for the Barbarians*, exploring the history and role of imperialism in its manufacturing and treatment of its Others as seen from the perspective of the Magistrate, an imperial governor who attempts to assume a mediatory position between the wounding imperial officers and wounded barbarians, only to find himself occupying both roles. The fourth and final chapter will examine *Elizabeth Costello*, following some of the eponymous character's (herself a

novelist) inconsistent arguments which attempt to negotiate the same ethical conundrum of responsibility and artistic representation that faces her own creator.

Chapter 1

Levinas, Lacan, & the Other

1. Who/what is the Other?

Perhaps the simplest way to approach any question seeking to elucidate the identity of the Other, is to begin by stating that s/he is precisely who/that which “I” am not. While superficially satisfying, such a definition proves to be not entirely airtight and begins to falter under even the most cursory glance. Humans (and by extension, all sentient creatures) are all beings who happen to be embedded in a subjective consciousness which views anything exterior to itself as “other”. One may view one’s neighbor, for example, as Other, however it equally applies that one, having neighbors and thus also being a neighbor oneself, is also an “other” (from a neighbor’s - a different “I’s” - perspective); all living beings are thus simultaneously “I” and “other”. One may wonder, then, how a world of “I”-subjects (ego-driven individuals), each of whose own being and existence are of the utmost importance (to him/herself), can engage ethically with a world of perceived Others, who by definition occupy a less exalted position than the Self in the world of being. This is not only a central question explored in the literary works of J.M. Coetzee, but a longstanding debate spanning several disciplines, philosophy and psychology among them. The following sections aim to offer a thorough grounding on the nature of the relationship between the “I” (the subject) and the Other. The psychology of Jacques Lacan will be instrumental in demonstrating the subject’s dependence on, and complex relationship with, the (not necessarily human) Other, an Other which precedes the subject’s own birth and through which the subject inevitably defines the self. Finally, the metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas will help elucidate the need for a subject’s ethical response to, thus, responsibility toward, the human Other, who resists, albeit passively, the subject’s totalizing efforts.

1.1 Jacques Lacan

The previous section focused primarily on defining the Other as an inter-human manifestation. While psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan also recognizes the importance of the presence of the human other for a subject (what he terms *le petit autre*, or, “the small other” [Bailly Chap. 4]), there is also, he believes, a broader sense in which the term Other can be applied, that is, in a sense beyond the physical human other – it is an otherness that encompasses the entirety of the social realm into which a human is born and to which he is expected to conform; it is the radical alterity of the Symbolic Order, dominated by language and law. The Symbolic Order, otherwise known as “the Big Other” (*le grand autre; l’Autre*), is a radical alterity because it exists exterior to the subject’s self, even predates that self, and thus cannot “be resolved or dealt with through identification” (ibid.). That is, because the Symbolic existed prior to the self, hence is “other” to the self, it cannot be a part of *who* that self is. The Symbolic does, however, provide the discourse through which an identity can be effectively fashioned (by the self), which is precisely what Lacan is referring to when he states that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (*Écrits* 214).

1.2 The Phallus & Name-of-the-Father

In the initial stages of its life, a child will already possess some rudimentary knowledge of the Big Other which, according to Lacan, is premised on the periodic absences of the mother (Bailly Chap. 5). Seeing that, for the child, the first Other is the mother (she is, initially, the child’s entire world, that is, the child, in the very beginning, does not make distinctions between itself and its mother, between its own needs and that which satisfies those needs; to Lacan, the child, at this early stage, exists in the realm of the Real - a state of perfect unity where all of the child’s needs can be fulfilled [Bailly Chap. 6]), her absences indicate to the child that there is a beyond, a true Other, to which the mother sometimes goes. It is a departure that causes some perplexity for the child, who wishes to be the sole object of its mother’s attention/affection, engendering a feeling of lack – the child, feeling that it is not always, in Lacanian terms, the object of mother’s desire, begins to form an infant hypothesis about the

nature of her going away, namely, that whatever it is that draws her away necessarily *has* something that the child does not (Bailly Chap. 5). Under ‘typical’ circumstances, the only other presence in the child’s life that can viably explain mother’s disappearances is the figure of the father. Lionel Bailly writes that “Long before the baby can understand concepts such as ‘work’ or ‘chores’ or the myriad other reasons for Mother’s absence, it can understand *and see* the reality of Father. He is the other thing in the baby’s world which might account for Mother’s going away...” (ibid.). The child thus comes to view the father as mother’s “biggest distraction” and therefore the child’s own greatest rival (ibid.). The idea of what Lacan terms the Phallus is thus formed in the child’s mind as “the imaginary object-of-power” that “*draws the mother away, or that perhaps I have, which brings her back*” (ibid.); briefly stated, the Phallus is the signifier, or *representation* of the idea of, the object of mother’s desire. In an Oedipal maneuver, the child will attempt to ‘win’ the mother back by becoming the desired Phallus, which it perceives as whole and perfect (ibid.).

In this manner a third element becomes introduced into what had initially been a dyadic relationship between mother and child alone – this third element is represented by the father (who may or may not be a real father but who at least stands to represent the ‘other’ object of mother’s desire – i.e., the perceived possessor of the Phallus), and is the key to the child’s “castration” and subsequent successful initiation into the Big Other, or Symbolic (ibid.). In order to be a functioning subject in the Symbolic, the child must first accept what Lacan has termed the paternal metaphor, or, Name-of-the-Father, which entails a symbolic castration. With the introduction of the father figure (which can be anyone or anything that consistently competes for the mother’s attention), the child becomes aware not only of the Other’s existence (beyond the mother), but it also begins to form notions of its obligatory nature; the Other makes demands on mother which is evident in the language she uses when explaining her going away to the child in terms that imply necessity (ibid.): “mommy has to go to work”, or “I must go food shopping”, etc. The child must, in turn, accept mother’s explanations and, in so doing, it “enters into the game of discourse, and into the Symbolic realm” (ibid.). The child’s acceptance of the mother’s language represents a loss that Lacan describes as castration, or, giving up the Phallus. Bailly writes:

Castration is the acceptance that one is less-than-perfect, limited, not all-powerful and able to control or satisfy the world. Castration is therefore a symbolic process which allows the child to situate itself within the Law, and to accept that its own desires are not paramount. (ibid.)

The paternal metaphor, then, lays the necessary foundations for the child beginning to negotiate its way into the Symbolic and the responsibilities of the self that ensue.

1.3 The Mirror Stage

On its journey towards the Other, it is important that the child also first form a notion of self. To Lacan, the role of the mother is again crucial for a child's formation of identity; Bailly writes that "The mother's gaze is the child's first mirror" (Bailly Chap. 2). That is, even before the official Mirror Stage a baby will have formed some notion of itself as a subject based on the attention or the gaze of its mother, from which, "it [the baby] begins to assume the idea of possession of the toes she coos over and the sides she tickles" (ibid.). The pre-linguistic starting point which initiates a child's fascination with the self (a fascination that will persist throughout the entirety of that human's life) and opens up the pathway to the Symbolic, is Lacan's so-called mirror stage. There will come a point in its early life (to Lacan, beginning around 6 months of age [ibid.]) when a child will have to confront itself in a mirror. The moment of self-recognition is, for the child, a joyous one in that it is the first time that it perceives itself as a whole being, as opposed to a fragmented collection of parts (ibid.). It is also a perplexing moment in which the child, contemplating himself, is also contemplating the 'other' of himself, the reflection in the false reality of the mirror, which is alienating (ibid.). The child, then, both one with, and separated from, the self, consequently objectifies its reflection, turning it into an Ideal-I which represents, as the name suggests, the unified "I" that the child will henceforth wish and strive to become (ibid.). One's aspiration to the Ideal-I, as it turns out, is a lifelong endeavor that, as Lacan asserts, was doomed from the moment of its conception; "the important point is that [the ideal formed in the mirror stage] situates the agency of the ego ... in a line of fiction" (Gallop 121). The

appearance of the Ideal-I thus marks the birth of the ego, the fictional “whole”-self, which will strengthen as the child begins to acquire language, pulling signifiers from the Symbolic (*young, smart, athletic*) and using them as tools for demarcation in an effort to provide the longed-for but ultimately unattainable unity of self, represented by the Ideal-I (Bailly Chap. 2). Such signifiers are, however, the ‘picks’ of the protective ego, and as such, they function as the representations of what the child/subject wishes to believe and project about the self, a selection process that necessarily entails the repression of signifiers which are less in line with the strived-for ideal (ibid.).

1.4 Emmanuel Levinas

No one is good voluntarily.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

Much of the philosophy of Levinas is concerned with an arduous articulation of the experience of alterity; what happens to a subject when he is met with an Other? This Other, to Levinas, is necessarily a human other and his appearance in the subject’s life or ‘world’ is an arresting one, forcing the subject beyond himself, thereby creating an opening for ethical discourse. An encounter with the Other confronts the subject with his (the Other’s) fundamental resistance to the subject’s appropriative efforts (that is, the subject’s attempts at “making sense” of the Other by emptying him of his ‘strangeness’, thereby, according to Levinas, reducing him to the “imperialism of the same”). The Other, however, always exceeds the self (he exists exteriorly to, and therefore always comes from beyond, [the world of] the self) and is therefore entirely uncontainable, that is, irreducible to the Self (the subject) and the Same (the subject’s world) (*Totality and Infinity* 43). Being absolutely beyond the appropriative powers of the subject, the Other is then “the sole being I can wish to kill” (ibid. 198); as the Other cannot be truly, wholly, grasped, understood, and dominated, his presence is thus a challenge for the subject who may choose to respond with violence. The subject’s freedom to choose the nature of his response to the challenge of the Other establishes the encounter as inherently ethical.

The subject, Levinas assumes, is by nature a self-interested creature, wholly preoccupied with his own existence (ibid. 87). It is precisely this self-centeredness, or being for oneself (the backbone of Heideggerian ontology), that Levinas wishes to challenge and transcend with his philosophy of being for the Other. Recognizing that “no one is good voluntarily” (*Otherwise than Being* 11), Levinas thus describes a subject’s encounter with the Other as one that impels the subject beyond his own egotism (*Totality and Infinity* 84). That is, in an ethical interaction with the Other, the subject works against his own nature *for* the Other. One may then wonder exactly what it is about Levinas’ Other that inspires this radically newfound fidelity in the subject. The answer, according to Levinas, is to be found in the face.

1.5 Face-to-face

The human face, to Levinas, is much more than the sum of its parts. As a perceivable object (eyes, nose, mouth), it is subject to the ‘violence’ of visual appropriation, that is, it can be drawn into the reductive totality of the Same (*Ethics and Infinity* Chap. 7). However, the face, for Levinas, in a broader sense is also a signification “without context ... the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not ‘seen’. It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond” (ibid.). To Levinas, encountering the face of the Other in such a way is immediately ethical precisely because it eludes totalization – it cannot be grasped and molded by the subject for his own purposes – and in the certain unexpectedness of its unknowability, the face “leads you beyond”, that is, its interruptive calling into question of the Same shocks the naturally egocentric subject into an awareness of his own insufficiency thereby opening up the possibility of infinity. More succinctly put, Levinas’ notion of infinity means exactly “to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I” (*Totality and Infinity* 51). It is only an openness to the radically Other that allows for the possibility of the subject to truly grow, develop, and learn. Levinas states:

The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge.

(Totality and Infinity 43)

The calling into question of the Same which transpires when one lays eyes on the Other is thus not intended to be perceived as a threat to one's being, but as an invitation to 'surpass' it through exteriorly-induced knowledge.

1.6 Thou Shalt not Kill

The face of the Other is not merely a questioning of the Same; it is also a command, which Levinas describes as "the first word of the face ... Thou shalt not kill" (*Ethics and Infinity* Chap. 7). This command, which makes the face of the Other an authority, is not, however, issued from a position of power; the strength of its imperative is derived from the absolute vulnerability of the face, its exposed skin "which stays most naked, most destitute" (ibid.). When meeting the gaze of the Other one is thus ethically beholden to him under the unspoken and, to Levinas, innate charge of this imperative, founded in vulnerability. In other words, it is the palpable vulnerability as seen in or expressed by the face, that interrupts a subject's being, causing him to think past the self and for the Other, for whom he is responsible. This does not mean that one cannot transgress the authority of the face; Levinas states that "the face is not a force. It is an authority" ("The Paradox of Morality" 169). The face's exposure easily lends itself to violence or murder, and may even be interpreted as a provocation to such in its unasked-for interruption of the solipsistic self. However, to Levinas, when one kills, one is doomed to always miss the mark, so to speak. Colin Davis explains that "When I kill, I am trying to kill the Other, that which is utterly beyond my powers; I may succeed in killing the other, or even innumerable others, but the Other survives" (Davis Chap. 2). The other (lowercase o) in Levinasian

thinking represents that which “may be incorporated into the Same” (ibid.) including physical human bodies whose properties (race, gender, etc.) can be seen, grasped, and used as a type of ‘knowledge’ (which, to Levinas, almost always entails a divestiture of alterity), whereas the Other (capital O), although it manifests itself in the face-to-face encounter, remains fundamentally untouchable (ibid.). One might compare this idea of the Other to the notion of a soul, or spirit, that inhabits a body yet ‘lives on’ after the body dies, perhaps even haunting the site of its demise. Thus is it possible, in Levinasian thinking, to kill the body of an other, but not his absolute alterity (which inhabits another ‘world’ altogether); it is, in fact, this absolute alterity that has always been the true target of one’s murderous intentions to begin with, and which, being untouchable, serves to guarantee the failure of the act.

Levinas’ notion of the “unkillable” Other, however sympathetic in its utopian leanings, strikes one as uncomfortably irreverent in light of the actual deaths that have occurred, and are continuing to occur, the world over; the annihilation of real living breathing human beings (let alone animals, which do not figure very strongly in Levinas’ ethics at all) who would not likely have taken comfort in the idea that their alterity somehow ‘survives’ their mortality. Nor is it likely that the rather abstract idea of the futility of murder will ever prove to be compelling enough to stay the hand of any potential executioner (who often stands to gain materially from the act). It does not seem to be Levinas’ aim to (overly) moralize in his writing; Davis observes that “Levinas does not denounce violence as wrong; rather he attempts to show that it always fails, that it can never succeed in its true aims” (ibid.). Levinas’ ethics thus do not presume to pave a pathway to perfect peace, rather, they are an intense examination into an interrupted subject-hood, of a world of the Same into which the Other irrupts both vulnerable and challenging, providing the foundations for an ethical discourse. There is no prescribed course of action, and yet there is much at stake in how the subject decides to respond.

Chapter 2

In the Heart of the Country

In the Heart of the Country may best be described as a collection of narrative fragments composed and compiled by the novel's protagonist, Magda. The fragments of Magda's story, however, cannot be pieced together to form a whole coherent account. Time certainly passes within the novel, yet linearity is entirely flaunted; many of the novel's events occur, and then, seemingly, re-occur (or are blotted out and begun anew) albeit with several not insignificant changes; it is a fiction that makes a fiction of itself, made up by the made up Magda, whom the reader can, thus, not ever truly trust. As an unreliable and chameleonic character, Magda demands the reader's close attention whilst always managing to slip through his appropriative grasp; one cannot say with any certainty who she really is, least of all Magda herself (whose linguistic struggles will be detailed shortly). The problem of language, particularly in a Lacanian light – the (acceptance of the) language of the father granting access to the Symbolic Order – is a prime concern for Magda throughout the text as she cannot seem to find a stability of self within this dispassionate discourse of the Other. Struggling against the Symbolic Other, there is, additionally, a Levinasian challenge present in the text as Magda finds herself caught between two very human Others: the dominant father and the subordinate workers, both of whom she, at different times, attempts to intimately access, unsuccessfully.

Right from the start of the novel it becomes apparent that Magda's portrayal of events is not to be trusted as accurate when, for example, she suffixes a scene in which she descriptively recounts the returning of her father and his new bride to their South African farm by saying "I was not watching" (*In the Heart of the Country* 1). Despite Magda's overall unreliability, there are at least a few constants throughout the text which serve to more or less anchor the events (real or imagined) within a (somewhat) tangible time (somewhere in the 20th century) and place – an isolated farm in the Karoo region of South Africa. Of the few characters who make appearances, at least three seem to be relatively stable in Magda's mind: her father (a gruff and distant farmer), Hendrik (a black servant/farmhand of her father's), and Klein-Anna (Hendrik's young pretty wife). Of herself, Magda says much, yet does not seem to conform to any entirely-graspable figure; she is female yet in her

mind wholly unfeminine, considering herself to be almost unnaturally ugly, bony and harsh-looking, and her astounding academic intelligence is starkly incommensurate to her station as a farmer's daughter (she appears to be just as well-read as Coetzee himself). Furthermore, she is profoundly lonely out in the country, desperately seeking social contact yet perpetually, precariously, caught between her father's cold imperialism and the forced, impersonal compliance of his black workers. She does not fit in in her own home, or even her own skin, and the South African political climate has effectively precluded any meaningful or equal-footed relationship from developing between races, as Magda herself will discover. However, it also seems that at the core of Magda's dissatisfaction is an uncertainty of self; perceiving herself as constituted by a jumbled concatenation of words, those of her "father language", Magda "signif[ies] something, I do not know what" and thus feels "incomplete", "a being with a hole inside me" (ibid. 11). The paternal language (of the Father, the colonizer) into which she was born thus constitutes but cannot complete Magda who remains a substance-less subject within an infinite chain of linguistic signifiers forever displaced from the true beings-in-themselves, the wholeness of self, or as Magda puts it "the ecstasy of pure being" (ibid. 60), for which she desperately longs, and which she desperately, disastrously, attempts to assemble in her narrative.

2.1 O Mother, Where Art Thou?

Never having had a (Lacanian) loving mother figure to aid in the formation of a stable identity, Magda feels profoundly ill-situated in the father-dominated South African Symbolic Order which she at once detests and greatly desires. The arrival of the new and, apparently, imagined stepmother at the beginning of the novel prompts a good deal of introspection for Magda who, as she asserts, had never known her birth mother. This new female presence might be seen as a chance for Magda to connect with not only another human being, but also one of the same sex thereby potentially reducing the paternal "threat" that she feels is constantly hanging heavily in the air around her. Magda is, however, rather challenged by this new female on the farm; the stepmother embodies the fleshy uber-woman that Magda could never hope to be: "a big-boned voluptuous feline woman with a wide, slow-smiling

mouth” (ibid. 1)– horrified at the image of this woman, Magda retreats into the cold comforts of her imagination in search of any plausible figment from her infant memory still bearing a trace of the true mother she never knew. The figure she extracts, however, is nothing more than a smudge of commonplace adjectives: “a faint grey image, the image of a faint grey frail gentle loving mother”, and further on “a frail gentle loving woman” (ibid. 2); the repetition of adjectives signifying the pretense of Magda’s insistence on the type of motherly image that would have abounded in the (according to Chiara Briganti, most likely Victorian) literature she seems to have grown up reading. The unoriginality of Magda’s motherly portrait is, in fact, something she is very much aware of herself as she fully admits that the mother image is “one such as any girl in my position would be likely to make up for herself” (ibid.). Magda, it seems, conjures up for herself the image of the classical mother to serve, as Chiara Briganti observes, as “only the Other term of the dyad, only the father’s opposite” (Briganti 38); “She the soft, the fair; he the hard, the dark” (*In the Heart of the Country* 46). It is the absence of the “gentle loving mother” that Magda acutely feels under the ever-looming presence of her “dark” father, whom she blames for not only “murdering” the mother (she claims early on that it was his “relentless sexual demands [that] led to her death in childbirth” [ibid. 2]), but also “murder[ing] all the motherly in me” (ibid. 46). Magda, “this brittle, hairy shell with the peas of dead words rattling in it” (ibid.), is what she is on account of her father’s distant, unloving dominion; it is his language that has been forced upon her, a language that frames her entire existence within his uncompromising demands.

The idyllic mother prototype that Magda fashions as a contrast to the pitiless father is, however, also a product of the paternal discourse, the language of the father Other, under which she herself is held. However, Magda’s intense longing for the loving mother seems to stem from a desire to be rid of the world of the father, that is, she is longing for the Lacanian realm of the Real which consists of the symbiotic union of mother and child before it is interrupted and, in a sense, ruptured by the Other, that is, by the father who makes demands on the mother. Motherless Magda, however, wanting harmony, feels only displacement; a split self. She believes herself to be watched over, starting from a very young age, by a “ghostly double” (ibid. 50) who seems to act as an impartial

reflection for Magda, informing her of herself and, as Magda speculates, even being the source of the memory “snapshots” she has of her childhood self, wearing “black booties and wailing” (ibid.). Importantly, this ghostly split-self seems to correspond with the image Magda sees of herself in the large mirror in her bedroom, a mirror that, she claims, was inherited from her departed mother. The connection between mirror/mother here does not seem to be coincidental; lacking the initial (Lacanian) mother-mirror, and floundering in a world composed of her father’s stern and sovereign disinterest, Magda’s sense of identity is almost as barren and borderless as the desert landscape in which she lives: “Here in the middle of nowhere I can expand to infinity just as I can shrivel to the size of an ant” (ibid. 62). This instability of self leads Magda to assume several, often contradictory, “roles” within her narrative: that of the dutiful daughter; the “haggard wife” (ibid. 54); the “grim moralist with the fiery sword” (ibid.) raging against the philandering father; the “wild woman of the veld” (ibid.) who communes with nature and envies stones their “pure being”, etc. Whichever identity she assumes, she describes it herself as being merely a temporary “stopping place” where she, much like a hermit crab, inhabits the protective space of some other departed creature: “Whose shell I presently skulk in does not matter, it is the shell of a dead creature” (ibid.).

Magda’s mirror, then, is a distinctly Lacanian symbol in that it, according to Roman Silvani, “compensates for the absence of her mother” (Silvani 34) and seems to be the only object capable of revealing Magda to herself, of “bringing things into the open” (*In the Heart of the Country* 26), but it is a poor substitute, offering the alienating fiction of self-unity without the comforts of human reciprocity – recognition and love. Therefore, when Magda gazes upon her mirror image, she does so without the encouragement of the well-meaning mother (or parent); it is thus not the joyful recognition it is meant to be in Lacanian psychology, rather, Magda sees herself through the neglectful gaze of the (specifically: her) father. Caught in a patriarchal discourse, Magda scrutinizes her image in terms of how it would appear/appeal to the male gaze; she notices, for example, “how thickly the hair grows between my eyes” and subsequently wonders whether her “rodent glower ... might not be cosmetically tempered if I plucked out some of that hair with tweezers” - she even almost serenely contemplates yanking out some of her own teeth “of which I have too many” (ibid. 26-27). Sheila

Roberts asserts that “By allowing Magda to have these speculations, Coetzee’s intention (among others) is arguably to foreground women’s dislike of their own bodies, a dislike that seldom seems to agitate men about theirs” (Roberts 25). Assumptions about the possible extent to which men are preoccupied with their bodies aside - for Magda, this desire for feminization, which reaches pathological proportions, is not as determinate as Roberts seems to believe. Rather, Magda’s desire is yet another of her so-called “stopping places”, and a mere few lines later she is already contemplating the “joy it would be to be merely plain” (*In the Heart of the Country* 27), that is, physically unremarkable. In fact, the bodily obsession that Magda exhibits throughout the text, including her incessant attention to her absolute ugliness is, according to Chiara Briganti, rather the result of her “desire to escape her assigned place within the genealogy of ‘frail gentle loving’ women perpetuated in the literature that she has mastered” (Briganti 38). In Magda’s attempt to “utter my life in my own voice throughout” (*In the Heart of the Country* 172), to be, in a sense, her own woman, she has to inevitably attempt to overcome the language of the father, which is the language of the Other; the dark towering figure who indifferently owns her “despair and love” (ibid. 88-89).

2.2 Sins of the Father

The father figure in the novel serves as two distinct representations of the Other; as the Lacanian Other, the father is the law of the land whose rules must be obeyed and authority respected; as the Levinasian Other, the father is the strange and inaccessible figure with whom Magda longs, in a sense, to merge. Magda’s father is the only physically present blood-relation she seems to have in the novel; he is, furthermore, the only male presence in her life, aside from only two black workers mentioned – Jakob (who leaves the farm with his wife Ou-Anna relatively early on in the novel), and Hendrik. As previously mentioned, Magda and her father are not affectionate with one another, however, the extreme isolation inherent to their country living does occasion a rather strained intimacy not only between father and daughter but between them and the servants as well, all of whom, Magda included, work in perpetual fear of the master’s sudden rages and must consequently “tune (themselves) to my

father's signals" (ibid. 31). Thus is it clear that the father is the law, at least on the farm – acting as the embodiment of the South African Symbolic Order which privileges (at the time of writing) the white man above all others. Magda, born into this same system, also speaks its language, that of the father/master, yet finds it to be hollow and entirely unrepresentative, a mere “babble of words within me that fabricate and refabricate me as something else, something else” (ibid. 60). Moreover, it is a language that Magda believes has been forced on her, as her first language, she claims, was that of the servant's children with whom she used to play. The narrative that Magda constructs and reconstructs, then, reflects the dubious and destructive nature of the master dialectic to which she finds herself bound: “Labouring under my father's weight I struggle to give life to a world but seem to engender only death” (ibid. 13). The incestuous tone of this passage seems to situate Magda in an Oedipal relationship towards her father whose cries of “desire and sorrow and disgust and anguish” (ibid. 31) she wishes to answer and fulfill on her own. However, incomplete herself (lacking the Lacanian phallus), largely on account of her father's negligence, Magda, ugly and unwomanly, can never hope to be the woman who satisfies him. Moreover, the woman who does become the object of his desire, Klein-Anna, is a servant, a subordinate. This is a “code-breaking” transgression that strikes Magda to the core, not because she particularly empathizes with the young girl her father is authoritatively pursuing (she sooner sees her as a rival), but rather because she sees the servant girl as a pawn that her father is using to strategically wound Magda herself, claiming that the “real game lies between the two of us” (ibid. 42), that is, between Magda and her father. Magda's countermove, then, is both surrender and assault; simultaneously possessive of her father and wanting to be free of his dominion, Magda's narrative traces him obsessively, imploringly, only to culminate in -mostly his- brutal murder at her hands.

In her efforts at finding a place for herself by attempting to connect with human (Levinasian) Others, Magda begins close to home, so to speak, not only with her own race, but her own family as well, namely, her father and his new wife. Here, her abnormal attempts at intimacy are rejected, inciting (fantasies of) extreme violence. The first violence occurs relatively early on in the text, just after the father has brought home his imaginary new wife. The woman he brings home is an insult to

Magda in that she, voluptuous and somewhat crudely sensual, represents everything that Magda, the bony virgin, is not. It is unclear in the text if Magda ever truly lays eyes on the woman her father has gone out, and failed, to court; thus, one cannot know if the apparition he returns home with is based on a real woman, or simply a figment of Magda's imagination. Importantly, however, the new bride represents precisely the kind of "glutted woman" who Magda believes would gratify her father; she imagines them returning home as a married couple, only to completely destroy the vision by taking up a hatchet and murdering them both in their marital bed. Interestingly however, previous to the murder Magda details a scene in which she approaches the newlyweds' bedroom at night and "stand(s) in the doorway, naked, asking" (ibid. 10). Her father is sound asleep, and it is unclear whether or not the wife is sleeping as well, but Magda is apparently "seen" by her in some capacity, stating that "She watches me with full ironical lips" and "In the glare of the moonlight she goes over my poor beseeching body" (ibid.); it is a silent scene without reciprocity, ending with Magda hiding her eyes and weeping in shame. What Magda's exact intentions may have been are unclear, however, her nude "beseeching body" is undoubtedly an imploration, however desperate and inappropriate, for some kind of intimacy, for the solid warmth of human contact devoid of the usual word-clutter which, to Magda, simply passes through on the wind "from nowhere to nowhere" (ibid. 70). Having been denied the human, perhaps in this case even motherly, embrace she seems to be longing for, Magda retaliates by hacking the "sated" bodies of the sleeping newlyweds to pieces.

The episode is then rewritten, introducing the subordinate Other who, like the father, also turns out to be a source of both fear and fascination for Magda. Now it is not her father returning to the farm with a new wife but their worker Hendrik whose arrival is described in terms almost identical to that of the father's previously. The father is still alive and unmarried, albeit in a darker mood than usual as it is suggested by Magda that he has just come away from a failed courtship which has, to her great relief, given her a "second chance" to be "his good daughter" (ibid. 20) – a backsliding into patriarchal structures for Magda that is not destined to develop smoothly. A complication arises with the introduction of Hendrik's new wife, a third element which disrupts the father-daughter dyad Magda is seeking to maintain; the father begins to lust after the pretty young woman, Klein-Anna,

who, being herself a black woman and servant of the household, cannot easily (if at all) refuse “the boss’s” advances. Magda, perturbed by her father’s new infatuation but nonetheless committed, for the time being, to her role as dutiful daughter, gives in to his wish to be alone with Klein-Anna by making herself scarce. Closed off in her bedroom while her father brings Klein-Anna into the house, Magda is again confronted with linguistic complications, namely, the idea that her father is attempting to create a “private language” with Klein-Anna “with an *I* and *you* and *here* and *now* of their own” (ibid. 44), but such a task is impossible because “Their intimate *you* is my *you* too” (ibid.). They are thus corrupting language by attempting to exclude Magda from it, much like the father corrupts the sanctity of the “family meal” by excluding Magda from the table when he brings Klein-Anna into the house and almost blasphemously, according to Magda, “breaks bread” with her: “No scene more peaceful can be imagined, if one ignores the bitter child straining her ears behind the door at the far end of the house” (ibid. 64).

Thwarted again by her father, closeted away, ignored, and invisible, Magda succumbs to the ignominy of her situation -for which she again turns to the master’s discourse, fearing that Klein-Anna, the subservient Other, will begin “to test her power” ultimately forcing Magda into the position of household servant- and “misbehaves”. While her father and Klein-Anna are in the master bedroom, Magda approaches the door, which is “locked against me”, and begins to harass her father with the pleading tones of a child – “Daddy, I can’t sleep”, etc. His irritated acknowledgement of Magda is to physically fling her against the hallway wall, knocking the wind out of her. To his rough treatment, however, Magda responds with a degree of satisfaction: “I have spoken and been spoken to, touched and been touched. Therefore I am more than just the trace of these words passing through my head on their way from nowhere to nowhere” (ibid. 69-70). In this encounter, Magda seems to have found a measure of the recognition and human contact she has been looking for, but it is just a taste, moreover, her deep longing for the recognition that has been denied her all of her life has taken on pathological dimensions; it does not seem to matter what form that recognition takes, positive or punitive, so long as it allows her to feel sufficiently substantiated. Having, at least temporarily, forgone the idea of the motherly embrace, Magda has instead opted for the fist of the father to prove to her that she is a body

with definite contours, one that feels pain thus confirming that “I am I” (ibid. 67), and not an ethereal, non-signifying, babble of words in her head, or on a page.

A comprehensible object in light of the Other’s ungraspable alterity, the body is, in fact, one of Magda’s greatest obsessions and much of her narrative is concerned with its, particularly unglamorous, mechanics including blood, sweat, and excrement - functions that civilization politely disdains but in which Magda, who compares herself to an insect, seems to, on a certain level, revel. The figure of the father, “the tower with eyes”, begins to take on more human proportions after Magda’s second patricidal episode in which she fatally shoots him in the chest; his suffering body becomes at least predictable to Magda who, unable to read him, has fantasies of self-annihilation by “creep[ing] through the honeycomb of your bones” (ibid. 88) to her cellular place of origin and start life anew. In shooting her father, however, Magda has subverted the master dialectic once again and this time it is her father who is reduced to a mere child, dying whilst “sitting in a pool of blood like a baby that has wet itself” (ibid. 84). With the dark father now dead and buried, his “eternal NO” has been silenced, but not, as Magda shortly discovers, nullified.

2.3 The Irreducible Other

With the absence of the father, Magda once again attempts to drop the master dialogue and turns toward the so-called subordinate Other; she invites Hendrik and Klein-Anna to move into the house with her to keep her company. By this invitation, Magda seems genuinely interested in attempting to meet Hendrik and Klein-Anna on relatively equal terms, in breaking with the “sterile monoculturality” (Viola 133) under which she (or rather – they all) has been raised. However, circumstances, the deep almost ineradicable etches of a long history of injustice, are simply at that point, incommensurate to this task. Magda proves that she still speaks the language of the master when she calls Hendrik a “damned hotnot” in a fit of anger; and Hendrik and Klein-Anna maintain the servant’s script, refusing, despite her insistence, to call Magda by name, doggedly referring to her instead as “miss”, even long after the power dynamics between them have drastically shifted.

Magda's desire for intimacy, thus, does not neatly translate into a relationship of equality, and Hendrik and Klein-Anna have, in fact, been the focus of Magda's prying, appropriative, inconstant imagination both long before and long after the father's second murder. Ultimately, the dispassionate master has merely been replaced by an impassioned mistress. Following a passage in which she details Hendrik's most intimate family and future wishes, Magda almost provokingly asserts, "I know nothing of Hendrik" (*In the Heart of the Country* 30). And, in an effort to escape from her own tortured existence, Magda imagines inhabiting Klein-Anna, "my skull in the benign quiet of her skull where images of soap and flour and milk revolve, the holes of my body sliding into place over the holes of hers, there to wait mindlessly for whatever enters them" (ibid. 135). The vision Magda constructs of Klein-Anna's "benign" inner-being is almost too transparently self-serving; it is a hollowing out of her body, turning her into a gross oversimplification so that Anna may dumbly continue to serve – this time as a place of refuge for the white mistress. This idea is continued with Magda's awkward attempts at sisterly affection with Klein-Anna by crawling into bed with her (after sending Hendrik away on an errand – the strategy of the father) in a forced embrace. This scene is tinged with the same eerie eroticism present in Magda's earlier naked imploration to the stepmother, only Klein-Anna, without Hendrik present, is in not in any real position to deny Magda, a fact that Magda seems perfectly willing to take advantage of for the satiation of her shallow comfort.

The relationship between Magda, Anna, and Hendrik, ensnared as it is in the master/slave dynamic of their corrupted country, is thus doomed to discord. Hendrik assumes the recently vacated role of the master and begins raping Magda, who tries to take a human lesson from his abuse: "I would like to sleep in his arms ... but that is not what he wants" (ibid. 137) only to discover that, like the masterful father before him, Hendrik's "face is growing more obscure to me every day" (ibid. 138). Finding her situation just as desperate, if not more so, than when the father was alive, being no closer to the reconciliation she seeks, Magda is once again beset by bloodlust and imagines murdering Hendrik with the shotgun. The paternal language, then, is so embedded in Magda that her clumsy efforts at creating unity beget only alienation; she cannot truly know Hendrik and Klein-Anna who "might as well be on separate planets" (ibid. 34) and her attempts at intimacy, whether physical or

mental, remain tainted by the injunction of the “eternal NO” that still so palpably, painfully resounds between them all.

2.4 Conclusion: A Gilded Cage

The end of the novel witnesses the return of the father, only now, according to Magda, many years have passed and she is herself “a mad old bad old woman” (ibid. 153). The father, who shows no signs of life except for the occasional dribble of saliva (which might actually be the tea she incessantly pours down his throat), is no longer the towering and imperious figure he once was and, completely debilitated, if not actually dead, has lapsed into complete silence. André Viola writes that (that father) “being deprived of speech (he) can no longer utter the ‘no’ which defined and constricted Magda’s life. The book therefore closes with silence on all fronts, which seems to imply that Magda has reached a point where she can escape the pressures of the Symbolic” (Viola 130). And, indeed, the pressure is, in a sense, entirely off; in her forced, and failed, attempts at creating intimacy with resistant Others, Magda has effectively killed, or chased off, the few human beings with whom she had ever had any kind of, or chance at, meaningful contact. Magda is now entirely alone in her world, and the last few pages of the novel exhibit a tone of melancholic peace with her sitting by her dead/invalid father feeling “corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world” (ibid. 172) and the African landscape in particular. It is a landscape, however, which inspires her to want to write poetry of the patriotic, and therefore, patriarchic variety. Magda has resigned herself to the now masterless quiet of the farm, ostensibly free from the paternal dialogue, but there is a rather disconcerting irony lurking behind her last words when she states that “I have never felt myself to be another man’s creature ... I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout” (ibid.); words that immediately draw the reader’s attention to the man behind the curtain, one might say Magda’s true father, who conceived of her and filled/fed her with his alienating language “of hierarchy, of distance and perspective” (ibid. 120) - the true master of her agency: Magda was always Coetzee’s creature. Secure in her delusion of autonomy Magda’s narrative ends, only the reader is there to confirm her

suspicious that the father figure endures, “still (lying) here breathing, waiting for his nourishment” (ibid. 171).

Chapter 3

Waiting for the Barbarians

If *In the Heart of the Country* was concerned with exploring the certain futility of forcibly accessing the Other across racial and gender divides, *Waiting for the Barbarians* investigates the, perhaps even unconscious, role of the self in relation to the suffering Other, whose pain is challenging to that self. Similarly to *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is set at a considerable remove from any kind of grand metropolis. Almost the entirety of the novel takes place within the confines of a remote frontier settlement which is situated less in the middle-of-nowhere (like Magda's farm) and more on the outskirts-of-somewhere – that somewhere being the vast Empire, the beacon of civilization, under which the settlement, among many others, is governed. In the desert wilds just beyond the settlement's walls live not only the peaceful yet uncivilized fisherfolk, but the allegedly brutal and bloodthirsty barbarians whom the Empire has branded as enemies of the state. Fearing an impending barbarian attack, special agents of the Empire are dispatched to the settlement to capture many barbarian people and force them, through the use of torture, into providing information about their tribe's (supposed) martial intentions. Recalling Coetzee's article quoted in the introductory section of this thesis, one might conjecture that this novel is his attempt at "imagin[ing] torture and death on [his] own terms" (Coetzee "Into the Dark Chamber"). Importantly, the narrator of the novel, known simply as the Magistrate, bears trace resemblances to the author as a white male intellectual in a position of some authority. In creating a main character who is certainly different, yet not wholly removed from, himself, Coetzee seems to want to assume the responsibility for the "Orphic descent" that both he and his character are preparing to make, into the dark realm of the Other. The Magistrate is not, however, merely Coetzee's second self and should not be read or interpreted as such.

While technically a servant of the Empire, the Magistrate has spent his entire life at its borders, on the remote settlement; he has thus experienced the same wild seasons the barbarians do and is for this reason (his relative proximity to nature) perhaps best able to foster a certain respect for their rough way of life, even if he ultimately prefers the idler comforts of a sedentary life on the settlement. The arrival of the Empire's agents however forces the Magistrate into a crisis of

conscience when he observes that their, unprovoked, methods aimed at so-called self-preservation violently intrude upon the being of another.

It is precisely this intrusion into otherness that *Waiting for the Barbarians*, through the eyes of the Magistrate, wishes to explore. If, as Levinas suggests, the Other remains fundamentally unknowable, this chapter follows the question: what does one gain through pointless attempts at penetration? Although the Magistrate balks at the idea of torture, he nonetheless finds himself fascinated with all parties involved; the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Not having the stomach for violence, the Magistrate wishes to demystify the process by attempting to inhabit the mind of the torturer in pursuit of his truth. He is similarly concerned with the plight of the victim of torture and, trying to get to the heart of the experience, takes a maimed barbarian woman into his home only to subject her to a second round of (failed) interrogations, albeit with a gentler touch. Wanting to enter each world but finding them resistant to his efforts, he betrays both; becoming first torturer then victim himself, one might say that, in a perverse way, he got what he was looking for, and yet the end of the novel is almost a complete reset to the beginning. The players have all returned to their corners, yet none are quite the same as before; the Magistrate is reinstated as magistrate of the settlement (though disillusioned), the barbarian woman is returned to her people (scarred for life), the agents have retreated back to the capital (considerably weakened), the Empire stands, albeit more shaken and more exposed in the Magistrate's eyes now that he has not only seen but felt the horrors employed for its supposed benefit – by the Other inside, against the Other outside, the gates.

3.1 Other as Torturer: Pain is Truth

The Magistrate's first ethical confrontation with the wounding Other occurs at the very beginning of the novel, which opens with him acting as host to Colonel Joll, the newly arrived agent of the Empire, an important figure belonging to the Third Bureau, which the Magistrate describes as being "the most important division of the Civil Guard nowadays" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 2). Joll has been dispatched to the settlement to investigate the rumors of barbarian unrest that have been emanating

from the capital. The Magistrate, who has “not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times” (ibid. 8), is instinctively discomfited by Joll’s presence, not merely for the fact that he is “here under the emergency powers” (ibid. 1), thus rupturing the Magistrate’s easy “quiet times”, but Joll is also quite individually puzzling as well; he covers his eyes with dark sunglasses and wears them at all times, even indoors, and both speaks and acts with a bureaucratic efficiency that obscures both thought and expression. Joll is, furthermore, a torturer – a breed of man that is fundamentally alien to the placid Magistrate on his “lazy frontier”. In a rather Levinasian encounter, Joll’s sudden presence in his life shocks the Magistrate into an uncomfortable awareness of the infelicitous side of imperial law; that his comfort and easy living come at a not inconsiderable price to those who live outside of that so-called law (i.e., the Empire), those who live out in the wilds and must therefore be wild themselves, uncivilized and almost inhuman – barbarians, the automatic enemy of the Empire, who must be sought out and annihilated, for the sake of civilization.

It is a civilization that the Magistrate wishes to (continue to) believe in, only now, the implicitly threatening presence of Colonel Joll and the “uncleanness” of his profession, have triggered a curiosity in the Magistrate facing his newfound, in a sense torturously, uneasy morality concerning the beings of wounded Others. After, at first, having tried to block his ears from the sounds of torture coming from the granary (the improvised torture chamber on the settlement), the Magistrate quickly realizes the all too convenient rejection of responsibility evidenced in his claim that life and its associated noises “[do] not cease because somewhere someone is crying” (ibid. 5). Joll has exposed the Magistrate to the cries of the wounded Other; once heard, the Magistrate can no longer live entirely idly. Not only does the Magistrate trespass into the granary at night to examine the scenes of torture and offer what relief he can to one of the still living victims (a young barbarian boy), but, in an attempt to decipher the stoic man behind the dark glasses –wanting to know, for example, what motivates him, what drives his dispassionate cruelty, and, perhaps, also hoping to open up a debate that might facilitate a change of heart in the impassive officer– he begins openly questioning Colonel Joll himself.

Torture, as it seems to the Empire, is tantamount to the pursuit of truth, of forcing the truth out of someone unwilling to give it under any other circumstances. The Magistrate, however, wishes to know how an interrogator can be sure, beyond the shadow of a doubt, when a prisoner being pressured to yield confesses the truth. The answer, according to Joll, lies in the tone of the confession; when one has hit the right tone, one has told the truth. Yet, there is a script to be followed before that tone is inevitably reached; Joll states that “First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth” (ibid.). To Joll, truth-seeking is an exact science, and the truth that is told is absolute. However, Michael Valdez Moses writes that “the only truth which Joll can conceivably extract from the body of the tortured is precisely that ‘verity’ he has projected into or onto the blank space of the victim” (Valdez Moses 121). That is, the Empire writes/imposes its own truth upon the beings/bodies of its Others, substantiating itself by carving them into the history of its dominion. The Empire’s Others are “blank spaces” because of their alien unknowability (the Empire, therefore, assimilates them by inscribing itself onto their bodies, scarred and maimed by torture), they threaten the Empire precisely by not needing it, by living beyond it, while the Empire itself is very much dependent on the barbarian “resistance” or “aggression” (which the Empire inevitably, eventually, provokes through too much prodding) not only to demarcate and enforce its borders, but also to justify its very existence as law, the righteous defender of civilization.

Unfortunately for the Empire, the barbarians do not seem to be overly interested in the spoils of its civilization; the rumors of unrest, notably, come from the capital which seems to be the area of the Empire most insulated from any barbarian activity. The Magistrate is himself skeptical of the legitimacy of these rumors as, in all of his years on the frontier with the barbarians living practically in his backyard, so to speak, he has never experienced any direct tension with them. Fear of the barbarians is real, but according to the Magistrate, the “episode[s] of hysteria” which occur “once in every generation, without fail” are simply “the consequence of too much ease” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 9). That is, only when life becomes too comfortable, and perhaps too predictable, are people afforded the leisure to indulge in their fantasies of fear. The Empire, riding the crest of this

new wave of paranoid panic, and seeing that the barbarians are themselves disinclined to play their part in its history by taking any kind of offensive action against its regime, aims to realize this largely imagined threat by bringing it within its own walls by force; soldiers of the state are sent out on an expedition to scout the area for barbarian activity and capture any suspicious looking peoples (the definition of suspicious being as simple as happening not to be an imperial subject) for interrogation.

The Magistrate, confronted with the dozens of prisoners captured and eventually tortured by Colonel Joll and his men, shaken by the knowledge of what is being done to these people in the darkness of the granary, finds himself suffering inwardly as well: “once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering” (ibid. 23). Once again, he tries to spare himself by blotting out the faces of the prisoners in the yard and going about his daily duties as if nothing were amiss, even spending several nights with a local prostitute in an attempt to get away from “the empire of pain” (ibid. 24) surrounding him. It is the Magistrate, however, who is left to handle the aftermath of Joll’s inquisition after the latter returns to the capital. After freeing the prisoners, the Magistrate reflects that it “would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once” (ibid. 26); he imagines taking Joll’s terrified and damaged victims and wiping the slate clean by murdering them all somewhere out in the desert, then returning to the settlement, the Empire, with a clean slate, to start anew “full of new intentions, new resolutions” (ibid.). And yet it is men like Joll who, in the Magistrate’s mind, truly believe in “fresh starts” and “clean pages” whereas the Magistrate himself claims to believe in “the old story”, presumably that of the easy life relatively devoid of conflict he had led (that is, the life of Levinas’ egoistical subject) prior to Joll’s unwelcome and unnerving interruption. The Magistrate, with his insistence on the “old story”, is, however, conveniently overlooking the archaeological ruins just outside of his own town; the empty homes of a long-departed people whose history remains frustratingly obscure to him (who occupies his free time by excavating them from the devouring desert sands). It is not inconceivable that the Magistrate’s “old story” finds its roots in this ghost town, in the gutted homes of a once thriving civilization atop which his own settlement now triumphantly stands. The cruelties of the Empire are thus not a degeneration effected by the “new” men such as Joll, rather, they are, and always were, part and parcel to the entire imperial

system as such, which “locate[s] its existence ... in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe” (ibid. 146).

3.2 Other as Victim: Secret Bodies

After many long days of almost ceaseless interrogations, the agents of the Empire return to their beloved capital to make their reports, and the Magistrate is again in full control of his settlement albeit none the more enlightened about any impending barbarian invasion. He notices an apparently blind and clearly crippled barbarian woman begging in the street, a leftover from Joll’s inquisition, and takes her in, hiring her as a scullery-maid. An ostensibly charitable act with a rather insidious agenda which both the Magistrate and the woman recognize immediately: “She understands what I am offering. She sits very stiff, her hands in her lap” (ibid. 28), the Magistrate, for his part, trying to ease her mind by disclaiming his guilt, “‘This is not what you think it is,’ I say. The words come reluctantly. Can I really be about to excuse myself?” (ibid. 29). The perversity of the Magistrate’s fascination with the marred barbarian woman, while certainly physical, does not however prove to be entirely sexual in nature; he is most attracted to the parts of her body that bear the most evident traces of the torturer’s touch, namely, her broken ankles and semi-blinded eyes. He begins what he comes to call “the ritual of the washing”, a nightly occurrence initially focusing on the washing of the woman’s deformed feet but which quickly escalates to the entirety of her body. While erotically charged, the washing scenes prove to have an anti-erotic effect on the Magistrate who “feel[s] no desire to enter this stocky little body” (ibid. 32); this intimate contact with the barbarian woman’s body rather has a soporific effect on the Magistrate who, in the middle of his administrations, is consistently overcome by sudden blank intervals of sleep. Susan Van Zanten Gallagher writes that with this nightly ritual the Magistrate “seems to be trying to absolve himself of the guilt he feels for having allowed the torture to take place” but the uncomfortable correlation to this possible act of penance is the fact that “he also is attempting to penetrate her secret being, to find her deepest and most hidden feelings” (Van Zanten Gallagher 283).

The Magistrate, in fact, is conducting an inquest of his own with the barbarian woman by continuously asking her to divulge the details of her torture, concluding that “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 33). However, like the ancient wooden slips found in the aforementioned archeological ruins which display the markings of an ancient script that the Magistrate has spent countless hours trying to decode in vain, the barbarian woman remains completely, fundamentally, unreadable/impenetrable. The rather blunt reticence with which she faces his questioning both disconcerts and provokes the Magistrate further into his destructive desire for her truth; in time, he acknowledges feeling a pang of pity for her torturers: “how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!”, not cancelling out the possibility that he is himself of their league, “I behave in some ways like a lover – I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her – but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate” (ibid. 46).

Under the pressure of the Magistrate’s constant questioning and nightly probing, the barbarian woman (who is never named; evidently, this is one question the Magistrate never asks) does eventually, to use Colonel Joll’s expression, “break”; she breaks her silence on the subject and provides the Magistrate with the disturbing details of her torture. Her account is succinct, strictly adhering to the material facts of the event – which instruments were used and how, and yet the Magistrate remains dissatisfied; wanting more, he pushes further, pressing the woman for more information – he wants to know what she feels towards the men who tortured her, which, considering the Magistrate’s own observation that “The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible” (ibid. 29), is tantamount to asking her for a confession wherein he himself stands as a central figure to a truth that he seems more intent not on extracting from, but rather instilling within her. The woman is a featureless blank to the Magistrate who cannot recall, despite his efforts, what she looked like prior to the interrogations, and never seems to be able to fully grasp her image even afterwards, describing her as being “incomplete”; Debra Castillo writes that “The Magistrate does not notice her or find her significant until she is marked by the scars of his own people” (Castillo 88).

To the Magistrate, the “alien” woman’s scars represent the beginning of a potentially readable history. Viewing them as something to be “deciphered and understood” the Magistrate is implicitly aligning himself with Colonel Joll and his assertion that “pain is truth”; the scars are a script filling in the “blank space” of the barbarian woman giving her content, and are therefore, in their own way, meaningful. The scars remain, however, the language of the Empire, they encroach upon the body but ultimately have no bearing on the truth of the Other, who comes from beyond. The Levinasian challenge of the barbarian (as well as imperial) Other is thus her uninterpretable blankness, yet the Magistrate fails in the face of her infinity; gazing into her maimed eyes, which, like Joll’s sunglasses, form a type of barrier to her inner-being, he sees only the “twin reflections of myself [staring] solemnly back” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 44); that is, faced with an Other, whether barbarian or imperial, who does not reveal him/herself, the Magistrate can only attempt to “decipher” them by, as Valdez Moses also observes, projecting something of himself onto their blank spaces. Moreover, despite the fact that the barbarian woman never seems to take a definite shape in the Magistrate’s mind, the thought of existing only on the periphery of her field of vision (and perhaps in a larger context, figuring only in the margin -if at all- of her life) is disconcerting to him; “Am I to believe that gazing back at me she sees nothing – my feet perhaps, parts of the room, a hazy circle of light, but at the centre, where I am, only a blur, a blank?” (ibid. 33). He is here again assuming a central position in the woman’s life, this time placing himself at the center of her sight (even though she is often looking elsewhere), neglecting the fact that when she does wish to regard him she can only do so by turning her head away from him, decentering him, relegating him to the dreaded periphery – where he, to her, truly appears most intact.

3.3 To Infinity

After a time, the Magistrate resolves to return the barbarian woman, the Other whose challenge is growing increasingly burdensome, to her people. This decision follows an episode in which the woman, during one of the nightly rituals, makes a sexual advance on the Magistrate which he turns

down. His rejection shatters the normally composed and impassive comportment of the woman who breaks out into tears, knowing full well that the Magistrate sleeps with other women. With the renewed realization that the woman is just as much a prisoner under his own custody as that of her torturers, the Magistrate puts an end to the washing ritual and begins making plans for their departure into the desert, the home of the barbarians. On the one hand, the gesture is, seemingly, magnanimous; an attempt to right a wrong by giving the woman at least a measure of the freedom she once had amongst her own people. On the other hand, the Magistrate's decision comes too close to the woman's breakdown, that is, the revelation of an entirely recognizable human emotion that causes him to see that the woman is perhaps "More ordinary than I like to think" (ibid. 61). She is a barbarian but she is also human, and the Magistrate's obsessive efforts at penetrating into, invading, her deepest inner being will inevitably produce the universal cries of a body, or soul, in pain, which so unnerve him. Faced with the absolute vulnerability of his suffering "prisoner", the Magistrate wishes to nullify not her challenge (which is the challenge of the irreducible Other), but rather his responsibility to that challenge; after the arduous and life-threatening journey through the desert, as he stands on the brink of delivering her back unto her people, the Magistrate tells the woman that he wants her to return to the town with him "Of your own choice" (ibid. 77). What he is essentially asking for is her willful submission, which would, if granted, relieve him of the uncomfortable correlation he feels between his own incessant probing and that of the torture chamber. Not surprisingly, the wounded woman opts for a life in the desert.

3.4 Conclusion: A Lesson in History

The journey into the desert, crossing the borders into the land of the prescribed enemies of the Empire, is not entirely without a lesson, albeit a perverse one. The Magistrate's transgression of imperial boundaries causes him to return to the settlement with the mark of the Other upon him; he is relieved of his post as magistrate and kept in confinement by the "new barbarians" who have recently arrived from the capital to start their offensive against the enemy outside the gates. The Magistrate is content

with his new situation, considering that his “alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over” (ibid. 85); he believes that he has successfully severed any ties that could be said to link him with the likes of Colonel Joll and his men. However, his “easy” confinement eventually degenerates into the brutal reality of the torture chamber that had so fascinated him previously. Once an arbiter of the law, now a victim of that selfsame system, the Magistrate is forced to recognize that there is nothing inherently just about imperial justice. Instead, as Michael Valdez Moses observes, “the law does not delimit the use of power; rather, power ultimately defines the meaning of the law and circumscribes the realm in which it applies” (Valdez Moses 119). The law upon which the Empire’s civilization is built, is simply a “tool” to be invoked or exceeded by those who possess the power to do so; as such, it is as arbitrary as the forced distinction between the humanity of the civilized man and that of the barbarian.

The Magistrate, indignant at the Third Bureau’s callous treatment of both the (newly) captured barbarians and himself, as well as its shady insistence on a barbarian threat that only concretely manifests itself when provoked, confronts Colonel Joll by telling him that “*You are the enemy! You have made the war ... History will bear me out!*” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 125). Joll simply replies that “There will be no history, the affair is too trivial” (ibid.). ‘The affair’ being the capture and senseless torture of scores of people who have nothing to confess, whose confessions in a sense do not even matter as much as the malicious marking of their bodies, a type of brand that both identifies and subjugates the state’s so-called enemies; ‘the history’ being, naturally, the surviving record of events. Joll’s lesson to the Magistrate is powerfully simple: just as power defines the law, so too does power shape history. And the history of the Empire is its perseverance in self-preservation; knowing that imperial rule is locked into the “jagged time of rise and fall” (ibid. 146), the Empire is constantly casting a paranoid eye into the desert, looking for the inevitable enemy who will arrive to topple its reign. When none present themselves timely, the Empire will, of necessity, write them in anyway, as the imperial officers in the novel unambiguously demonstrate by physically writing the word ‘ENEMY’ on the naked backs of a group of captured and utterly helpless barbarian people, thus using their bodies, their lives, for the Empire’s own delimiting purposes.

The blatant manipulation of history, of the Empire carving itself into the vulnerable Other, outrages the Magistrate yet also awakens in him a deeper realization about his own conduct with the wounded barbarian woman whose body he had also been using with a disturbingly similar purpose; “Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply” (ibid. 148), that is, to mark her as his own by filling in her blank spaces with his history. Despite his awareness of the dubiousness, and certain destructiveness, inherent to the written record, the Magistrate - restored to his post after the men of the Third Bureau, defeated by the desert, stumble back to the safety of the capital - nonetheless undertakes to “set down a record of settlement to be left for posterity” (ibid. 168). He does not, however, leave an embittered account of the Empire’s inglorious actions during its so-called state of emergency. Instead, he cloaks his rough desert settlement in an idyllic beauty: “No one who paid a visit to this oasis...failed to be struck by the charm of life here...This was paradise on earth” (ibid. 168-169). The Magistrate, a subject of the Empire despite being awakened to its darker dealings, is also imbued with the imperial gaze; he, too, scans the horizon for signs of the catastrophe that will effect the end of an era, one in which he lived and had a role, thus one that he does not wish to be forgotten entirely, but rather misremembered as it should, but never truly could, have been.

Imperial paradise is thus, by the end of the novel, an exposed myth which the Magistrate recognizes, having been condemned to its hell, yet continues to propagate despite the fact that it only serves to underscore the threat of the Other who, being a barbarian (so the story goes), is less concerned with assimilation into the coveted culture, than with its total annihilation. A moral impasse develops; even if one were to try to live “decently” by throwing open the town gates to the mistreated barbarians (who, according to the Magistrate, would taste the town’s mulberry jam and never want to leave), what would that lead to but simply a different regime, a new chapter in history with its own injustices (which may or may not be committed to the page). Coetzee cannot and does not attempt to solve the problem of history by illuminating the way to a true earthly paradise. The Magistrate could not mediate between Others of opposing factions and consistently felt himself to be operating on the

side of the “enemy”, whether imperial or barbarian. The novel, then, enacts the brutal reality, the impossibility in fact, of the Levinasian challenge to the self; the unfulfillable demands of innumerable Others (some of whom may in fact be, or at least resemble, monsters themselves). The Magistrate gives up in the end and chooses a side, fully aware that the barbarians are not the natural enemies of the state that the Empire claims them to be. His decision to return to the comforts of imperial life is on some level quite understandable, however, with this choice he is also opting for the history of the Empire, that is, that of rise and fall, including the inevitable catastrophe which is to be his grim legacy to the, presently innocent, children of the settlement, and of the Empire as a whole.

Chapter 4

Elizabeth Costello

An unconventional novel composed of eight “lessons” which often do not seem to have any obvious or immediate relation to one another, *Elizabeth Costello* follows the later literary career of the aging eponymous character, Elizabeth Costello. The fictional Elizabeth, an Australian novelist of some repute with “a small critical industry” (*Elizabeth Costello* 1) surrounding her work, made a name for herself earlier on in her career with her fourth novel, *The House on Eccles Street*, a heavy intertextual engagement with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which focuses on the -previously sequestered- character of Marion Bloom, “turn[ing] her loose” on the streets of Dublin. Of the many books Elizabeth has written to date, *The House on Eccles Street* is the only one that is ever explicitly named and briefly outlined in the novel, often to her own consternation, and yet it does serve to illustrate the rather compelling ethical concerns of its creator; to venture into foreign territory (here, Joyce’s “world”, his fictional Dublin) and, through an imaginative effort, to inhabit that world and the characters that move within it, not merely providing a different angle to the story but facilitating a new movement as well – Elizabeth releases Marion from the conjugal home. Elizabeth’s feminist rewriting, or reimagining, of *Ulysses* can thus be interpreted as her attempt at challenging or setting straight Joyce’s vision of a woman, an Other whom he himself certainly inhabited to a degree in his writing of her. Interestingly, it is Coetzee, of course, who is inhabiting Elizabeth Costello as she criticizes this canonized representation of a woman, suggesting perhaps an awareness that his own attempts at embodying the female Other may very well be, in their own right, equally as suspect or misrepresentative.

The “sympathetic imagination” thus forms the backbone of Elizabeth’s ethical approach not just to fiction writing but to the world at large, a world wherein suffering is so commonplace as to be practically banal, particularly to those who consider themselves to be “uninvolved”. Through many of the novel’s “lessons”, which often take the form of lectures given by Elizabeth followed by a round of critical discussion on said lectures, Elizabeth wishes to challenge the perceived complacency of her (academic) audiences who, like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, may be living their lives too uncritically, that is, without bothering to examine what it is that makes their comfort possible, or

what their particular habits mean for *others*. In line with Levinas, these Others, to Elizabeth, present a challenge to the egotistical self which, by nature, wishes to negate their alterity either through assimilation or annihilation. However, Elizabeth responds to the challenge of the Other in an anti-Levinasian maneuver, through an attempted embodiment, that is, by imagining her way into both the body and world of the Other, an act that presupposes that one can, in a sense, know the Other and, through this intimate knowledge of his being, which may include his suffering, feel compassion for his plight. To Elizabeth, then, it is not the Levinasian face-to-face, but the suffering body that attests to the Other's vulnerability, impelling one to ethical action. Importantly, Elizabeth also moves beyond Levinas by including the suffering animal body into her realm of ethical considerations. The idea of the sympathetic imagination, however, is not without its complications, as Elizabeth discovers; this chapter will trace Elizabeth's arguments both for and against the use of the imagination, particularly in a literary context, in inhabiting and representing an Other whose unknowability may in fact prove destructive to the self who has ventured perhaps too far out into hostile terrain.

4.1 Against Reason: An Ethics of the Heart

In one of the most cited chapters of Coetzee's novel, entitled "The Lives of Animals", Elizabeth travels to the fictional Appleton College in the United States, where her son John works as a professor of physics and astronomy, to "deliver the annual Gates Lecture and meet with literature students" (ibid. 60). She is given the possibility to speak on any subject she chooses and, instead of opting for the more conventional route by offering a lecture on her own literature, Elizabeth elects to talk about what John refers to as her "hobbyhorse", that is, animals. A somewhat shallow reading of Elizabeth's lecture might reduce it to an impassioned defense of animal rights. However, the lecture in fact proves to be deeply concerned with the nature of "rights", as a philosophical discourse, to begin with. Elizabeth Susan Anker observes that "Rights are often criticized for being exclusionary and premised on gendered, racialized, class-based, and other hierarchies and divisions" (Anker 169); the fundamental questions where the allotment of rights is concerned are thus - who deserves to be

protected, and to what extent (the implication being that even within the human model there exist those who are simply less deserving, that is, less worth protecting)? Elizabeth's lecture seeks to problematize the rights discourse, which depends heavily on the language of philosophy, by exposing its, in her mind, faulty foundations.

Elizabeth opens her lecture by citing the horrors that occurred within the Third Reich's concentration camps, the millions of deaths that were being carried out within reasonable proximity to regular civilian life. She mentions the villagers who had been living around Treblinka who claimed that they "did not know" what was going on inside the camp, relating their response to that of most of the people living so close to such horrors that they "could not afford to know, for their own sake" (*Elizabeth Costello* 64) what was going on in the dark chambers all around them. Here, she draws a parallel to the horrors of the slaughterhouse where animals are bred to be tortured and ultimately butchered for consumption, accusing her audience of the same kind of moral negligence concerning suffering animals as exhibited by the people of Treblinka, who likewise turned a blind eye to the human suffering around them. The analogy is, according to Elizabeth herself, a "cheap" one, but it is not without a core of disconcerting truth; almost every living body has experienced some degree of pain, wishes to be protected from any further painful sensations and demands that others respect this desire, whence the notion of human rights. Elizabeth, however, questions this privileging of the human (or rather, certain types of human, as the Jews were themselves dehumanized by the Nazis as a justification for the cruelties to which they were subjected) who, it is assumed in the various philosophical traditions of, for example, St Thomas, Plato, and Descartes, "is made in the image of God and partakes in the being of God" (*ibid.* 67); this "being of God" being, inevitably, reason, as "God is a God of reason" (*ibid.*). Man's ability to reason then is, according to the reasoning of philosophy, what makes him "godlike" while animals are merely "thinglike". The corollary to this pronouncement is that man is inherently more deserving of ethical consideration than animals, who may not in fact be worthy of much, if any, consideration at all.

Reason, to Elizabeth, is however neither essentially divine nor that which constitutes the fabric of the universe:

On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought. Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking. And if this is so, if that is what I believe, then why should I bow to reason this afternoon and content myself with embroidering on the discourse of the old philosophers? (ibid.)

A break with the intellectual tradition of the “old philosophers” is necessary if one wishes to approach the problem of suffering with an ethics that does not merely reinforce power structures. To reason then, Elizabeth opposes “fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being” (ibid. 78) all of which are achieved or activated through use of what she terms the sympathetic imagination. The beginning of an ethical relationship with another sentient creature, be it a human or nonhuman animal, according to Elizabeth, is to imagine oneself in the other’s shoes, to inhabit his body, which is alive to the world, and move and feel as he does. This embodiment means, in a sense, to open oneself up and allow oneself to be possessed by the Other which is a sensation that Elizabeth claims is best bodied forth by the most gifted of poets; speaking of reading Ted Hughes’ poem “The Jaguar” she states that “we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us” (ibid. 98). That is, through inhabiting the jaguar, one is in turn inhabited by him; it is a rather intimate encounter with the Other from which one emerges not only full of the “sensation of being” of the Other, but also, similarly to the Levinasian face-to-face, with an acute awareness of his corporeal vulnerability. This vulnerability, Elizabeth argues, is shared equally by all embodied beings and is precisely that which should compel one to act ethically with regard to the being of others, including animals, whose lives do not somehow matter less because they may not have first “tak[en] a course in philosophy” (ibid. 111).

4.2 Censorship and the Soul

The sixth chapter of the novel, entitled “The Problem of Evil”, bears witness to a significant revision of Elizabeth’s faith in the ultimate good of the sympathetic imagination. Here, she is once again

preparing for a lecture, this time to be given on the aforementioned “problem of evil”. The main source of inspiration for the lecture she will be giving happens to be a work of literature she has recently finished reading; a (real world) novel written by (real world author) Paul West called *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*. West’s novel is categorized as historical fiction, following a disillusioned Wehrmacht officer through a failed assassination attempt on Hitler’s life. The officer, Count von Stauffenberg, is fatally shot immediately after the attempt but remains present in the story as a ghost, continuing to act as narrator, sparing no detail as his fellow plotters are caught, taken prisoner, and eventually brutally murdered. The intricately detailed execution scene proves to be too much for Elizabeth who is shocked and nauseated at the novel’s, in her mind, vulgar intrusion into the deaths of these men, claiming that “Their last hours belong to them alone, they are not ours to enter and possess” (ibid. 174) – a statement which seems to admit to the (at least potentially) appropriative violence of imaginative embodiment, which, to Elizabeth, should suddenly be delimited where *human beings* are concerned. Furthermore, she believes that such “terrible men” as the hangman who did Hitler’s bidding should not “be hauled out of the grave when we thought he was safely dead” (ibid. 168). Elizabeth’s lecture, then, focuses on these perceived infractions of Paul West, who “ventured into the darker territories of the soul” (ibid. 160) and returned tainted by the devil, consequently releasing evil into the world (and into herself as well) through his novel.

If Elizabeth’s idea of the sympathetic imagination focused primarily on embodying victims of some kind of oppression previously, at this point in the novel she is confronted with its application where the perpetrators are concerned; what does it mean to enter into the being of an evildoer? If writers/poets possess the ability to turn one, however briefly, into a jaguar for sympathetic effect, what, then, is their ethical obligation towards the “ming[ling] [of] breath and sense” necessary for embodying/representing a murderer, who is just as much an Other? Being “no longer sure that people are always improved by what they read” (ibid. 160), Elizabeth’s newest convictions call for a ban on evil through censorship; that, where evil is concerned, writers should hold their silence, should avoid the “darker territories”, that is, avoid inhabiting wrongdoers and thereby opening themselves up to be inhabited by the devil. One wonders, however, how the figure of the jaguar, which Elizabeth insists

can be inhabited, manages to escape this edict; as natural hunters, jaguars, too, are killers in their own right, they, too, might toy with their prey awhile before finishing it off. In inhabiting a jaguar, the sensations of blood and (of causing) pain and death are thus equally as present, and perhaps even equally as thrilling, as they are for the hellish hangman. Elizabeth is here thus affording a certain privilege to the human killer (as she ultimately does to the human victim) thereby underestimating the “darker territories” of the (nonhuman) animal’s “soul”, which can prove to be just as grisly, and therefore just as injurious to the inquisitive party.

Literature, then, allows access to the Other who is, in turn, allowed access to the reader. Michael Marais writes that (Coetzee’s works) “[seem] to claim for literature an ethical potential that derives from the fact that the act of writing establishes a relation with alterity in which the writing subject is altered” (Marais “Impossible Possibilities” 16). Elizabeth Costello extends this idea to the act of reading as well, which takes one beyond the Levinasian face (that which interrupts and commands *without* force); reading is thus not merely an encounter with the Other but an embodied experience, exposing one to the pulsating core of the Other’s alterity – one is touched by the Other and is thus oneself irrevocably altered. Where Levinas describes one’s encounter with the Other as “shocking”, Elizabeth, rather, views the touch of the Other as necessarily wounding; when one inhabits a victim, one is forced into his suffering as well; when inhabiting an oppressor, one can only helplessly raise the whip or tighten the noose along with him, committing such vile acts that their traces, too, become painfully embedded in one’s being.

There is, in fact, something rather sadomasochistic in Elizabeth’s evaluation of reading/embodiment in that, to her, it is an experience that is both horrifying and perversely entertaining (in fact, she does refer to herself early on in the novel not so much as a “writer” but as an “entertainer”). A reader may be moved to sympathy for, for example, the caged jaguar, but he also, however privately, thrills in the new sensations of this “alien” animal body; that same damning curiosity compels one into the body of the unholy hangman, who moves one, one way or another, as well. Reading, then, becomes, at least in part, a type of intellectual slumming and writing is, likewise, “a form of moral adventurousness” which “has the potential to be dangerous” (*Elizabeth Costello*

162). One can thus never be fully prepared for an experience of the Other, which always alters one, though not necessarily for the better. The risk of corruption, for Elizabeth, is simply too great and she denounces Paul West's book in her lecture, describing such literature as being akin to torture; her reading is plagued with such thoughts as "Why are you doing this to me?", "I do not want to read this", "Let me not look", "Do not make me go through with it!" (ibid. 157, 178, 179). The true shame for Elizabeth, however, is the fact that the book "*excited* her to read" (ibid. 179); it was thus not with horror alone that she inhabited the hangman as he did his duty, but with a certain dark fascination, a proclivity for corruption, that had existed within her all along and was revealed to her through her reading. However disturbing, it is an occupation with which she is herself perfectly familiar; she uses her own writing to underscore the perceived moral failures of her audiences, aiming to unnerve them as she has been unnerved by Paul West.

4.3 Conclusion: Beyond the Book

The final chapter of the novel, "At the Gate", follows Elizabeth into a rather strange, hyper-literary afterlife, what she describes as "a purgatory of clichés" (ibid. 206), composed in such a manner as to resemble an unambiguously Kafkaesque landscape; the surreality of the town, populated by people who, to Elizabeth, feel more like "actors" than natives, is both off-putting and vaguely familiar.

There, she must stand trial before a panel of judges whom she must satisfy with a committed statement of belief before being permitted to pass through the large gate in the town in order "to get on with what comes next" (ibid. 199). Interestingly, in this episode of the novel she finds herself incapable of making any such statement, claiming that as a writer "It is not my profession to believe, just to write. Not my business. I do imitations, as Aristotle would have said" (ibid. 194). Her statement here contrasts markedly with those evinced by her earlier on in the text (which are, as illustrated, themselves contradictory), particularly where ideas, or beliefs in, the sympathetic imagination and embodiment are concerned. Both the benefits and the dangers of the imagination, as detailed by Elizabeth, are nullified if they do not in some way leave a trace on the writer, that is, if their effects

truly are, as she now claims, so easy to cast off before stepping into a new skin. The judges, for their part, refuse to accept Elizabeth's writerly disavowal of belief, denying her access to the gate until she is capable of rewriting or revising her statement to their satisfaction.

Elizabeth remains stuck in the town which, though pleasant enough, is a type of literary junkyard, the works of Kafka featuring most prominently, though there are plenty of other intertextual instances that strike her with their familiarity even if she cannot ultimately place them in their proper context: "It is as though she has been transported to the set of a dimly remembered film" (ibid. 208). Anna Jones Abramson writes that "The final chapter is a struggle to locate Costello in this world of literary canonicity and in relation to her own contradictory beliefs and ethical viewpoints" (Jones Abramson 45). It is a calling to account of a woman who has made her livelihood on the imagination, who furthermore believes (or at least, believed) in its unique and sometimes profane power to move people; Heather Walton observes that "the writer is on trial and is being judged" (Walton 291). This chapter, however, seems to represent a certain failure of that imagination in that it is simply "too literary"; built (intentionally) of the words, ideas, the language of other writers, the atmosphere feels strained and stagnant; the limits of the imagination appear to have been reached and the literary endeavor is reduced "to a parody" (*Elizabeth Costello* 209).

Elizabeth does not wish to become herself a permanent fixture in this graveyard of ideas. She continues to work on the statement of belief that she hopes will, eventually, allow her to pass through the gate which stands between her and the beyond. One (including Elizabeth) does not know, however, just what does lie on the other side of the gate, or to where it may eventually lead. If the absurd town in which Elizabeth finds herself is described as a purgatory, it is plausible that the gate could mark the entryway to true death, possibly even opening up to the afterlife, be it heaven or hell. Elizabeth does have a vision of "the far side" of the gate where she imagines a dog lying asleep and "Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity" (ibid. 224). It is a vision, however, that she does not trust because it is, once again, "too literary ... in particular the anagram GOD-DOG" (ibid. 225). The gate then proves to be an obstacle to the imagination, barring Elizabeth from the absolutely unknown which she now seems perfectly willing to risk entering despite the uncertainty

that motivated her previous pro-censorship sentiments. The novel closes with Elizabeth discovering that she is not, in fact, without belief, even if it is of a somewhat transitory nature where “Her mind, when she is truly herself, appears to pass from one belief to the next, pausing, balancing, then moving on” (ibid. 222). However, the gate “to infinity” remains closed to her, perhaps forever.

Elizabeth Costello, it seems, does not die. She makes appearances in several of Coetzee’s later fictions, including *Slow Man*. One can imagine her, however, biding her time between such appearances by sitting in the clichéd café in her strange town working on her, perhaps permanently insufficient, statement; “scribbling away at her task, a task never to be completed” (ibid. 215). One is reminded of one of the Magistrate’s musings in *Waiting for the Barbarians* when he states that “perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 70); that language, the medium of literature, is suspect to begin with, that is, it can only ever abstract away from reality in its attempt to master it and is therefore always in some sense misrepresentational (“words alienate”, as Magda says). Elizabeth can never fully capture her belief in a statement just as, one can suppose, she can never fully capture the suffering jaguar in her literature. As a fellow embodied being, one can certainly witness the jaguar’s suffering as well as understand its revolt against pain, however its “essence”, its alterity, remains, in a very Levinasian sense, incommunicable. It is thus impossible to inhabit infinity or attempt to render it sensible without doing it a violence. This does not mean that one should forego writing (or reading) literature entirely, but that one should do so with full awareness of, and a responsible eye towards, its representational limitations; a person can (be moved to) sympathize with the caged jaguar, which is still, fundamentally, a hunter, without being deluded into thinking that he has somehow “become” one. Rather paradoxically, Elizabeth, in the end, has been herself imprisoned, caged, in literary land by her creator, shelved possibly for Coetzee’s future “use”, yet her fate is not necessarily sealed; her own suffering may yet touch another. There would be no stopping a future novelist from resurrecting her, from opening the gate and having her pass through, whether towards an immaculate light, or hellfire, or something else entirely, is a matter for the imagination; one cannot help but wonder, however, if she would truly welcome this new intrusion, however sympathetic.

Conclusion

This thesis has concerned itself with exploring representations of alterity in the works of J.M. Coetzee with a specific focus on the ethical concerns of the author. Through a close reading of three of his novels, this thesis has aimed to demonstrate the highly self-conscious approach to literary representation employed by Coetzee. The question as to whether he manages to write the Other responsibly, that is, without ultimately writing over him, can be answered in the positive. Firstly, by writing fiction that often flaunts its own fictionality, that is, metafiction such as *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee seems to be concerned with demonstrating the limitations of the literary endeavor and, in so doing, purposely undermines the authorial voice. Secondly, Coetzee himself investigates the problem of appropriative representation by having many of his main characters undergo a similar trial in their own deep, though not always virtuous, (and ultimately destructive) desire for the impossible Other. Finally, the Others in Coetzee's fiction remain entirely aloof and unknowable despite the various impositions of his main characters; none of them ultimately speak the same language and they can, therefore, only ever imperfectly communicate. It is precisely the drama of this stunted communication that Coetzee plays out in his fiction where the silence and inaccessibility of the Other become a "blank space" on which the dominant party attempts to write and fill with content, which is often in some way wounding.

The first chapter has provided the theoretical framework for the discussion of Otherness as it applies to Coetzee's literature. The relationship between the self and the Other, which is, in the psychology of Jacques Lacan, a relationship between the subject and society at large, is explained in the first section of the chapter. This section focuses on the crucial, pre-linguistic, stages of a subject discovering a sense of self as the necessary means for entering into the Symbolic Order, that is, human society, which Lacan also terms the Other. The second section of the chapter offers a definition of the strictly human Other as outlined in the metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas, paying particular attention to the ethical challenge inherent to the self's encounter with an Other's ungraspable alterity.

The second chapter offered a close reading of Coetzee's novel, *In the Heart of the Country* with a particular focus on its Lacanian themes. This chapter analyzed Magda's failed and fractured sense of self as she struggles for recognition between two irreconcilable Others, the Master and his servants, in her lonely South African landscape; a world entirely dominated by the father figure and his ineffaceable colonial imprint. Provisionally wishing to be free of the father/colonizer's grasp, Magda instead seeks a crooked kind of companionship with his subordinates, the black farmhands who work for them, only to find (or intensely fear, as one can never be quite sure which events in the book are imagined and which actually occur) that they, too, are willing to fill a position of power should it become available to them. Magda ultimately retreats to the world of the father and the novel closes with her mawkishly extolling the African countryside whilst clinging to his lifeless body. Thinking she is free, she is merely submitting to his history by continuing to write it, attempting to preserve her place of privilege as opposed to facing the terrifyingly unknowable Other, which includes a changing South Africa, a new Symbolic Order.

The third chapter analyzed *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the role of the Magistrate who, like Magda, attempts to assume a type of mediatory position between incompatible Others; here between imperial authority and barbarian existence. This chapter illustrated some of the Levinasian concepts of Otherness which Coetzee applies in his works; Colonel Joll's eyes shielded behind dark sunglasses, and the maimed and nearly sightless eyes of the tortured barbarian woman serve as barriers to the expression of their inner beings, into which the Magistrate hopelessly wishes to penetrate both in order to know them as well as leave his own mark. The Others of the text, however, do not reveal their secrets; Coetzee does not inhabit them and their thoughts remain entirely their own. The Magistrate's drama is strikingly similar to that of the writer who is faced with the challenge of accessing the core of an Other. Coetzee seems to agree with Levinas on the impossibility of this endeavor; the Magistrate necessarily fails and responds to this failure by writing a false and glorified history of his abject little settlement, overwriting the dark deeds of the Empire as well as the suffering of the barbarians, thereby contributing to and perpetuating a history of dominion.

Finally, the fourth chapter discussed the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, which most directly tackles the ethics of embodying and representing the Other specifically through literature. The chapter traces Elizabeth's arguments for, and later against, the sympathetic imagination which she initially believes grants one limitless access to the true being of another; when applying the imagination to inhabit a suffering Other (here she is speaking explicitly of the animal Other), one feels as he does and is moved to a compassion that overrides the imbalances caused by rational privileging/prioritization (as observed, for example, in the rights discourse). However, the Other, in human form, proves not to be as readily accessible as Elizabeth initially believes and he, in fact, enacts a Levinasian scenario by both shocking and challenging her with his unknowability; through literature she has inhabited a hangman, witnessed the last living moments of his victims and discovered that something in her was not merely horrified but also seduced by his depravity. Elizabeth is forced to reconsider her stance on the ethics of embodiment and concludes that there are some things which should not be written about, some places/bodies (namely, human) into which the imagination should not roam. Her story, like those of Magda and the Magistrate, represents another failed attempt at mediation between the powers-that-be (whether Lacanian society/law, or the Levinasian human) and their victims, both Others in their own right, who pose significant and it seems insurmountable challenges to the subject/writer seeking access.

None of the characters in the novels explored in this thesis thus manage to come into successful communion with the Others who so intrigue them. This is not to suggest that the main characters of Coetzee's texts are not themselves Others both to reader and writer alike; the Magistrate is a complacent official of a corrupt regime, and both Magda and Elizabeth Costello are, among other things, women, albeit Western. Yet even with these characters, there are moments in each text where Coetzee intentionally makes the reader aware of his puppeteering; at a moment when the Magistrate is mysteriously held back from shooting a ram, when Magda feels a mysterious body slipping into her skin, when Elizabeth Costello becomes "revealed" as a fiction as she enters a purgatory of past literary creations. They, too, are in a sense helpless in the hands of a power who creates and shapes them yet who also does not remain entirely untouched by their struggles. It is through these metafictional

techniques that Coetzee responsibly handles the perhaps permanently unresolvable problem of representation, opening the way for expressions of suffering that demands close attention, which, through its open mechanics, refuses to overly assume the voice of the Other.

The responsible approach to alterity and the Other as explored in this thesis is particularly applicable to the first half of Coetzee's literary career. In addition to *Foe*, Coetzee's novel *Life and Times of Michael K* potentially fits into this paradigm as well albeit from quite a different angle; there is evidence (if somewhat inconclusive) in the text to support the idea that the main character of the novel, Michael K, is in fact a black man, or at least of mixed race. Read from this angle, it may prove interesting to analyze the ways in which Coetzee portrays, responsibly, perhaps his only main character who is a non-Westerner. Also worth investigating in light of this discussion would be the presence of animals in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*; here, the main character David Lurie relates to the predatory nature of many animals yet this view is challenged when he and his daughter become "prey" themselves and are both viciously attacked and wounded (by human assailants). After the attack, one sees a significant development in David's character as he begins to show respect for the bodies and beings of animal Others, yet, the novel ends with David committing a powerful and unsettling act of euthanasia; he claims it is an act of love, yet the product of this "love" is no different from the hate-inspired acts of his attackers, who slaughtered a pack of kennel dogs during the incident. *Disgrace* makes light of the darker side of neither the human nor nonhuman animal's "soul", whilst underscoring the ethical ambiguity inherent even to one's attempts at truly doing "good", particularly for those who cannot speak for themselves.

The paradigm proposed in this thesis, however, is less likely to apply to the second half of Coetzee's career (post *Elizabeth Costello*) and therefore may be somewhat limited in scope. The discussion, however, remains an important one, even if Coetzee's later literature often takes on a different, though certainly not less important, thematic focus. Animals, for example, are gaining some ground in both the social and academic world, yet they do not have a voice with which to contribute to the debate; to what extent does one presume to speak/write for them, and what is the exact nature, as well as extent, of one's responsibility to the suffering, and in many cases, even violent, animal Other?

There are truly no definite answers to such difficult questions; the point, however, is to face the challenge head on by posing them.

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